LIFE FOR SALE

A Story of Betrayal and Survival

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Rozina Khanam

This book is dedicated to all the girls who were betrayed, not only by people, but also by the very relationships they trusted.

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The Web of Trust

Muzaffarpur, Bihar. This is where the story begins. A quiet, old city where mornings arrived gently and life moved at its own unhurried pace.

The year was 1991, and the morning was soft and clear. The city had not yet fully awakened. The narrow streets were slowly coming alive with the familiar sounds of everyday life: the ringing of bicycle bells, the occasional rattle of a passing rickshaw, the calls of milk vendors making their rounds, and the distant temple bells floating through the quiet morning air.

The sun was beginning to rise, spreading a warm, golden glow across the rooftops. From some houses, thin trails of smoke curled upward from kitchen stoves, announcing that breakfast was being prepared. Elsewhere, newspaper vendors pedalled through the lanes, bundles of freshly printed newspapers tied to their bicycles.

The air carried the faint fragrance of Muzaffarpur's famous lychee orchards, mingling with the earthy scent of damp soil.

The city had not yet acquired the restless rhythm of modern life. There were fewer vehicles, fewer hurried footsteps, and less noise. People had time to pause at a neighbour's doorway,

exchange a few words, ask about one another's families, or simply sit together over a cup of morning tea.

Life had a certain stillness then, a stillness in which even the smallest sounds seemed to matter.

At the far end of one of the city's narrow lanes stood a small house.

It was a modest two-room home with walls whose paint had faded and peeled away in several places. During the monsoon, rainwater found its way through a corner of the roof, dripping steadily into the room below. In summer, however, the charpoy placed in the tiny courtyard became the family's favourite place to sit and escape the heat.

There was nothing expensive inside the house. No elaborate furniture. No luxurious possessions. Nothing that suggested comfort beyond what was necessary.

There was an old wooden trunk, a few chairs, a simple table, and a cupboard filled with books arranged neatly on its shelves. In one corner rested an old landline telephone the family's only connection to the world beyond their neighbourhood.

Yet, despite its simplicity, the house had a warmth that money could never have bought.

Outside the front door stood a small tulsi plant, carefully tended by the family. Beside it, every evening, a tiny oil lamp was lit.

That little flame seemed to carry a quiet message into the night, no matter how difficult life became, hope was still alive.

Within that modest home lived a family whose lives were bound tightly together. Rajesh, his wife Kavita, and their three daughters.

Rajesh was a modest railway employee, a medium-built man with a dusky complexion, tired eyes, and faint lines of worry on his forehead. His simple, slightly worn but always neat clothes reflected his limited means, while his quiet dignity revealed the strength of his character.

He followed the same routine every day, leaving for work on time, spending long hours buried in files, and returning home exhausted in the evening. He was a man of few words, but behind his silence lived a deep love and constant concern for his daughters. Their future was the greatest responsibility he carried in his heart.

Kavita was the quiet soul of the household. With a simple face, a small bindi, the red Sindhoor in her hair parting and the black-beaded Mangal sutra around her neck quietly marked her as a married woman, there was a gentle serenity in her eyes. Her beauty lay in her simplicity, while her hands were rarely still, moving from the stove to the dishes, sewing, and managing the countless chores of the home.

She spoke little, but her eyes revealed the worries she carried for her daughters and their future. To support the family, she made and sold papads and pickles from home. Every little contribution mattered to her, yet she never complained about the hardships she quietly endured.

Ridhi, the eldest of the three daughters, was a quiet and disciplined Class 12 science student. Fair-skinned, simply dressed, and dignified in her manner, she carried a quiet strength

that set her apart. Her eyes held one clear dream to become a doctor and build a better future for her family.

She was often immersed in her books, making careful notes and studying late into the night despite knowing how difficult her dream would be with limited resources. Sitting by the window, she would look at the sky and whisper, "One day, I will become a doctor and put an end to all my parents' worries." It was not merely a dream; it was a promise she had made to herself.

Nisha, a Class 10 student, was quite the opposite of Ridhi. Whiteish, cheerful, and always ready with a smile, she brought warmth and laughter into the household. She loved talking more than studying and could turn even an ordinary moment into something amusing. Beneath her playful nature was a pure and caring heart, and she shared a particularly close bond with Ridhi, whom she looked up to as both a sister and a confidante.

Riya, the youngest, was a Class 8 student with an innocent face, large expressive eyes, and a gentle smile. Sensitive and affectionate, she was deeply attached to her family, though she was shy around strangers. She often lost herself in playing with her dolls or sat quietly beside Ridhi while she studied, watching her turn the pages of her books with silent admiration as if, even at that young age, she sensed that her elder sister's dreams were different from her own.

Evenings in that little house followed much the same rhythm.

When Rajesh returned from work, Kavita would be standing near the stove, making rotis(bread). Nisha would be talking endlessly about something that had happened during the day, while Riya sat nearby, listening with occasional bursts of laughter.

Ridhi? She was either buried in her books or sitting quietly beside the window, gazing into the distance and shaping the future she had imagined for herself. She believed that hard work could change her destiny and that dreams belonged to those who were willing to fight for them. But life does not always follow the path we carefully choose for ourselves.

Sometimes, the strongest dreams are tested first, and those who possess the greatest determination are often the ones forced to endure the hardest battles. Ridhi was about to learn that lesson a lesson that would change the course of her life forever.

Time moved quietly forward, carrying Ridhi toward a moment she had been waiting for. Months passed, and at last the day of her examinations arrived. She entered the examination hall carrying more than books and pens; she carried her parents' hopes, her family's expectations, and the dream she had nurtured for years. When the examinations were finally over, she began imagining the life that awaited her; medical college, a white coat, a stethoscope around her neck, and above all, the proud smile of her father. For the first time, she felt as though she were standing at the doorway of the future she had worked so hard to build.

But fate had written another story. A story Ridhi could not yet see, a story that would soon take her life in a direction she had never imagined and change it forever.

It was 1993, and for Ridhi, the year arrived with a disappointment she had never imagined she would have to face. Resources were limited, opportunities were few, and competition was fierce. She had worked with everything she had, studying late into the night and holding on to the belief that her hard work would finally take her to medical college.

But when the results came, her name was not on the list. For a while, Ridhi could not bring herself to accept it.

The news seemed to break something inside her. For days, she barely spoke. Her books remained open before her, but the words no longer held her attention. She would stare at the pages for long stretches, her mind drifting somewhere far beyond them.

Yet, beneath the disappointment, one desire remained alive.

She wanted another chance. She wanted to sit for the examinations again, work harder, improve her result, and make another attempt at medical school.

One evening, after gathering enough courage to speak, she sat beside her father.

"Papa, I want to take my exams again," she said quietly. "I'll work even harder this time. Maybe I can get into medical school."

Rajesh did not answer immediately.

He looked at his daughter for a long moment. In her eyes, he saw a dream she refused to surrender, but he also understood the burden of their limited income, household expenses, and growing responsibilities.

"Daughter," he finally said, his voice gentle but firm, "our situation doesn't allow us to wait another year. We have responsibilities at home too. You should enrol in a bachelor's degree now."

The words were simple but to Ridhi, they felt like the closing of a door.

She wanted to argue. She wanted to tell him that she could manage, that she would work harder, that she would not ask for anything more than another opportunity but no words came.

That night, Ridhi lay awake, staring at the familiar sky outside her window. The stars were the same, but something within her had changed. For the first time, she understood that circumstances could sometimes make choices on our behalf.

With a heavy heart, she tucked her dream of attending medical college into a quiet corner of her soul. It wasn't a surrender; it was a dream choosing to wait for its time.

By morning, Ridhi had made her decision. She went to her father and spoke in a calm but determined voice.

"All right, Papa. I'll pursue a bachelor's degree in biology. But I want to take admission in Patna."

Rajesh looked at her carefully. For a moment, he said nothing. There was something in her voice that made him pause.

Perhaps, for the first time, he saw not just his daughter, but the strength she had been carrying within her all along.

Then he slowly nodded. "If that is what you want, then all right."

Ridhi lowered her eyes. Her dream had changed its course, but it had not disappeared. Neither had her determination.

Within a few days, Ridhi was enrolled in a college in Patna, and arrangements were also made for her to stay in a girls' hostel.

Standing at the hostel entrance, Ridhi held her father's hand. Her eyes were moist, but she composed herself.

"Please don't worry, Papa. I'll give tuition to children here and manage my own expenses."

Her father gently placed his hand on her head, then he turned and walked away.

Patna in 1993 was far simpler and more peaceful than the bustling city it is today. The streets saw a modest flow of cycle rickshaws and a limited number of vehicles, while the city breathed at its traditional pace amid old marketplaces and government buildings.

The breeze from the Ganges, the narrow lanes of the old neighbourhoods, and the silence that settled over the city as evening fell gave Patna a character of its own.

For Ridhi, Patna was a new city a place of unfamiliar streets, unfamiliar faces, and the beginning of a new life.

At that time, many people in Patna converted their two- or three-storey houses into girls' hostels for female students and ran them as boarding facilities. The hostel where Ridhi came to stay was one such old, two-storey house. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary residential home, but once inside, each floor had small rooms for students, shared bathrooms, and a large courtyard.

The owner's family lived on the ground floor, while the two upper floors were reserved for the students. Two or three girls shared each room. As evening fell, the corridors would fill with the sound of turning book pages, laughter and casual conversations, and the distant sound of a radio playing somewhere. For these girls living away from home, the building had gradually become their temporary home.

The hostel also had a landline telephone, which the students could use at designated times to speak with their families. Meals

were provided at the hostel as well breakfast, lunch, and dinner were served at fixed times.

However, girls who did not enjoy the hostel food or were accustomed to the taste of home would occasionally order tiffin from outside. So, within this modest little hostel, each girl lived according to her own habits, preferences, and convenience.

In the small hostel room where Ridhi was now to build her new life, she shared the space with another girl named Madhu.

At first glance, Madhu appeared quiet, simple, and unassuming. There was a seriousness about her face, as though she were the kind of girl who preferred to remain lost in her own world.

Ridhi had not yet spoken to her much. Even though they shared the same room, it felt as though they belonged to two entirely different worlds. One was quietly weaving dreams, while the other seemed to be carrying an untold story deep within her.

The college building was nothing less than a new world for her. Wide corridors, tall doorways, and a crowd of faces carrying dreams of their own. There was a new energy everywhere, a sense of hope and possibility. But for Ridhi, it was simply a path toward becoming something for her family.

Every morning, she would get ready on time and leave for college, carrying her books, her eyes lowered, and a quiet resolve in her heart, even if the path changed, her determination to reach her destination would not.

In class, Ridhi always sat in the front row, listening attentively to every lecture and keeping her notes neat and organized. It was

there that she met Rita, a cheerful and talkative girl who soon became one of her closest friends.

She would often say to Ridhi, "Why are you always so serious? Try to live a little, too."

Ridhi would reply with a faint smile, "My purpose in life is to become someone, Rita. I don't have time to laugh."

Around the same time, there was a boy at the college named Rahul, tall, well-groomed, confident, and composed, with a quiet dignity that set him apart.

He first noticed Ridhi in the library, where her seriousness and unwavering concentration caught his attention, and a few days later, he approached her.

"Are you always this quiet?"

Ridhi gave a brief reply. "There is peace in silence."

It was a simple exchange, but for Rahul, it marked the beginning of something. He began speaking to her occasionally, sometimes about studies and sometimes over a casual question.

To Ridhi, however, Rahul was simply a classmate and a good friend. Her heart had no room for love; her family and their future came first. She wanted only to build a life that would make her parents proud.

When Rita said one day with a smile, "I think Rahul likes you."

Ridhi replied seriously, "I don't have time for all this, Rita. I have responsibilities, not dreams."

She fell silent, but her dreams had not disappeared; they had merely taken a different shape.

Rahul, too, had begun to understand the distance she kept between them. He never pressured her in any way. He remained by her side simply as a friend, quietly appreciating her even from afar.

Ridhi had chosen a new path, but the dream she had once set aside still lived quietly within her.

There was a quiet determination in her eyes. She had always seen her father as her hero and had sensed his wish for a son who could support the family. So, even as a daughter, Ridhi decided she would become the strength he had hoped for.

"Papa, one day I will make you proud," she would say softly, but with unwavering resolve.

Rita, who was her closest friend, would often try to reason with her. "Ridhi, don't push yourself so hard. You can't carry everything on your shoulders alone."

Ridhi would smile and reply, "If I don't carry it, then who will?"

But life was not going to be easy for Ridhi. Society, relationships, and traditions stood between her and the future she dreamed of. Even after entering college, circumstances continued to shape her path, leaving her original dream still unfinished.

At night, when the house fell silent, Ridhi would quietly return to her books, holding on to her dreams with every page she turned. She did not know that life was already preparing a turning point that would test her dreams, desires, and determination.

Life in Patna slowly became familiar to Ridhi. Her days revolved around college, the library, hostel life, and finding children to tutor in the evenings so she could earn a little for herself.

In their small hostel room, Ridhi and Madhu slowly grew closer. What began as polite conversation soon turned into friendship, and at night, they would stay awake sharing their dreams, fears, and untold stories.

"You're lucky, Ridhi," Madhu once said. "Your father believes in you."

Ridhi smiled, though behind that smile lay years of struggle. One night, she quietly said, "I have only one dream to become a source of strength for my father and take away all his worries."

Madhu gently held her hand. "You will. I know you will."

That night, something changed between them. What had begun as simple companionship slowly became a friendship and understanding.

Days passed, and Ridhi began noticing that Madhu often left the hostel on Sundays. She would return around dusk, sometimes carrying a box of sweets, sometimes fruit, new clothes, or a beautifully decorated box of bangles.

One Sunday, Ridhi finally asked with a smile, "Where do you go every Sunday?"

Madhu answered casually, "I have an aunt who treats me like her own daughter. She often invites me to her home for meals. There's always so much liveliness there."

After a brief pause, she added, "She knows a lot of people and has connections with some well-established families. She has even helped arrange marriages for several girls. Everyone respects her."

Ridhi did not think much of it. To her, it simply seemed that perhaps, in a big city like Patna, there were people who enjoyed helping others and opening doors for those who needed them.

That night, Ridhi woke suddenly. For a moment, she lay still, trying to understand what had disturbed her sleep. Then she noticed that Madhu's bed was empty.

Perhaps she had gone to the bathroom, Ridhi thought.

Several minutes passed, and Madhu did not return. A faint uneasiness began to settle in Ridhi's mind. She quietly got out of bed and stepped into the corridor to look for her.

The hostel was almost silent. Most of the girls were asleep, and only the dim corridor lights remained on. As Ridhi reached the far end of the hallway, she noticed Madhu standing beside the landline telephone, speaking in a low whisper.

Ridhi stopped. She had no intention of listening, but as she took a few cautious steps closer, a few words reached her ears.

"Yes, Aunty… the new girl is very nice. She studies hard too."

Ridhi froze. Before she could hear anything more, Madhu suddenly turned and saw her.

For a moment, something like panic flashed across Madhu's face. She immediately ended the call.

"You? What are you doing here?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

Ridhi looked at her curiously. “I was looking for you. You’d been gone for so long. I thought perhaps you weren’t feeling well.”

Madhu quickly looked away. “I couldn’t sleep, so I came out to call home.”

Ridhi said nothing. She simply looked at Madhu for a moment before returning to the room. But the uneasiness stayed with her. There had been something strange in Madhu’s voice. The way she had suddenly ended the call.

Ridhi could not shake the feeling that Madhu had not been speaking to her family at all. Who was the “Aunty” she had been talking to? And why had Madhu looked so frightened when she saw me?

A few days later, Madhu came to Ridhi with an unusual excitement in her voice.

“Ridhi! You wanted to tutor children, didn’t you? There’s a good family near my aunt’s house looking for a tutor. If you come with me, I can introduce you today.”

A flicker of hope lit up Ridhi’s eyes. Perhaps, she thought, life was finally opening a new door for her.

That evening, she stepped out of the hostel with Madhu. The streets of Patna were beginning to glow beneath the evening lights, while traffic, voices, and the aroma of tea from roadside stalls filled the air.

Ridhi walked quietly behind Madhu, following her through the busy streets.

“It’s not far,” Madhu said with a reassuring smile. “Aunty will be very happy to see you.”

Ridhi nodded.

All she could think about was one thing: if she found a tutoring job, she would be able to earn a little for herself and, perhaps, ease the burden on her father.

A few minutes later, they stopped in front of a two-storey house. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary residence, but the moment Ridhi stepped inside, she was taken aback.

The drawing room was elegantly furnished. Expensive paintings adorned the walls, a glass table stood at the centre, and the air carried a delicate fragrance. Everything seemed carefully arranged and polished far beyond anything Ridhi was accustomed to seeing.

A well-dressed woman standing at the entrance welcomed them with a warm smile. "Come in, dear. Madhu has told me so much about you."

Her voice was exceptionally sweet. Yet, for reasons Ridhi could not explain, there was something unsettling in the brightness of her eyes.

Tea and an assortment of snacks were soon placed before them. The woman kept asking Ridhi questions.

"Where are you from?"

"Who all are there in your family?"

"What do you plan to do after your studies?"

Ridhi answered each question honestly and without hesitation. She spoke as though she were sitting among people she already knew and trusted.

Madhu remained beside her, quietly smiling.

Then came the sound of footsteps from the staircase.

A young man appeared and walked down into the room. He was neatly dressed, wearing an expensive watch and holding a set of car keys. He carried himself with confidence.

Madhu immediately introduced him. "This is Ritesh. He's Aunty's relative. He lives in America and is here for a few days."

Ritesh gave a polite nod. "Hello. You must be Ridhi?"

Ridhi lowered her eyes and greeted him quietly.

Ritesh glanced at her, then turned towards the woman. For a brief second, their eyes met. It was a fleeting exchange almost like a silent signal. Then, just as quickly, both smiled and returned to their conversation.

Ridhi noticed it but thought nothing of it.

During the meal, the woman kept putting more food on Ridhi's plate.

"Eat, dear. You're hardly eating anything." Then she smiled warmly. "You're just like my own daughter."

The affection felt a little too much, but Ridhi ignored the feeling. Perhaps this was simply how people behaved in a wealthy household.

After the meal, the woman finally brought up the reason for Ridhi's visit.

"Madhu tells me you're looking for a tutoring job. I know a family nearby who needs someone to teach science to their two children. If you'd like, I can speak to them."

A spark of hope lit up Ridhi's eyes. "Really, Aunty?"

The woman smiled. "Of course, dear. But you'll have to decide quickly."

Ritesh sat quietly, watching everything. A faint smile rested on his lips, but his eyes kept returning to Ridhi's innocent face, as if he were quietly judging her.

When it was time to leave, Aunty placed a box of sweets in Ridhi's hands and smiled. "You're one of us now. Come whenever you like."

Ridhi thanked her and returned to the hostel with Madhu, carrying with her only the warmth of what she believed had been a kind and generous encounter.

Late that night, when the hostel corridors had fallen silent and the other girls were asleep, Madhu quietly slipped out of bed and stepped into the hallway. She stopped beside the landline telephone in a dimly lit corner and dialled a number.

After a few moments, someone answered. "The girl is innocent."

Madhu lowered her voice. "Yes."

The voice on the other end remained calm. "Get closer to her. She could be useful to us."

Madhu was silent for a moment before softly replying, "Yes."

She ended the call and stood there for a few seconds, staring into the empty corridor. Then she turned and quietly walked back to the room.

Inside, Ridhi was sleeping peacefully, unaware of the conversation that had just taken place.

Somewhere in the darkness of the sleeping city, an invisible trap was beginning to close around her one whose threads were still hidden from sight.

Time moved on, and Ridhi slowly settled into her new routine of college, hostel life, and tutoring. She seemed more confident now, knowing that she was earning enough to cover some of her own expenses.

Whenever she found a few free moments at the college canteen, Ridhi would sit with her closest friend, Rita, sharing tea and the small joys of her new life.

One day, she said happily, "You know, Rita, if it weren't for Madhu, I might never have found this tutoring job. Her aunt is so kind. She treated me like a daughter from the very first time we met."

Rita listened quietly before saying, "Ridhi, the world isn't always as simple as you think. Not every smiling face is sincere."

Ridhi laughed. "You're always suspicious of everyone."

"I'm not suspicious," Rita replied seriously. "I've just learned that in big cities, people can sometimes hide their intentions behind kindness. Don't trust anyone too quickly."

Ridhi brushed off the warning with a smile, but Rita's words stayed somewhere in the back of her mind.

That same evening, Rita happened to meet Rahul, their classmate, a thoughtful young man who noticed things others often

missed. During their conversation, she mentioned Madhu, her aunt, and Ridhi's new tutoring opportunity.

Rahul fell silent for a moment before saying, "Sometimes, people who are in need are the easiest to take advantage of."

Rita looked at him, startled. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm not saying anything for certain," Rahul replied calmly.

"I just want to understand what's really going on. One day, let's visit Ridhi at her hostel. We can learn more about Madhu and her aunt before jumping to conclusions."

Rita nodded.

Meanwhile, Madhu had grown much closer to Ridhi. She would bring her favourite food, help her prepare notes, or insist on taking her to the market. Ridhi had begun to see her as a true friend, never imagining that Madhu's kindness carried a hidden purpose.

Almost every night, after Ridhi had fallen into a deep sleep, Madhu would quietly slip into the corridor and whisper into the telephone. "Yes, Aunty. Everything is going as planned. She still suspects nothing."

The voice on the other end was always too faint for anyone else to hear, but the strange smile that appeared on Madhu's face afterward was difficult to ignore.

Meanwhile, Ritesh began visiting Aunty's house more frequently. He was always polite and soft-spoken, showing particular interest in Ridhi's studies, dreams, and future. One day, he asked gently, "You wanted to become a doctor, didn't you?"

Ridhi's eyes grew moist. "Yes… but fate had other plans."

Ritesh looked at her with apparent sympathy. “Fate can change, Ridhi. Sometimes, all you need is the right people by your side.”

His words touched something deep within her, and Ridhi’s respect for him grew. She did not know that some people win hearts not with truth, but by making even lies feel like the truth.

That same night, in a closed room inside Aunty’s house, Madhu, Aunty, and Ritesh sat facing one another. Three cups of tea rested untouched on the table, the silence between them heavier than the rain beginning to fall outside.

Aunty looked at Madhu and asked quietly, “Does the girl trust you now?”

A faint smile touched Madhu’s lips. “She’s very innocent. She trusts me completely now.”

Ritesh slowly closed the file lying before him and said in a calm voice, “Don’t rush. The trap works only when the victim has no reason to suspect anything.”

Silence filled the room again. Outside, rain began tapping against the windowpanes, each drop sounding like a quiet warning of the storm that was drawing closer.

Meanwhile, in her room, Ridhi was quietly preparing for the next day’s classes, completely unaware that the web being woven around her was tightening with every passing day and that her innocence was about to become its most vulnerable target.

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Behind the Smiles

It was still early Sunday morning when Rita called Ridhi.

"We're both coming to see you today."

Ridhi's face lit up with happiness. "Really? Come soon. I'll be waiting!"

As soon as the call ended, she began tidying the hostel room. She had no idea that Rita and Rahul were not coming merely for a friendly visit. They wanted to see Madhu for themselves, to understand who she really was and what lay hidden behind her carefully guarded life.

Rita and Rahul reached the hostel around eleven. After signing the visitors' register at the entrance, they made their way upstairs to Ridhi's room.

The moment the door opened, Ridhi greeted them with a bright smile but behind her, Madhu's expression changed for the briefest moment. A flicker of surprise and uneasiness crossed her eyes before disappearing behind a carefully composed smile.

"Please, come in." Ridhi introduced them. "This is my friend Rita, and this is Rahul. He's a very good friend of ours."

Madhu greeted them politely, but Rahul noticed that her eyes kept drifting toward the landline telephone in the corridor, as though she were waiting for an important call.

For a while, the room was filled with laughter and casual conversation. True to her innocent nature, Ridhi kept praising Madhu.

"If it weren't for Madhu, I probably would never have found my tutoring job, her aunt is so kind. She treats me like her own daughter."

Rita quietly watched Madhu's expressions while Rahul listened without saying much.

Then, suddenly, Rita suggested, "Why don't we go to Patna Zoo today?"

Madhu immediately shook her head. "No, I have something important to do."

But Ridhi insisted. "It'll only be for a few hours. Come on!"

Rita took Madhu's hand playfully. "You're not escaping today. Come with us."

Eventually, Madhu agreed, though the uneasiness on her face remained.

The zoo was crowded that Sunday. Children ran excitedly between the enclosures while families moved from one attraction to another. Ridhi's innocent delight brought a smile to Rahul's face.

Deep down, he had begun to care for her. He had never expressed his feelings, but one thought troubled him constantly he

could not bear the idea of anyone taking advantage of someone as trusting and innocent as Ridhi.

Meanwhile, Rita deliberately stayed close to Madhu. She asked about her family, her childhood, and her friends. Madhu answered every question, but her story seemed to shift each time. At one point, she said her father was a businessman; later, she mentioned that he had been a government employee.

Rita noticed the gaps in her story. At one point, Rahul quietly excused himself, saying he was going to get some water.

On his way back, he noticed Madhu standing near a counter, speaking softly on a public telephone booth.

"No, not today. It's not possible. They're with me."

A moment later, he heard her say, "Yes, Ritesh. I'll talk to you later."

The name caught Rahul's attention. Before he could hear anything more, Madhu ended the call and returned to the others with a smile, as though nothing had happened.

By the time evening approached, they returned to the hostel.

Throughout the journey, Ridhi happily talked about everything they had done that day. Rahul, however, remained unusually quiet.

Outside the hostel, he glanced at Madhu and then quietly said to Rita, "There's something hidden behind that girl's smile and why does Ritesh's name keep coming up?"

Rita nodded seriously. They both knew this was about more than a tutoring job or a kind-hearted aunt.

A game had already begun, with everyone hiding behind carefully constructed faces.

Only Ridhi knew nothing about it. She still believed every smile was sincere and every act of kindness came from the heart.

After leaving the hostel, Rahul and Rita walked back together through the city. Evening had settled over Patna, and the headlights of passing vehicles blurred into the growing darkness. Rahul remained silent for a long time before finally speaking.

"Rita, something doesn't feel right."

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I saw the uneasiness on Madhu's face. Whenever Ritesh is mentioned, something changes in her expression. I think she is hiding something from us."

He paused before adding, "I'm most worried about Ridhi. She's too innocent. She trusts people too easily. People like that can become easy targets for those with bad intentions."

Rita's expression grew serious. "Then what should we do?"

Rahul lowered his voice. "Get closer to Madhu. Become her friend. Start visiting her aunt's house. Find out who comes there, who Ritesh really is, and what they're involved in. I'm certain this story isn't as simple as it appears."

Rita nodded. "Next Sunday, I'll ask Madhu to take me to her aunt's house. Maybe we'll find out what's really going on."

Rahul looked up at the sky. Dark clouds were gathering, slowly covering the moon, as though nature itself were hiding a secret.

"Just remember one thing, Rita. If you sense even the slightest danger, tell me immediately."

Meanwhile, Ridhi remained unaware of what was happening around her. She still believed that Madhu and her aunt truly cared about her.

Over the next few days, Rahul deliberately began spending more time with Ridhi at college. Sometimes he accompanied her to the library, sometimes they talked over tea in the canteen, and sometimes he gently reminded her to be careful about whom she trusted.

Ridhi would always smile and say, "You people worry for no reason. There are still good people in the world."

Rahul would fall silent. He knew that sometimes the most dangerous people were the ones who were best at pretending to care.

That same night, Madhu quietly called Aunty. "Aunty, Rita is trying to get closer to me."

There was silence on the other end for a few moments.

Then a cold voice replied, "Keep an eye on her, and inform Ritesh as well. No one must get even a hint of what we are doing."

Madhu's face lost its colour. At that very moment, she heard footsteps outside the window. Startled, she stepped into the corridor, but there was no one there.

The following Sunday, the sun had barely risen when someone knocked on the hostel door. Ridhi opened it and found Rita standing there with a mischievous smile.

"Surprise!"

Ridhi threw her arms around her. “So early?”

Rita laughed. “I’m spending the whole day with you. No college, no books just two friends having fun!”

From the other corner of the room, Madhu looked up sharply at Rita. A faint line of worry appeared on her face, but she quickly concealed it.

After a while, Madhu said quietly, “But Ridhi and I are going to Aunty’s house today. She has invited us for lunch.”

Rita immediately smiled. “Then I’ll come too, if you don’t mind.”

For a moment, the colour seemed to drain from Madhu’s face. She looked away and remained silent.

Ridhi frowned. “But Aunty didn’t invite you.”

Rita laughed teasingly. “You’re always telling me how wonderful Aunty is and how she treats everyone like family. Why would she mind seeing me? What do you say, Madhu?”

Madhu hesitated before forcing a smile. “Yes, yes. Why not? Come along.”, but inside her heartbeat had quickened.

A little later, Madhu excused herself to use the bathroom and slipped out of the room. She went straight to the landline in the corridor and dialled a number. When someone answered, she whispered, “There’s another one coming.”

A few moments later, she hung up and hurried back. She did not know that Rita had noticed the brief conversation.

Rita said nothing. She simply remembered Rahul’s warning: Never trust every smile.

The three girls took a rickshaw through the busy streets of Patna toward Aunty's house. Ridhi chatted happily throughout the journey, while Madhu remained unusually quiet.

She kept checking her watch, as though she were waiting for a particular moment or someone.

At last, the rickshaw stopped outside Aunty's house. As they entered, Rita noticed an expensive black car parked in the courtyard. It had a registration plate that was unfamiliar to her.

At that very moment, Ritesh stepped out onto the veranda.

He first looked at Ridhi, but the moment his eyes fell on Rita, the smile on his face disappeared for a fraction of a second. Then, just as quickly, his confident expression returned.

"Welcome. Today the gathering is even more beautiful."

Rita greeted him politely, but her eyes remained fixed on his expressions.

Aunty came forward warmly. "Oh, dear! You came too? I'm so glad. The more people in the house, the happier it feels."

There was warmth in her voice, but Rita noticed a brief flicker of uneasiness in her eyes.

Madhu and Aunty went inside, pretending to prepare lunch. Rita was heading to the kitchen for water when she heard faint voices coming from a half-closed room at the end of the corridor.

"She still doesn't know anything."

The second voice was Ritesh's. "And the other girl?"

"Don't worry. She's only a friend. She'll be gone soon."

Rita stopped in her tracks. Her heart began pounding. She wanted to hear more, but suddenly, she heard footsteps behind her. She turned, and the glass slipped from her hand. It hit the floor with a sharp crash that echoed through the house.

Rita spun around in alarm and found an elderly maid standing behind her with a tea tray.

"Are you all right, dear?"

Rita quickly composed herself and smiled. "Yes. Nothing happened. The glass just slipped." But her heart was still racing.

She now knew that something was hidden inside that half-closed room something someone was determined to keep secret.

When she returned to the drawing room, Ridhi was chatting innocently with Aunty, while Ritesh sat quietly, occasionally watching her.

During lunch, Aunty smiled warmly at Ridhi.

"Ridhi, you're one of us now. Come here whenever you want. Think of this house as your own."

Ridhi smiled. "Yes, Aunty. Your affection makes me feel at home."

Rita looked silently at Ridhi. The trust shining in her innocent eyes frightened her more than anything else.

After lunch, Aunty said, "Come, I'll show you my new room upstairs."

Ridhi happily followed her. Rita was about to go after them when Madhu stopped her. "Come with me. I want to show you my collection."

For the first time, Rita became certain that she was being deliberately kept away from Ridhi.

Then her eyes fell on a blue file lying open on a nearby table.

Across the top, in bold English letters, were the words:

"TRAVEL DOCUMENTS", Several papers were sticking out from inside.

Rita glanced at one of them. It appeared to be a form bearing a girl's photograph, but the name was not clearly visible.

Then Ritesh's voice came from behind her. "What are you looking for?"

Rita turned sharply.

Ritesh was smiling, but there was no warmth in his eyes.

"Nothing," she replied quickly. "I was just looking."

Ritesh slowly closed the file and picked it up. "Some things should not be looked at without permission."

There was a quiet hardness in his voice. A warning bell rang in Rita's mind.

By evening, they left for the hostel. Throughout the journey, Ridhi kept praising Aunty. "She's so nice, isn't she? She's invited us again next Sunday."

Rita remained silent. As soon as they reached the hostel, she called Rahul.

"Rahul, you were right. Something is being hidden there. I saw a file marked 'Travel Documents,' and Ritesh's behaviour was strange too."

There was silence on the other end.

Then Rahul said quietly, "Rita, we must be very careful now. If my suspicion is right, Ridhi is much closer to danger than she realises."

At the same time, inside Aunty's house, Ritesh turned to Madhu and spoke coldly.

"We need to move faster. We can't wait much longer."

Madhu looked uneasy. "What if Rita has figured everything out?"

A mysterious smile appeared on Ritesh's lips. "Then she'll have to be silenced too." Silence fell over the room.

Outside, thunder rolled across the darkening sky, as though announcing the storm that was drawing closer.

Meanwhile, an unfamiliar fear had begun to settle in Rahul's heart. The closer he grew to Ridhi, the more he feared that they might already be running out of time.

In that growing anxiety, he decided. Before something happened, he would tell Ridhi how he felt. The truth was that Rahul was not the only one who had feelings for her.

Ridhi had liked Rahul from the very beginning.

His seriousness, his quiet manners, and the way he cared about others had touched something deep within her. But she had always kept those feelings hidden in a silent corner of her heart.

She had only one priority to complete her education, fulfil her father's dreams, and become a source of strength for her family.

She had promised herself that, if fate allowed, she would tell Rahul how she felt when the right time came.

But that time had not yet arrived. She knew that, for now, responsibility mattered more than emotion. So, she kept every feeling hidden behind a smile.

The next day, Rahul, Rita, and Ridhi were sitting together in the college canteen. Steam rose from their cups as they chatted casually, but one question kept circling in Rahul's mind.

Finally, he broke the silence.

"Ridhi, who exactly is Ritesh? What is he to Aunty? And what do you think of him?"

Ridhi thought for a moment. "I don't really know what his relationship with Aunty is. I've only heard that he lives in America and travels to India frequently for business." She took another sip of tea.

"I haven't spoken to him much. Whenever I happen to meet him at Aunty's house, it's just a brief hello."

Rahul studied her face. "And what do you think of him?"

Ridhi gave a small smile. "I don't know him well enough to have an opinion."

Rita quietly listened to them, watching Rahul. She knew he was not asking out of simple curiosity. There was a deeper concern behind his questions.

Rahul changed the subject. "Ridhi, not everyone is what they appear to be. You shouldn't trust people too quickly."

Ridhi smiled. "I trust my fate."

Rahul silently prayed that her faith would never be broken. At that moment, a white car stopped outside the college gate.

A man wearing dark sunglasses sat behind the wheel, watching the canteen from a distance. After a few moments, the car slowly moved away.

Ridhi, Rahul, and Rita noticed nothing. None of them knew that someone had been watching their every move and that another chapter of fate was quietly beginning to unfold.

A year had passed since Ridhi had come to Patna.

Her college examinations were approaching, and her days had become busier than ever. She spent her days with books and her nights dreaming about the future.

Yet, despite all her responsibilities, one thing had begun to trouble her more the longing for home.

She missed her mother's affection, her father's blessings, Nisha and Riya's playful mischief, and even the familiar scent of the earth in their courtyard.

One evening, she decided that before her examinations, she would spend a few days in Muzaffarpur with her family.

The moment she arrived home; the entire house seemed to fill with happiness.

Her mother embraced her tightly. Joy shone in her father's eyes, while Nisha and Riya kept circling around her as though someone precious had returned after years away.

For those few days, Ridhi soaked herself in the warmth of home. Over meals, she often talked about life in Patna.

She spoke about Rita's playful nature, smiled while talking about Rahul's seriousness, praised Madhu's friendship, and told her parents about Aunty's hospitality.

Her mother listened with a smile. "Thank God you've found such good people there, dear."

Her father remained quiet, listening carefully. It was his nature to think about every new person or situation before accepting it completely.

One night, he asked Ridhi, "Who is this Aunty you keep mentioning?"

Ridhi smiled. "She's a very kind woman, Papa. She's someone Madhu knows. She treats me like her own daughter and keeps asking me to bring you and Mama to meet her."

Her father thought for a moment before quietly saying, "That's good. We'll meet her next time."

The few days passed quickly. When it was time to return, her mother's eyes filled with tears, but she blessed her daughter and prayed for her bright future.

Then, unexpectedly, her father said, "We'll go to Patna with you."

Ridhi looked at him in surprise. "You too?"

He smiled. "Yes. We'll see your hostel, meet your friends, and finally meet this Aunty who keeps inviting you to her house."

Ridhi was delighted.

That same evening in Patna, Aunty, Ritesh, and Madhu sat together in silence. Madhu had just ended a phone call. "Aunty, Ridhi is coming back with her father and mother."

Silence fell across the room. The smile disappeared from Aunty's face.

Ritesh slowly picked up the keys from the table. "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Madhu lowered her eyes.

Ritesh walked toward the window. After a few moments, he turned back toward Aunty.

"If the family gets involved, we'll have to change the entire plan."

Aunty took a deep breath. "Then we'll have to win their trust at any cost."

Outside, evening shadows deepened. It appears darkness was beginning to descend not only over the city, but over Ridhi's life as well.

Ridhi returned to Patna with her parents in high spirits. The moment they reached the hostel, she informed Rita and Rahul.

Rita arrived shortly afterward with a smile, and Rahul came as well, his usual seriousness softened by genuine warmth.

Ridhi happily introduced them. "Papa, this is Rita, my best friend and this is Rahul. He's also a very good friend of mine."

Her mother blessed them both, while her father warmly asked about their studies and lives. Within minutes, the atmosphere

became so comfortable that it felt as though they had known one another for years.

Madhu also came to the hostel and respectfully greeted Ridhi's parents. Her gentle manner and simple appearance immediately made a favourable impression.

Over tea, Rahul smiled and said, "Uncle, since this is your first time in Patna, you shouldn't leave without seeing the city. If you allow us, Rita and I can show you around."

Ridhi's father smiled. "That would be wonderful, son."

For the next several days, they explored Patna together. They spent evenings near Golghar, enjoyed the cool breeze along the Ganges, wandered through the markets, and visited some of the city's historic places. Seeing Ridhi so happy made her parents happy too.

Rahul quietly looked after her at every opportunity, while Rita continued to observe Madhu's behaviour.

The week passed quickly. Then, on Sunday morning, Aunty called. "Ridhi, all of you must come to my house for lunch today. I've been wanting to meet your parents. I won't take no for an answer."

Ridhi was delighted and immediately told everyone. Aunty had specifically invited Rita as well.

Rahul felt relieved. He wanted Rita to be there because his suspicions had still not disappeared. Before they left, Ridhi's father looked warmly at Rahul.

"Rahul, if you're free, why don't you come with us? You're one of Ridhi's good friends too. We can all spend some time together."

Rahul glanced at Ridhi before smiling respectfully. "Yes, Uncle. If you're inviting me, I'd be honoured to come."

Ridhi's mother smiled. "Yes, beta. Come with us. Our children's friends are like our own children."

Rahul lowered his head respectfully. Ridhi stole a brief glance at him, and a faint smile touched her lips. Rita noticed the exchange in silence. She knew how much Rahul cared for Ridhi. Everyone began preparing to leave.

None of them knew that this lunch invitation was more than a simple invitation. It was about to become the beginning of another turning point in Ridhi's life.

As they prepared to leave, Rahul found a moment to speak quietly to Rita. "Watch everything carefully today especially Ritesh. I have a feeling something important may come to light."

Rita nodded, though an unexplained fear had already begun to stir inside her.

At the same time, Ritesh stood near the window of Aunty's house, watching the street.

Aunty asked quietly, "Is everything ready?"

Ritesh smiled coldly. "Yes. Today's meeting is important. If everything goes according to plan, the next step will become much easier."

Aunty glanced toward the door.

"Just make sure no one becomes suspicious."

At that moment, a car stopped outside. Ridhi, her parents, Rita, Madhu, and Rahul stepped out and entered the house, unaware that it was filled with secrets.

Aunty opened the door and welcomed them with extraordinary warmth. "Come in, come in! Today my house truly feels complete."

She embraced Ridhi's mother warmly and shook her father's hand with great respect. "I've been wanting to meet you both. Ridhi talks about you all the time."

Ridhi's parents were pleased by the affection she showed them. For the first time, they felt certain that their daughter had found genuinely good people in Patna.

The dining room was beautifully arranged, with an elaborate spread of food and delicacies prepared especially for the occasion. After a few moments, Aunty called out, "Ritesh, come here, dear."

Ritesh entered the room slowly. Dressed simply but elegantly, with a confident manner and a faint smile, he appeared at first glance to be a well-mannered young man.

Aunty introduced him. "This is my nephew, Ritesh. He lives in America and travels to India for business."

Then she smiled and added, "I keep telling him to get married, but he never listens. His parents are no longer in this world, so he's all I have."

Ritesh lowered his head silently. Ridhi's father smiled warmly. "Stay happy and keep progressing in life, son."

Ritesh replied respectfully, "I need your blessings, Uncle."

The conversation gradually became more relaxed. Ridhi's mother and Aunty talked about household matters, while her father asked Ritesh about America and his business. Ridhi and Madhu moved between the kitchen and the drawing room, joining the others from time to time.

Rita quietly observed everyone. She noticed that Aunty repeatedly praised Ridhi. "Ridhi is such a sensible and well-mannered girl. A daughter like her brings honour to any family."

Whenever she heard such praise, Ritesh would occasionally glance toward Ridhi before quickly looking away.

Rahul noticed everything in silence. The uneasy feeling in his heart remained, but he still could not put his suspicions into words.

After lunch, Aunty presented each guest with a gift. A beautiful sari for Ridhi's mother, a shawl for her father, a purse for Rita, a watch for Rahul, and a lovely outfit for Madhu.

Finally, she handed Ridhi an elegant gift.

"This is for my daughter." Happiness flickered across Ridhi's face.

Before they left, Aunty turned to Ridhi's father. "Brother, if you don't mind, could you give me your home address and telephone number? I may want to check on you from time to time."

Ridhi's father wrote their address and telephone number on a piece of paper and handed it to her.

Aunty carefully placed the note inside her diary and said, "Now you're all family. Whenever you come to Patna, consider this your own home."

As she walked them to the door, she casually added, "By the way, Ritesh is returning to America tomorrow. He probably won't be back for another two months."

Ridhi smiled politely. "Oh. Have a safe journey."

Ritesh nodded courteously. "Until we meet again."

The car slowly pulled away from the house, carrying Ridhi and her family into the evening. Behind them, Aunty stood silently at the doorway and for a moment, the warmth disappeared from her face.

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The Choice

Throughout the journey, Ridhi's parents praised Aunty's hospitality, but Rahul remained unusually quiet. He could not shake the feeling that a secret lay hidden inside that house, one that could change many lives when the truth emerged.

A few days later, Ridhi's parents returned to Muzaffarpur. Their departure left the hostel room strangely empty. The laughter and warmth of home were gone.

Before leaving, her mother reminded her to take care of herself, while her father gently placed a hand on her head and said, "Beta, focus on your studies. Your examinations are close. Don't worry about anything else."

Ridhi had smiled reassuringly. "You both don't worry about me. I'm perfectly fine."

When their car disappeared, her eyes filled with tears. That evening, she sat quietly for a long time. Seeing her sadness, Madhu came closer and said, "Why are you so upset? It's only a matter of a few days. Once your exams are over, you can go home again."

Ridhi gave a faint smile and nodded. Slowly, life returned to its usual rhythm college, books, tutoring, and exam preparation. Yet something had changed.

Aunty began sending messages for Ridhi through the hostel landline more frequently than before. Sometimes she asked how Ridhi was doing, sometimes about her studies, and sometimes she simply said, "Tell Ridhi to come and see me whenever she has some free time. The house feels so empty without her."

Ridhi took it as affection. Rita, however, found this growing closeness unsettling. One day at college, she said to Rahul, "I feel they've become much more active since Ridhi's parents left."

Rahul thought for a moment before replying quietly, "Because Ridhi is alone again."

Rita's smile disappeared.

Meanwhile, nearly two months passed without incident. Ridhi became so absorbed in preparing for her examinations that she barely noticed the small changes taking place around her.

Then, one evening, the hostel attendant came to the door and called out to Madhu.

"There's a message for you downstairs."

Madhu immediately went out. When she returned a little later, there was an unusual brightness in her eyes.

Ridhi looked up from her book. "What happened? You look very happy."

Madhu opened the cupboard casually. "Nothing special. Aunty has called me."

"Suddenly?"

"Yes."

She paused, then looked at Ridhi's reflection in the mirror. "Ritesh is back."

Ridhi simply said, "Oh."

Then she returned to her book. But Madhu continued watching her through the mirror, as though Ridhi's reaction mattered more than her words.

That same night, on the other side of the city, Aunty opened an old diary. On one of its pages was Ridhi's father's name, their Muzaffarpur address, and their home telephone number.

She ran her finger slowly across the name before looking at Ritesh sitting opposite her. "The time has come."

Ritesh said nothing. He simply leaned back in his chair and smiled.

A few more days passed. Ridhi remained busy with her examinations. Her mornings were spent in college, her afternoons in the library, and her evenings with her books.

Meanwhile, after Ritesh returned, Madhu's behaviour changed. She became quieter, sometimes leaving the hostel on one excuse or another or staying awake late into the night. Ridhi asked her once or twice, but Madhu always gave an ordinary explanation.

Then, one day, Aunty called Ridhi's home in Muzaffarpur. Ridhi's mother answered. "Namaste. Who is speaking?"

A familiar, sweet voice replied, "Oh, dear sister, you don't recognise me? I'm calling from Patna Madhu's aunt."

Ridhi's mother immediately brightened. "Oh, you! How are you?"

They exchanged pleasantries for a while. Aunty first praised Ridhi, asked about her studies, and then, with calculated care, brought the conversation around to the real purpose of her call.

"There is something I've been meaning to tell you for several days. I thought I should finally speak to you."

Ridhi's mother fell silent. "Yes? Please tell me."

Aunty paused. "You've met my nephew Ritesh, haven't you?"

The memory of that day immediately returned to Ridhi's mother. "Yes, the one who lives in America?"

"Yes, the same one." Her voice became softer. "The truth is… Ritesh likes Ridhi very much."

The receiver seemed to grow still in Ridhi's mother's hand. "Ridhi?"

"Yes. He says that if he ever marries, he wants a well-mannered, educated girl from a good family like Ridhi."

After a brief silence, Aunty continued, "And I want to make one thing clear from the beginning. Ritesh doesn't want any dowry. By God's grace, he has everything in America a house, a business, a car. He lacks nothing."

She gave a soft laugh.

"He even told me, 'Aunty, I don't want anything from them. No money, no belongings, no demands. I simply like Ridhi.'"

Ridhi's mother listened silently.

A young man living in America, financially secure, running his own business, and asking for no dowry this was not an offer that could easily be dismissed.

Sensing her hesitation, Aunty quickly added, "Please don't misunderstand me. I know a daughter's marriage is one of the biggest decisions in a family's life. Don't give me an answer now. Speak to your husband. Find out whatever you want to know about the boy. Think carefully. There is no hurry."

Her voice was gentle, but the smile on her lips concealed something the woman on the other end of the telephone could not see.

After the call ended, Ridhi's mother remained seated for a long time. That evening, when her husband returned home, she told him everything.

"Aunty called."

He looked at her. "Is everything all right?"

"She asked for Ridhi's hand… for her nephew Ritesh."

He stopped. "Ritesh?"

"Yes. The one who lives in America."

She repeated everything Aunty had told her. "She says he doesn't want any dowry. By God's grace, he has a house, a business, everything in America. He only wants Ridhi."

Her husband remained silent for several moments. There was no excitement in his expression, only deep thought.

"The boy seems well-mannered, and he speaks politely. But how much do we really know about him?"

His wife replied softly, "Aunty seems like a very good woman. She has looked after Ridhi for months. She herself told us to make all the enquiries we want."

He nodded seriously. "This is our daughter's life. We cannot decide simply because he lives in America, has a business, and doesn't want dowry. We need to know everything about him."

That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, Ridhi's mother remained awake for a long time. She kept thinking of her daughter living in America, in a wealthy household with a secure future.

Meanwhile, Ridhi knew nothing about the conversation taking place at home. A few days passed. Then, one evening, as she returned from college, she found Madhu waiting for her.

"Shall we go to Aunty's house today?" Madhu asked

Ridhi placed her books on the table. "Not today, Madhu. My exams are very close. I need to study."

Madhu studied her face. "Ritesh is there too."

Ridhi answered casually, "So?"

Madhu fell silent for a moment. Then an odd smile appeared on her lips. "Nothing. I was just telling you."

Ridhi looked at her carefully. "No, Madhu. There must be something. You're hiding something from me."

Madhu lowered her eyes for a moment before finally speaking. "All right, then. Let me tell you… Aunty has proposed you for Ritesh."

Ridhi was stunned. “With Ritesh?”

Madhu nodded. “Yes. Didn’t your mother tell you?”

Ridhi remained silent for a moment. Then she suddenly remembered. A few days earlier, her mother had briefly mentioned on the phone that a proposal had come for her. But Ridhi had quickly ended the conversation.

“Mom, my exams are close right now. We’ll talk about it after my exams.”

At the time, she hadn’t thought much about it. Only now did she understand who the proposal had truly been meant for. She remained lost in thought. So… was it Ritesh’s proposal after all.

Ridhi had already mentioned the matter to Rita and had clearly told her that she had no interest in the match. At that time, her studies and upcoming examinations were far more important to her but now, hearing Ritesh’s name, a strange uneasiness began to settle in her heart.

That same evening, Rahul and Rita sat at a small tea stall after college.

“Ritesh is back,” Rita said quietly.

The cup in Rahul’s hand stopped halfway to his lips. “When?”

“A few days ago.”

Concern appeared on his face. “Does Ridhi know?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t seem interested.”

Rahul looked toward the busy road. He could not decide whether he should feel relieved or more worried. Finally, he said

quietly, "Rita, I think they won't remain silent for much longer." He was right.

Meanwhile, inside Aunty's house, Ritesh stood near the window.

Aunty had just ended a telephone call. "I've started the conversation," she said.

Ritesh turned. "What did they say?"

"They haven't given an answer yet."

A faint smile appeared on his face. "They will."

Aunty studied him. "You sound very sure."

Ritesh smiled. "Because we haven't simply shown them a marriage proposal. We've shown them a dream for their daughter's future one they will find difficult to refuse."

Madhu stood silently near the doorway, listening. For some reason, there was no smile on her face this time.

The next few days passed uneasily for Rahul. After learning about Ritesh's proposal, he realised he could no longer remain silent. He had feelings for Ridhi but had never spoken to them. He feared that if he waited any longer, circumstances might decide everything for him.

Ridhi, too, was struggling. She attended classes and tried to study, but her thoughts kept wandering. Her parents planned to discuss Ritesh's proposal after her examinations. Then there was Rahul, the person she had quietly liked from the beginning.

Yet she had always believed the time was not right. She had to finish her education, support her father, and care about her

younger sisters. She had imagined that love would come at the right time.

Perhaps life had chosen a very different time for her.

One afternoon, after classes ended, Rahul stopped her. "Ridhi, I need to talk to you."

Seeing the seriousness in his face, Ridhi quietly followed him toward the college garden. They sat on an old bench beneath a tree. For a while, Rahul said nothing.

Ridhi finally asked, "What is it?"

Rahul looked at her. "Why didn't you tell me about Ritesh's proposal?"

Ridhi was startled. "Who told you?"

"Does it matter?"

She lowered her eyes. "I was confused myself. I didn't know what to say."

Pain entered Rahul's voice. "And you didn't think you should tell me?"

Ridhi immediately looked at him. "It's not like that."

"Then what is it like, Ridhi?"

This time, she had no answer.

Rahul took a deep breath. "I told you before that I like you. Perhaps I never made myself clear enough. So today, I want to say it properly."

Ridhi's heart began beating faster.

His voice was quiet but certain. "I want to marry you."

Ridhi looked at him. Those were the words she had secretly wished to hear countless times. Yet now that they had finally been spoken, she could not find a single word to answer.

Rahul continued, "I want my parents to come to your home and formally ask for your hand."

A flicker of happiness appeared in Ridhi's eyes, but it was quickly replaced by doubt. "Rahul… nothing is that simple."

"Why not?"

"Because my parents don't know enough about you and now Ritesh's proposal has also come."

Rahul immediately replied, "A proposal doesn't mean a decision has been made."

Ridhi remained silent.

Rahul softened his voice. "Just tell me one thing. Do you not like me at all?"

Ridhi lowered her eyes. A faint smile touched her lips, but she said nothing.

Rahul watched her carefully. "What am I supposed to understand from your silence?"

Ridhi finally whispered, "Not every feeling needs words, Rahul." With that, she stood up.

Rahul remained seated for a few moments. Then, for the first time in many days, a genuine smile appeared on his face.

That evening, he met Rita. "We need to find out everything about Ritesh."

Rita looked at him seriously. “Where do we start?”

“Aunty says he runs a business in America. But what business? Which city? How long has he lived there? We know almost nothing.”

“Madhu must know something. Or at least she thinks she does.” Rita looked at him. “You still suspect Madhu?”

Rahul answered quietly, “I suspect anyone who knows more about Ridhi’s life than Ridhi herself does.”

They decided that Rita would get closer to Madhu. She would casually ask about Ritesh, his address in America, his business, and his past. But neither of them knew that Madhu had become far more cautious.

Meanwhile, Aunty’s calls to Muzaffarpur became more frequent. She would ask about Ridhi’s health and examinations, and gradually, she began speaking warmly about Ritesh as well.

“My dear sister, I consider you family, which is why I’m telling you opportunities like this don’t come every day.”

One day, she told Ridhi’s mother, “The boy is settled in America. He has his own business and wants nothing in dowry. He has no demands. He simply likes your daughter.”

Ridhi’s mother answered cautiously, “We’re still thinking about it.”

Aunty laughed softly. “Of course. You should think carefully. This is your daughter’s life. Who am I to pressure you?”

Then, before ending the call, she added casually,

"Of course, Ritesh is receiving other proposals too. I've been holding him back because my heart has become attached to Ridhi."

The words stayed with Ridhi's mother. That evening, she said to her husband, "What if we take too long and he marries someone else?"

Her husband replied firmly, "If a proposal cannot wait a few days, then it isn't the right proposal for our daughter."

His wife fell silent. But a small seed of doubt had already been planted in her heart.

That same night, Aunty and Ritesh sat together in Patna.

"The girl's father won't agree easily," Aunty said.

Ritesh replied calmly, "Everyone has a weakness."

"And theirs?" A faint smile appeared on his face. "Their daughter's future."

Aunty said nothing.

Ritesh leaned back in his chair. "Tell them Ridhi can continue her education after going to America. Tell them I will never stand in the way of her dreams."

Aunty studied him. "What if they investigate you?"

For a moment, the smile disappeared from Ritesh's face. Then he said quietly, "That is exactly why we need them to make a decision before they do."

Aunty started staring at Ritesh.

After speaking with Rahul, Ridhi remained caught in a deep conflict for several days.

On one side was the love she had hidden for years. On the other were her parents' hopes and responsibilities. She knew how much her father worried about the future of his three daughters. Finally, one evening, she gathered the courage to call home.

The moment she heard her mother's voice, her resolve weakened. But this time, remaining silent might mean losing everything.

"Ma, I need to tell you something."

"Tell me, beta. What happened?"

Ridhi remained silent for a few seconds before speaking softly. "Rahul wants his parents to come to our house."

Silence followed on the other end. "For what?"

Ridhi's voice became even softer. "He wants to marry me."

Her mother could hardly believe it. "Rahul? The same Rahul who travelled around Patna with us?"

"Yes."

"And you?"

The question left Ridhi struggling for words. After a moment, she whispered, "Rahul is a very good person, Ma."

Her mother understood the meaning behind her daughter's hesitation. "Do you like him?"

Ridhi closed her eyes. "Yes."

The single word brought a shy blush to her face.

Her mother remained silent for a moment before saying, "I'll speak to your father." With that, she hung up.

A few days later, Rahul's parents formally visited Ridhi's family in Muzaffarpur to ask for her hand in marriage.

Rahul came from a respectable, educated, and financially secure family. His father was a dignified and thoughtful man, while his mother was graceful and well-mannered. There was very little anyone could find lacking in Rahul's family or background.

They spoke with humility and respect. Rahul's father said, "We have always told our son that marriage is a lifelong decision. This is the first time he has ever spoken to us about a girl, and we want to respect his choice."

Ridhi's father listened carefully.

Rahul's mother smiled. "We like your daughter very much. We want her to enter our home as a daughter, not simply as a daughter-in-law."

The meeting went pleasantly.

After Rahul's parents left, Ridhi's father said with satisfaction, "I liked them. The boy is right before our eyes. He is educated, the family is good, and most importantly, Ridhi knows him."

But Ridhi mother remained silent.

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

She replied quietly, "There is nothing lacking in Rahul, but Ritesh's proposal is much bigger."

Ridhi's father looked at her in surprise. "Bigger? In what way?"

"He is settled in America. He has his own business. He wants no dowry. If Ridhi settles there, it could open many possibilities for Nisha and Riya's future too."

Ridhi's father brows tightened. "We don't marry one daughter to create opportunities for the others."

"I'm not saying that" she replied quickly. "I'm only thinking about the future. Imagine Ridhi in America. Tomorrow, she could help with Nisha and Riya's education and their future."

Ridhi's father fell silent. Ridhi's mother's words came from the practical fears that often lived quietly in the hearts of parents from modest families.

When Ridhi learned that Rahul's parents had visited her home, she was overjoyed. For the first time, she felt that perhaps the moment she had been waiting for had finally arrived. But she did not know that, elsewhere, another game had already begun.

Madhu had informed Aunty that Rahul's parents had gone to Muzaffarpur with a marriage proposal.

Aunty's face changed. "So, it has come to this?"

Madhu lowered her eyes. "Ridhi likes Rahul too."

Ritesh, who had been sitting nearby, suddenly became silent. He looked at Madhu. "You knew this?"

Madhu became nervous. "I wasn't certain."

Aunty immediately intervened. "Anger won't solve anything."

She thought for a moment. Then a strange light appeared in her eyes.

"Everyone has a weakness." Ritesh looked at her. "And Ridhi's weakness?"

A slow smile spread across Aunty's face. "Her unfinished dream."

The next day, Aunty called Muzaffarpur. After a few formalities, she asked Ridhi's mother, "Has Ridhi ever told you what she wanted to become when she was young?"

Ridhi's mother sighed. "A doctor. But circumstances prevented her from fulfilling that dream."

Aunty remained silent for a moment, as though hearing it for the first time. Then she said softly, "Who said her dream is over?"

Ridhi's mother was startled. "What do you mean?"

Aunty's voice carried a strange confidence. "Ritesh told me that after marriage, Ridhi can continue her education in America. There are so many opportunities there. If she truly wants to become a doctor, Ritesh will support her completely."

The receiver nearly slipped from Ridhi's mother's hand.

"A doctor? In America?"

"Why not?" Aunty laughed softly. "Just imagine, sister. Your daughter becoming a doctor in America. The dream that circumstances stopped here could finally come true there. Thousands of people only dream of such a life."

Suddenly, a new picture formed in Ridhi's mother's mind. Ridhi in a white coat. The title of doctor beside her name. A prosperous life in America and perhaps, behind her, new possibilities opening for Nisha and Riya.

Aunty knew she had struck exactly where she intended to. She immediately softened her voice.

"The decision is entirely yours. We are in no hurry. Rahul is a good boy. I only want you to think carefully before deciding how far Ridhi's life could go."

The call ended but Aunty's words continued echoing in Ridhi's mother's mind. That night, she said to Ridhi's father, "What if Ritesh really helps Ridhi become a doctor?"

He did not answer immediately.

"That was her dream, wasn't it?" she continued. "We couldn't make it happen because of our circumstances. If fate is giving her another chance, should we really stand in her way?"

Ridhi's father sank into deep thought.

He had no idea that, at that very moment in Patna, Aunty was sitting across from Ritesh with a satisfied smile. "Now watch," she said. "The mother herself will hand her daughter over to us."

A few days later, Ridhi received a call from her father in Muzaffarpur. "Ridhi, if possible, come home for a few days. I need to discuss something important with you."

His voice sounded normal, but for some reason, Ridhi's heart began to race. She already knew what the conversation would be about.

Rahul stood before her as the man she had quietly loved. Ritesh represented the future her family wanted for her. Caught between them, Ridhi had to face a choice that could shape the rest of her life.

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The Road to America

The very next day, Ridhi left for Muzaffarpur. At home, Nisha and Riya ran to her and hugged their elder sister, while her mother embraced her and her father gently placed a hand on her head. Yet Ridhi sensed an unusual seriousness in the house that evening, as if everyone was hiding something.

After dinner, her father asked her to sit beside him.

"Beta, we called you home because a decision about your life should never be made without your consent."

Ridhi remained silent.

"There are two proposals for you," he continued. "One is Rahul's, whom you already know. The other is Ritesh's."

Her mother immediately added, "Both are good proposals, but they offer very different futures."

Ridhi lowered her eyes. Her father looked at her gently. "What do you want?"

It was a question Ridhi already knew the answer to. But saying it aloud was not easy.

After a long silence, she whispered, "Rahul is a good person, Papa. I have known him for a long time."

Her mother studied her face. “Is he only a good person, or do you actually like him?”

A faint blush appeared on Ridhi’s cheeks. “Yes.”

Silence filled the room. Her father took a deep breath. There was no anger in his eyes.

“If you truly like him, then we must seriously consider your feelings.”

For the first time that evening, Ridhi felt a little relieved.

But her mother was not finished. “Rahul is a good boy. He is educated, comes from a respectable family, and he cares for you. I agree with all of that.”

She paused. “But marriage is not only about today, beta. You must also think about tomorrow.”

Ridhi looked at her in confusion.

Her mother moved closer and held her hand. “Have you forgotten the dream you had since childhood?”

“What dream?” Ridhi looked at her mother.

“Becoming a doctor,” her mother replied.

The words struck Ridhi like a forgotten memory suddenly brought back to life. For years, she had buried that dream somewhere deep inside herself. Yet now it stood before her again.

Her mother spoke softly. “Aunty told me that Ritesh will support your education after marriage. You can continue studying in America.”

“America?” Ridhi whispered.

"Yes." Hope appeared in her mother's eyes.

"Think about it, beta. You could become a doctor. And not just here you could achieve it in America. Perhaps the dream we could not fulfil because of our circumstances has been given another chance by fate."

Ridhi said nothing. Two pictures slowly formed in her mind.

Rahul was the man who understood her silences, respected her dreams, and had quietly become a part of her heart.

The other dream was simpler yet powerful; a white coat, a stethoscope, and the name **Dr. Ridhi.**

For the first time in years, her forgotten dream began to breathe again.

Her mother tightened her hold on Ridhi's hand. "And it's not only about you. You have Nisha and Riya too."

Something inside Ridhi ached.

Her mother continued, "If you settle in America, you could support your sisters one day. Their education, their future, so many doors could open for them."

Ridhi pictured Nisha's ambitious eyes and Riya's innocent smile. She had always wanted to become a source of strength for her family.

Her mother spoke gently, "I am not asking you to reject Rahul. He is a good boy. But as your mother, I only want you to think beyond your heart."

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. "Is listening to my heart wrong, Ma?"

Her mother fell silent. "No, beta. It isn't wrong. But sometimes life asks us to think about the happiness and future of those we love too."

The words settled heavily in Ridhi's heart. Her father, who had been listening quietly, finally spoke.

"But remember one thing." He looked at his wife. "We cannot place the burden of our other daughters' future on Ridhi's shoulders."

Then he turned toward Ridhi. "You do not have to sacrifice your life for anyone. Choose the person with whom you believe you can truly be happy."

A tear rolled down Ridhi's cheek. If only the decision were that simple. That night, she sat alone in her old room.

On the table lay the same books from which she had once studied while dreaming of becoming a doctor. She opened an old notebook and turned to the first page.

In her childish handwriting were two words: **Dr. Ridhi.**

Her fingers lingered over them. Then Rahul's face appeared in her mind. "I want my parents to come to your home." She closed her eyes. Her heart pulled her toward Rahul.

But the dream she had buried for years was calling her in another direction. Between those two choices stood the future of her sisters.

Meanwhile, in Patna, Aunty had already learned that Ridhi had been called to Muzaffarpur.

"The decision is not far away now," she told Ritesh.

"What if she chooses Rahul?" he asked calmly.

A cold smile appeared on Aunty's face. "She won't."

"So certain?" Ritesh asked.

She tapped her fingers against the table. "Love pulls at the heart, Ritesh. But dreams, responsibilities, and concern for family can silence even the strongest feelings."

Madhu stood outside the room and heard every word. A chill passed through her. For the first time, she understood what they were doing. They were not chaining Ridhi. They were turning her own dreams into chains.

After returning to Patna, Ridhi was no longer the same.

She attended classes, spoke with her friends, and continued studying, but inside, she felt as though she were being pulled in two different directions.

Rahul noticed her sadness almost immediately. After class, he stopped her. "Don't leave without talking to me today."

They walked to the college garden and sat on the same old bench where Rahul had first spoken about sending his parents to ask for her hand.

Today, however, there was no happiness between them.

"What happened in Muzaffarpur?" Rahul asked.

Ridhi remained silent for a moment.

"My parents called me to discuss both proposals," Ridhi said.

"And what did you tell them?" Rahul asked.

"I told them I like you," Ridhi replied softly.

A brief spark of happiness appeared in Rahul's eyes, but when he saw the sadness on her face, it faded. I'd make Rahul's concern and Ridhi's inner conflict more visible while keeping the dialogue simple:

"Then what is the problem?" Rahul asked, his voice softer now.

Ridhi lowered her eyes. "My mother thinks Ritesh is a better choice for me," she said quietly.

"Because he lives in America?" Rahul asked, unable to hide the hurt in his voice.

Ridhi hesitated. "Aunty says he will help me continue my education there," she replied.

Rahul looked at her for a moment. "And what about what you want, Ridhi?"

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. "I don't know anymore. I know what my heart wants… but I also know how much my family expects from me."

Rahul looked at her in surprise.

"She says I can become a doctor."

His expression softened. He knew how much that dream meant to Ridhi. "You still want to become a doctor?"

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. "I never stopped wanting it, Rahul. I just taught myself to live without it."

Rahul fell silent. After a moment, Ridhi whispered, "My mother says that if I go to America, I can finish my studies and

become a doctor. Someday, I might be able to give Nisha and Riya a better life too."

Rahul looked at her sadly. "What about you, Ridhi?"

She looked up at him.

His voice was gentle, but his words hurt. "Where are you in all these plans?"

Ridhi's lips trembled. She wanted to answer, but she had no answer not even for herself.

Rahul leaned closer. "Look at me."

Slowly, she raised her eyes.

"Do you really think I would ever stand in the way of your dreams?"

"I never said that" Ridhi replied softly.

"Then listen to me," Rahul said.

His voice was firm, but his eyes were gentle. "If you want to become a doctor, then become one. Even after marriage. I will never stop you. Your dream will become my dream too."

A tear slipped down Ridhi's cheek. "But Rahul…"

"No. Let me finish." He paused for a moment.

"America is not the only place where dreams come true. And you don't have to marry someone you barely know just because he can offer you a beautiful future."

Ridhi listened silently.

"You can study here. I will support you. My parents will support you too. And if you ever need to move to another city for your education, I will stand beside you."

He looked directly into her eyes. "Just don't say yes to Ritesh."

Ridhi's breath caught.

"Trust me." He continued, "I don't know what Ritesh's real story is, but I know something isn't right. The promises, the sudden proposal, the repeated calls to your family none of it feels normal."

Ridhi whispered, "But my parents trust Aunty."

"And you Ridhi?" Rahul asked

She remained silent.

"Do you trust Ritesh?" Rahul asked

After a long pause, Ridhi lowered her eyes. "I don't even know him."

"Exactly." Rahul took a breath. "Don't hand your entire life to someone you barely know. Give me a little time."

"For what?" Ridhi asked

"To find out the truth about Ritesh." Rahul said

Ridhi looked frightened. "What if my parents decide before that?"

"Don't say yes. That's all I'm asking." Rahul said

Tears gathered in Ridhi eyes.

Rahul said softly, "Trust me, Ridhi. I won't force you to choose between your dream and your love."

Ridhi gave no answer but as she walked away, she turned back once. “I’ll try.”

Rahul smiled faintly. “Not try. Promise.”

She looked at him for a long moment. “Promise.”

Neither of them knew that Aunty had already made her next move.

Two days later, a thick envelope arrived at Ridhi’s home in Muzaffarpur.

It carried an American postmark. Curious, her father opened it. Inside were photographs of a large house, an expensive car, an office building, and Ritesh standing confidently among well-dressed people.

Aunty’s letter explained that the photographs showed Ritesh’s home, business, and life in America.

Ridhi’s mother studied every picture carefully.

“See? I told you. Aunty isn’t hiding anything from us.”

Ridhi’s father remained silent. He still wasn't completely convinced. But photographs had a strange power. People often trusted what they could see more easily than what they had yet to investigate.

That evening, Aunty called. “Did the photographs arrive?”

“Yes,” Ridhi’s mother replied happily.

“I thought they would give you some peace of mind. After all, you have every right to know about the family you are considering for your daughter.” Aunty said

Then, almost casually, she added, "Ritesh has also spoken to a college about Ridhi. He says he will do whatever is necessary for her education."

The old dream returned to Ridhi's mother's eyes.

"Really?" Ridhi's mother asked.

"Of course," Aunty replied.

Aunty paused. "There is just one small problem."

"What?" Ridhi's mother asked.

"Ritesh must return to America soon. Important business matters are waiting for him there."

Ridhi's mother fell silent.

Aunty continued gently, "He only wants the engagement settled before he leaves. The wedding can take place later."

"We… will think about it," Ridhi's mother replied.

"Of course. I would never pressure you. If you aren't ready, I'll tell him to wait. But how long can I keep turning down other proposals for him? He is receiving very good offers in America too," Aunty said.

After the call ended, a new fear took root in Ridhi's mother's heart.

What if they waited too long and lost such an opportunity?

Meanwhile, back in the hostel, Ridhi kept remembering Rahul's words. "Don't say yes, Ridhi. Trust me."

She had no idea that it was no longer just her heart being influenced. Her entire family was being drawn into a dream whose reality no one had truly verified.

For several days, the subject dominated conversations at home sometimes Rahul, sometimes Ritesh.

Ridhi's father still refused to make a hurried decision, but her mother was becoming increasingly convinced by the promise of America, better education, and Ridhi's dream of becoming a doctor.

One night after dinner, Ridhi's mother finally said, "How long can we keep thinking? Ritesh must return to America. If we wait too long, we may lose this proposal."

Ridhi's father looked at her seriously. "But Ridhi likes Rahul."

"I know," her mother said, pausing. "But children cannot always see their future as clearly as parents do."

"And what if we are wrong?" her father asked.

She fell silent. She had no answer. After a long silence, she said softly,

"Rahul is a good boy. But with Ritesh, Ridhi's entire life could change. She could go to America, continue her education, become a doctor, and perhaps support her sisters one day. We cannot give her the kind of future he can."

Ridhi's father closed his eyes for a moment. He could find no fault with Rahul. He was educated, respectable, and, most importantly, Ridhi loved him. Yet standing against Rahul was the

future Aunty had carefully painted before them; America, prosperity, education, and the promise of "Dr. Ridhi."

After days of uncertainty, the decision was finally made. Ridhi would marry Ritesh.

The news was given to Ridhi first. Her mother called her home again. The moment Ridhi entered the house; she sensed that something had already been decided.

That night, her father asked her to sit beside him. His face was unusually serious. "Beta, we have thought about this very carefully."

Ridhi's heart began to pound.

"We have decided to accept Ritesh's proposal," her father said.

The colour drained from her face. "Papa…" That was all she could manage.

Her mother immediately sat beside her and gently held her hand. "Beta, we have made this decision for your future."

Tears filled Ridhi's eyes. "But I told you I love Rahul."

"We know," her father said quietly.

"Then why?" The single question carried her hurt, confusion, and helplessness.

Her mother held both her hands. "Ridhi, Rahul is not a bad person. We never said he was. But life cannot be built on love alone. Ritesh can give you the future you have always dreamed of."

"What if I don't want that future?" Ridhi asked, her voice trembling.

Her mother fell silent. Her father looked at Ridhi, but before he could speak, her mother's eyes filled with tears.

"We have spent our entire lives making sacrifices for you, beta. Don't you trust us even a little?"

Ridhi's heart sank. She had no words left; not because she agreed, but because she could not bear to hurt the people she loved. "It's not that, Ma."

"Then listen to us." Her mother touched her head. "You can go there and become a doctor. Build your own life. And one day, you can help Nisha and Riya too."

The moment her sisters' names were mentioned, Ridhi looked toward the doorway. She remembered their faces. The dreams she had carried for them. The promise she had made to herself to become a source of strength for her parents. That night, Ridhi cried alone in her room. She remembered Rahul's promise.

"Don't say yes, Ridhi. Trust me."

But she also remembered her mother's tears, her father's sacrifices, and the responsibilities she had always carried in her heart.

The next day, her parents sent their answer to Rahul's family. They respectfully declined the proposal. When Rahul's father told him, he could hardly believe it.

"They refused?" Rahul asked.

"Yes, beta. They have decided to arrange Ridhi's marriage elsewhere," his father replied.

Rahul felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath his feet. He went to college immediately and searched for Ridhi. But she was still in Muzaffarpur.

When she finally returned to Patna a few days later, Rahul stopped her outside the college.

"I need to talk to you," Rahul said.

Ridhi met his eyes for a moment, then quickly looked away. She had known this moment would come.

They walked quietly toward the garden, where the old bench still stood. Everything looked the same, yet nothing between them felt the same anymore.

Rahul finally asked, "Your parents rejected my proposal."

Ridhi said nothing.

"Was that your decision?" he asked.

Her lips trembled. "Rahul…"

"Just answer me. Yes or no. Do you want to marry Ritesh?"

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "I don't know."

Rahul's voice broke. "Then refuse!"

Ridhi looked at him.

"You promised me."

She cried. "What am I supposed to do, Rahul?"

"Tell your parents that you want to marry me," Rahul said.

"I already did," Ridhi replied.

"Then stand by your decision."

Ridhi wiped her tears. "I cannot say no to my parents."

Rahul stared at her.

"They have spent their entire lives for us. They have sacrificed so much. I'm their eldest daughter. I always wanted to be their support."

"And for that, you'll sacrifice your whole life?" Rahul asked.

Ridhi had no answer.

"What about our love?"

She closed her eyes. "Perhaps every love story doesn't have a happy ending, Rahul."

The words broke something inside her.

Rahul looked at her for a long moment. "That isn't you speaking, Ridhi. That's your fear."

She slowly shook her head. "No. It's my decision."

But her eyes betrayed her words.

Rahul asked softly, "Don't you love me?"

Ridhi's breath caught. That was the question whose honest answer could change everything.

She lowered her eyes. "Rahul, please don't ask me that."

"Why?" Rahul asked.

"Because I don't have an answer that would allow me to walk away from you."

Rahul's eyes filled with tears.

Ridhi wiped her face and forced herself to remain strong. "Forget me, Rahul."

He gave a bitter smile. "Will you forget me?"

Ridhi said nothing. She turned to leave.

Rahul's voice followed her. "Just look at me once and tell me you'll be happy marrying Ritesh."

Ridhi stopped. But she did not turn around. After a long silence, she whispered, "My parents believe this is best for me." Then she walked away.

Rahul remained sitting alone on the bench. He knew she had never truly answered his question.

A few weeks later, the date for Ridhi and Ritesh's engagement was fixed. Aunty arranged everything quickly.

Ritesh was supposed to return to America soon, so she insisted that the engagement take place before his departure. The wedding, she said, could be held a few months later.

On the day of the engagement, Ridhi's home was filled with relatives and guests. Nisha and Riya were delighted to help their elder sister get ready.

Ridhi wore a beautiful outfit, but as she looked at herself in the mirror, she remembered the old bench.

Rahul's voice echoed in her mind. "Don't say yes, Ridhi. Trust me."

Then voices rose outside. Ritesh and Aunty had arrived.

Soon, Ridhi was brought into the room and seated among the guests. Ritesh wore a confident smile. Aunty repeatedly told everyone,

"We don't want anything. We only want Ridhi."

Ritesh picked up the ring. Ridhi closed her eyes for a moment. Rahul's face appeared before her. Then she saw her mother's tears. Her father's-tired eyes. Nisha and Riya's dreams.

Slowly, she extended her hand. Ritesh slipped the ring onto her finger. Applause filled the room. Everyone smiled. Her mother cried tears of happiness. Her father looked at his daughter with pride.

Aunty wore the quiet expression of someone who had finally won. Ritesh looked down at the ring on Ridhi's finger with satisfaction.

At that very moment in Patna, Rahul had already heard the news from Rita. He sat silently for a long time. Then he asked only one question. "Was she happy?"

Rita had no answer. Perhaps that silence was the most painful answer of all.

Later that night, Ridhi returned to her room and closed the door. She stared at the ring on her finger. A tear fell onto the stone. Very softly, she whispered, "Forgive me, Rahul."

In another room, Aunty was speaking quietly to Ritesh. "The hardest part is over."

Ritesh's expression remained cold. "No, Aunty."

He glanced toward Ridhi's closed door. "The real work starts now."

After the engagement, the atmosphere at home changed. Everything revolved around the wedding. Ridhi's parents stayed busy choosing clothes, arranging jewellery, inviting guests, and planning the ceremonies.

Nisha and Riya were the most excited, making lists of everything they wanted from America.

"Didi, bring me a beautiful coat," Nisha said.

"And lots of chocolates!" Riya added.

Ridhi smiled. Their innocent excitement helped hide the sadness inside her.

Only six months remained until the wedding.

Soon, she would return to Patna to collect her belongings, complete her hostel formalities, and leave behind the life she had built there.

She had no idea that the journey ahead would take her far beyond the future she had imagined and reveal the truth behind Ritesh, Aunty, and the carefully built dream that had changed her life forever.

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The Cage of Dreams

Ridhi now had to go to Patna to collect the rest of her belongings.

Her mother had made it very clear that she would go to Patna only to sit for her examinations. After that, she would have to return to Muzaffarpur.

It was morning. Her mother was folding her clothes and carefully placing them into her bag. Her hands were busy, but her eyes kept returning to her daughter's face.

While folding another dress, she said, "Come back quickly, my daughter. There is still so much work left to do."

Ridhi silently nodded. She had nothing to say.

As soon as she reached Patna, Ridhi felt as though she had returned to a city that no longer belonged to her.

Everything looked the same the roads, the college, the hostel, even her room but she was no longer the same person.

Her eyes fell on the table where she had spent countless nights studying, dreaming of becoming a doctor, supporting her father, and, sometimes, quietly thinking of Rahul.

The moment Madhu saw her, she rushed forward and hugged her. “You finally came!”

Ridhi tried to smile. “I came to collect my things.”

As she said those words, something inside her broke. She had come to collect her things, and now even this room and perhaps this city would no longer feel like hers. Maybe the life she had once chosen for herself was slipping away too.

The next day, she went to college. The sight of the familiar building made her pause. The corridors, classrooms, and trees seemed to whisper an old story a life she was about to leave behind.

The moment Rita saw her, she ran toward her and hugged her. “You came after so many days!”

There was more sadness than happiness in her voice.

Ridhi instinctively looked around. A question rose inside her heart. “Rahul didn’t come?” But the question stopped at her lips. She did not ask.

Rita, however, understood the meaning of her eyes. She remained silent for a few moments before saying softly, “Rahul doesn’t come to college very often anymore.”

Ridhi asked without thinking, “Why?”

Rita looked at her carefully. “Perhaps he wants to stay away from certain people.”

A sharp pain passed through Ridhi’s heart. Since the engagement, Rahul had made no attempt to meet her.

No message. No complaint. No questions. It was as though he had quietly walked out of her life. Ridhi wondered if he was angry with her, but his silence hurt more than anger ever could.

For the next few days, she packed her belongings books, clothes, old notebooks, and a few things that carried precious memories, but some memories refused to be left behind.

The day before leaving Patna, she went to college one last time. The sky was covered with thin clouds, while a cool breeze moved through the trees, making the leaves rustle softly.

Somewhere deep inside her heart, perhaps a small hope remained. Perhaps Rahul would meet her. But he did not come.

Ridhi stood for a long time beside the old bench where Rahul had once told her, "I will never force you to choose between your dreams and your love."

Today, that same bench was empty. Ridhi looked back once, then quietly walked away.

She did not know that Rahul was standing near the window of another college building, watching her leave. He could have stopped her. He could have called out to her. He could have said once again, "Don't go." But with what right?

Rahul clenched his fists.

Ridhi continued walking away and Rahul remained standing there.

Some separations do not begin when two people walk away from each other. They begin when two people can still see each other but have lost the right to reach one another.

Ridhi returned to Muzaffarpur. Soon, the day of her wedding drew near. The house filled with lights, flowers and guests.

Nisha and Riya ran happily from one room to another. Sometimes they laughed together, sometimes they rushed into Ridhi's room just to look at her and then ran outside again. Her mother moved constantly between the kitchen, the guests and her daughter's room.

Every now and then, she would come in and lovingly look at Ridhi. Ridhi sat dressed as a bride. Looking at her reflection in the mirror, she felt as though the girl sitting before her was someone else. She looked beautiful but there was a silence in her eyes that only she could understand.

Finally, in December 1995, Ridhi married Ritesh.

The wedding procession arrived, and the house filled with excitement and celebration. Ritesh naturally drew everyone's attention. Well-dressed, confident, and extremely polite, he greeted everyone respectfully.

He repeatedly told Ridhi's father, "From now on, don't think of me as your son-in-law. Think of me as your son."

Whenever her mother heard those words, happiness filled her eyes.

The wedding rituals were completed, and within six months, Ridhi had become Ritesh's wife.

After the wedding, Ritesh stayed in Muzaffarpur for a few days. His behaviour gradually erased the doubts in Ridhi's parents' hearts. He took exceptional care of her.

If she looked tired, he would immediately say, "Please let her rest. Someone else can take care of the rest."

At the dining table, he remembered her preferences. Whenever they went out, he would ask, "Ridhi, do you need anything?"

Sometimes, in front of everyone, he would smile and say, "You have given your daughter to me. From now on, her every happiness is my responsibility."

Her mother would look at her daughter and smile.

One day, she said to her husband, "See? Our Ridhi is so fortunate."

Her father looked at his daughter with satisfaction. For the first time, he truly believed they had made the right decision.

A few days later, Ritesh brought Ridhi to Patna. There too, his behaviour was extremely loving. He took her shopping; bought things she liked and showed her beautiful dreams about their future.

One evening, as they drove through the illuminated streets of Patna, Ritesh looked at her and said,

"Once we reach America, I want you to rest for some time first."

Ridhi looked at him.

He smiled. "Then we'll think about your studies. You still want to become a doctor, don't you?"

The moment she heard those words, the dream she had carried for years lit up in her eyes once again.

"Will I really be able to study there?"

Ritesh smiled. “I promised you. Don’t you trust me?”

Ridhi immediately fell silent. “I do.”

Ritesh smiled at her. Every time he smiled like that, it silenced one more doubt hidden inside Ridhi’s heart.

Slowly, the day of their departure for America drew closer.

New clothes were bought for Ridhi. Necessary belongings were packed into trunks. Her mother repeatedly checked everything to make sure nothing had been left behind.

Nisha and Riya were sometimes excited that their elder sister was going to America, and sometimes they would suddenly hug her and begin to cry.

“You won’t forget us, will you?” Riya asked with tears in her eyes.

Ridhi pulled her close to her chest. “How could I ever forget you both? I am going there so that one day I can do something for all of you.”

Her mother’s eyes filled with tears when she heard this. She felt proud of her daughter.

The night before her departure, Ridhi sat alone in her old room. The cupboard, the table, and everything around her carried memories of her childhood. Outside, the night had deepened.

She slowly opened her old notebook. On the first page, in her childhood handwriting, were the words: “Dr. Ridhi.”

A faint smile touched her lips. Perhaps her mother had been right. Maybe life was giving her another chance to fulfil her dream

in America and give her parents and sisters the life she had always wished for them.

She closed the notebook. Suddenly, Rahul's face appeared in her mind. She looked away. There was no road back now.

The next morning, it was time to leave. Her mother held her tightly and could not let go for a long time.

Her father placed his hand on her head, but tears filled his eyes.

Nisha and Riya clung to her, crying.

In front of everyone, Ritesh said lovingly, "Don't worry about Ridhi at all. From now on, her every happiness is my responsibility."

Her father held his hand with tearful eyes. "Our daughter is very innocent, son. Take care of her."

Ritesh immediately replied, "Please don't worry. I will never let her lack anything."

His words reassured Ridhi's parents. After spending a few days in Patna, Ridhi left for America with Ritesh.

As she sat aboard the plane, a wave of emotions washed over her. She felt the pain of leaving home the ache of parting from her parents, and the memories of her sisters. Ahead lay an unfamiliar country, while behind her was a dream she had carried for so long and was finally within reach.

The plane slowly lifted into the sky. Ridhi looked through the window as her country, city, and familiar world faded into the distance. Tears filled her eyes.

Ritesh looked at her. “Are you sad?”

Ridhi wiped her tears and nodded. “A little.”

Ritesh held her hand. “Your new life is about to begin.”

Ridhi looked at him silently. She did not know then how true those words would be.

The journey she believed would lead her toward her dreams was taking her into a world far different from the beautiful future she had been promised.

A world where she would learn that some relationships are not built on love, but on the price placed on a human being.

The long journey to America was nearing its end. The airplane slowly began its descent.

Through the window, the snow-covered ground, tall buildings, and long roads looked to Ridhi like a scene from a movie.

Her eyes filled with wonder. Ritesh smiled and held her hand. “Welcome to America. This is your home now.”

Ridhi looked outside and thought of her parents. “Father, I will fulfil your dream. Mother, I will become a doctor now.”

For the first time, the dream she had once buried seemed within reach.

As soon as they stepped outside the airport, a cold wind greeted her. Ridhi instinctively wrapped her shawl more tightly around herself.

Ritesh walked toward the car he had already booked. They placed their luggage inside and began driving through the city.

Ridhi looked around in wonder. Tall buildings, wide roads, shining lights, unfamiliar faces a completely new world. She could hardly believe that she had truly arrived in America.

After almost an hour, the car stopped in front of a beautiful two-story house.

Ritesh smiled. "Come… this is our home."

The house was truly beautiful. There was a small lawn in front, colourful flowers, a white wooden door and large windows. The moment Ridhi stepped inside, she felt an impression of elegance and silence.

She whispered, "What a beautiful house."

Ritesh smiled. "Now it is your home too."

He placed Ridhi in different parts of the house and the yard and took several photographs of her.

Then he said with a smile, "I'll send these pictures to your parents so they can feel reassured that they made the right decision for you."

He paused for a moment. Then continued, "And yes, Ridhi, you won't refuse this. Every month, I'll send some money to your parents on your behalf. It will make them happy to know that their daughter is living comfortably in America."

Ridhi stood silently, looking at him. She had no idea that these photographs would one day be used to hide the truth of her life.

Ritesh then arranged a call with her parents so they could hear her happiness for themselves.

The first few days truly felt like a dream. Ritesh took great care of her, prepared breakfast, and showed her around the city parks, shopping malls, and Indian restaurants.

At night, they sat together for hours, talking about their future.

One evening, Ridhi hesitantly asked, "Ritesh… what about my studies?"

Ritesh immediately replied, "What's the hurry? You've only just arrived. First, get used to the new environment. Then we'll calmly talk about college and admission."

Ridhi felt satisfied. She thought, what is the hurry, after all? Everything would happen in a few days.

Every Sunday, Ritesh himself would arrange a call to Muzaffarpur.

The moment Ridhi's mother heard her voice; her eyes would fill with tears. "How are you, my daughter?"

"I'm very happy, Mother. "Ridhi would tell her everything about the house.

She would describe the city roads, parks, snow and every new thing she saw.

Her mother would happily say, "I told you, didn't I? You will be very happy."

Her father was satisfied too.

Ritesh always spoke to him with great respect on the phone. "Father, don't worry. Ridhi is very happy here."

Her father would always say, "Just take care of our daughter."

"That is my responsibility." That was always Ritesh's answer.

Sometimes Ridhi thought about Rahul. But every time, she would tell herself, "Whatever happened, perhaps it was for everyone's good."

She began trying to lock her past inside a chest of memories. But life does not always give a person enough time to heal their wounds in peace.

Almost three weeks passed. One morning, Ridhi asked with a smile, "Ritesh, shall we go to the college next week?"

Ritesh was working on the computer. Without looking up, he replied, "We'll see."

Ridhi noticed that this was the first time Ritesh had avoided answering her directly. She did not think much of it. That evening, she brought up the subject again. "I was reading about some universities…"

Before she could finish, Ritesh said in a slightly harsh tone, "I told you, there's time."

Ridhi fell silent. That tone was new to her. A few moments later, Ritesh himself softened. "Sorry… there was a lot of pressure at the office today."

Ridhi immediately ended the conversation. "It's okay."

But for some reason, a faint uneasiness entered her heart for the first time. That night, she began looking at the house more carefully. She realized that one of the rooms on the lower floor was always locked. She had never asked about it before.

One day, while cleaning, she asked without thinking, "What is in that room?"

Ritesh looked at her for a moment, then casually replied, “Just some old things.”

“Should I clean it?” Ridhi asked

“No need.” His answer was brief.

After that, Ritesh immediately changed the subject.

Ridhi did not ask again. That same night, she noticed something else strange.

Ritesh often spoke to someone on the phone late at night in a low voice in English. Whenever Ridhi entered the room, he would immediately end the conversation.

She asked him once or twice, “Who was that?”

He would laugh and say, “People from work.”

Ridhi believed him. After all, there was no reason for her to suspect anything.

One evening, the doorbell rang. Ritesh went to open the door himself. Two unfamiliar men were standing outside. They did not come inside.

Ritesh spoke with them quietly at the doorway. From a distance, Ridhi could see only that one of the men handed Ritesh a brown envelope. Ritesh immediately slipped it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

When he returned, Ridhi smiled and asked, “Who was that?”

Ritesh answered in a perfectly ordinary tone, “People from the office.”

Ridhi nodded. That night, she remained awake for a long time. She could not understand whether this was simply the unfamiliarity of living in a new country or whether there really was something being kept hidden from her.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in India, Rahul still sometimes went and sat silently beside that empty college bench.

Whenever Rita saw him, she would say only one thing, "What if your suspicion turns out to be true?"

Rahul's eyes would drift into the distance. He would say quietly, "Then I will never forgive myself."

And in America, at that same moment, Ritesh was sitting inside his study.

He opened the same brown envelope. There were several documents inside. He fixed his eyes on one of the papers. A faint smile spread across his face. At that very moment, there was a knock on the door.

Ridhi entered.

Ritesh quickly placed all the papers inside a drawer and locked it.

Ridhi looked at him in surprise. "Did I disturb you?"

Ritesh immediately smiled. "No. Just some important business papers."

Ridhi smiled too.

Ridhi had been in America for almost three months. The excitement of the first few days had slowly become an ordinary

routine. Ridhi had noticed several times that Ritesh was no longer the same.

He now left home early in the morning and often returned late at night. Earlier, he had shared everything with Ridhi. Now his answers were becoming shorter. "There's too much work at the office. A new deal is going on. I'll be busy for a few more days."

Ritesh had almost stopped arranging calls between Ridhi and her parents. Often, he would simply say, "I already called them from the office. Everything is fine."

He would also tell Ridhi's parents, "I'm very busy with work, so I haven't been able to let her talk to you much."

However, he continued sending money regularly, so Ridhi's parents had no serious reason to doubt his behaviour.

These few sentences had now become a regular part of his daily conversations.

Ridhi convinced herself that perhaps his business responsibilities had genuinely increased.

One evening, she gathered courage and asked again, "Ritesh, when will we think about my studies?"

Ritesh closed his laptop. "What's the hurry?"

"There's no hurry. I just don't want to waste my time."

Ritesh gave her a forced smile. "I promised you, didn't I? Then why are you so restless?"

Ridhi fell silent. That night, for the first time, she realized that she always received the same answer. Every time, the real issue was simply pushed into the future.

A few days later, Ritesh suddenly said, "Some of my friends are coming over this evening."

Ridhi was happy. She thought she might finally meet people and begin building a world of her own. She prepared Indian dishes, arranged the table, and carefully put the house in order.

That evening, three guests arrived, two men and a middle-aged woman. Ridhi welcomed them with a smile but was surprised when they barely spoke to her. Instead, they spoke quietly with Ritesh in English.

From time to time, they glanced at Ridhi. Their looks were difficult to understand, but they made her uncomfortable.

After dinner, the woman came closer to Ridhi. With a forced smile, she asked, "You just came from India?"

"Yes," Ridhi replied.

"Are you liking it here?"

"Yes, very much."

The woman studied her face for a few moments before giving a silent smile. There was something strange about it, as though she were not looking at Ridhi but assessing her.

After the guests left, Ridhi turned to Ritesh. "Who were they?"

"Business partners," he replied.

"The woman too?"

"Yes. She is a business partner too," Ritesh said immediately.

The conversation ended there.

A few days later, Ridhi noticed that Ritesh had almost stopped allowing her to go out alone.

"If you need to go somewhere, tell me."

At first, she had thought it was an expression of love. Now the same words began to feel like a restriction.

One day she asked, "Can I go for a walk in the park across the street?"

Ritesh immediately replied, "No. Not now."

"Why?"

"This area is new to you. You might lose your way."

Ridhi did not argue further but the questions inside her heart continued to grow.

That night, Ridhi came downstairs to get some water. The light in the study was on. The door was not completely closed. She could hear Ritesh's voice from inside. He was speaking to someone on the phone in English.

Ridhi could not understand everything, but one phrase reached her ears clearly. "Documents… and passport."

Ritesh suddenly looked toward the door.

Ridhi immediately stepped back and went toward the kitchen. A few moments later, Ritesh came out. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to get some water."

Ritesh looked at her carefully for a few moments. "Did you hear anything?"

Ridhi laughed. "I barely understand half of English."

Ritesh smiled too and ended the conversation but after she left, he took a long breath. As though he had just escaped a serious problem.

The next morning, Ridhi was searching for something inside her wardrobe. She wanted to take out her passport. She searched the entire wardrobe. Then opened her suitcase. The passport was nowhere to be found. She immediately asked Ritesh,

"Where is my passport?"

Ritesh replied calmly, "I have it."

"You, have it?"

"Yes. Important documents need to be kept safely here. If it gets lost, it could create a lot of problems."

Ridhi innocently nodded. "Oh. Okay."

She asked nothing more. As she looked at her reflection in the window, an unfamiliar feeling stirred within her. She could not name it. It was neither fear nor relief, only a quiet sense that something had changed.

It was as though the most important document representing her freedom was no longer in her own hands. She still had no idea how serious that was.

At that very moment, thousands of miles away in Muzaffarpur, Ridhi's mother was proudly telling a neighbour, "Our daughter is very happy. We found such a wonderful son-in-law. He takes such good care of her. Now we only pray that our daughter becomes a doctor soon."

They had no idea that their daughter's passport was safe… but her freedom was slowly being taken away from her. Time continued to pass silently.

Ridhi had now been in America for several months. She had become somewhat familiar with the city's roads, weather and daily routine.

One thing remained unchanged. She was living in a country where she was free, yet somewhere inside, she still felt trapped.

Ritesh did not openly stop her from going outside. He often said, "If you feel restless, you can go to the park across the street or walk around the shopping mall."

Every time, he repeated the same warning. "Remember, your passport and all your other documents are safely with me. The laws here are very strict. If you ever lose your way, or someone asks you for identification and you don't have your papers, the police could stop you. Then you could get into unnecessary trouble."

Ridhi never objected. She was in a new country and knew little about its laws. She assumed this was simply how things worked there.

Ritesh's words felt like caution, not control. Gradually, she settled into a quiet routine an occasional walk in the nearby park, a visit to the mall for necessities, and then straight back home.

She rarely spoke to anyone. The language barrier and her own hesitation kept her isolated. Her world had shrunk to three places: home, the nearby mall, and the hospital.

Then, one day, she discovered she was going to become a mother. Tears of happiness filled her eyes. For the first time in

years, she felt truly happy. She waited impatiently for Ritesh to come home.

That evening, when Ritesh arrived, Ridhi placed the medical report in his hand with a smile. "Ritesh…"

She paused. Then said softly, "We're going to become parents."

Ritesh looked at the report. The smile disappeared from his face in an instant. "How did this happen?"

The harshness in his voice startled Ridhi. "What do you mean?"

Ritesh remained silent for a few moments. There was an anger on his face that Ridhi had never expected to see.

Without thinking, she asked, "You… aren't happy?"

Ritesh immediately controlled his tone. He took a deep breath, then came closer and placed his hand on her shoulder. "No. It's not like that."

With a forced smile, he said, "I just hadn't thought about it happening so soon. Business has grown so much that, for a moment, I panicked."

Ridhi looked at him silently.

Ritesh held her hand. "Come on… it's okay. Whatever God has planned."

Ridhi breathed a sigh of relief. She thought perhaps he had simply been shocked by the sudden news.

After that day, Ritesh became gentle with her again. He took her to the hospital himself, listened carefully to the doctor, and

made sure she took her medicines on time. Sometimes, he would stop at the mall on the way home to lift her spirits.

Ridhi began to believe he might be not only a good husband but also a responsible father. Yet one thing remained unchanged her world was still limited to home, the hospital, and the mall. Beyond these places, her life did not go.

Whenever Ridhi mentioned visiting somewhere new, Ritesh would smile and say, "Once the baby arrives, we'll go wherever you want."

Ridhi accepted his promise.

To make her time at home more comfortable, Ritesh taught her to use the computer. She spent hours on it searching for recipes, reading about baby care, and quietly browsing medical college websites, keeping her dreams alive.

She often told herself, "Once the baby grows a little, I'll begin my studies."

Once a month, Ritesh called Muzaffarpur, and Ridhi would spend hours talking to her parents, Nisha, and Riya.

Her mother always asked, "Your husband takes good care of you, doesn't he?"

Ridhi would smile. "Very much."

Her answer was not entirely false. In front of her, Ritesh truly played the role of an ideal husband. Ridhi did not realize that her world had become so small that she had begun to mistake it for freedom.

One day, Ridhi overheard Ritesh talking to someone on the phone.

He was saying, "Now my job has become much easier. Once the baby is born, she won't go anywhere. Until I finish the second project. This time, there won't be another mistake."

Ridhi stood there for a few moments. Her feet seemed rooted to the floor. She could not understand what Ritesh meant. An unfamiliar fear awakened inside her heart. She instinctively placed a hand over her stomach.

The room was silent. Outside, the evening darkness was slowly settling over the city and in the middle of that silence, one question kept echoing in her mind.

"What project was he talking about?"

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The Price Behind the Promise

Ritesh's business trips became more frequent. He often left for India for several days at a time. Ridhi noticed something strange. He rarely went to Patna anymore.

Most of his trips were to Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, and sometimes Kolkata.

Whenever Ridhi asked, "Aren't you going to Patna?"

Ritesh would laugh casually. "My business has spread across the country. I must go wherever I'm needed."

Ridhi accepted his explanation, but one question kept returning to her mind. If his business was based in America, why did he keep travelling to so many cities in India?

One evening, Ritesh was preparing for another trip when his mobile phone suddenly rang. It lay on the table, and a single name appeared on the screen:

"Aunty."

Ridhi smiled and called out, "Ritesh, Aunty is calling."

Ritesh came running, quickly picked up the phone, and walked into the other room. Just before the door closed, Ridhi heard a single phrase: "New girl."

The rest of the conversation disappeared behind the closed door.

Ridhi stared at it for a moment, then smiled to herself. Perhaps they were talking about some relative.

She turned back to her computer, unaware that the "new girl" on the other end had nothing to do with a relative.

It was another life whose price was about to be negotiated.

When Ritesh returned from India, Ridhi noticed another change in him.

He was no longer paying attention only to her daily routine. He had begun taking a particular interest in her clothes, the way she spoke, and even the way she carried herself.

One evening, he came home carrying several large shopping bags.

Ridhi looked at them curiously. "What is all this?"

With a smile, Ritesh began opening the packages one by one.

Inside were Western-style clothes.

Ridhi picked up one of the dresses and looked at it uncertainly. "These are for me?"

"Who else?" He laughed. "You live in America now, Ridhi. You must learn to live according to the environment here."

Ridhi hesitated. “I’m perfectly comfortable wearing my suits and saris.”

Ritesh gently interrupted her. “You can wear them at home, but when you go outside, you’ll gradually have to get used to Western clothes.”

Then, with a smile, he added, “After all, you’re an educated woman with a modern outlook.”

Ridhi did not think it was worth arguing. She told herself that perhaps some things simply had to change when one moved to a new country.

A few days later, she brought up her education again.

“Ritesh, I think it would be better if we started the admission process now.”

Ritesh was looking through her medical reports on the table.

“Not now.” Ritesh reply

“Why?” Ridhi asked

“Your health is more important now. The doctor has also advised you to rest during the pregnancy.”

Ridhi spoke softly. “I only want to gather some information.”

Ritesh placed a hand on her shoulder.

“After the baby is born, we’ll take care of the admission properly. I promised you, didn’t I? And I never forget my promises.”

Ridhi tried to be satisfied. She told herself it was only a matter of a few months. Time passed slowly.

Ritesh had also started inviting some of his business associates to the house. At first, Ridhi would simply serve tea and food before quietly going back inside.

One evening, Ritesh stopped her. "Why do you always go inside?"

Ridhi looked at him in surprise. "They're your guests."

"They're not just my guests anymore. They're our guests."

Ridhi remained silent.

Ritesh laughed lightly. "You still think like you're living in India."

"What do you mean?"

"This is America, Ridhi. People mix freely here. They talk openly. There's no need to be shy about everything."

Ridhi nodded.

The next time guests arrived, Ritesh made her sit beside him. "This is my wife, Ridhi."

He introduced her to everyone and then smiled. "You should talk too."

Ridhi gave brief answers. She still wasn't comfortable becoming too friendly with strangers.

After the guests left, Ritesh smiled at her. "You'll have to become a little more confident."

"Did I do something wrong?" Ridhi asked

"Not wrong but you're too quiet." Then he added gently, "This isn't India, Ridhi. Here, people talk while looking into each

other's eyes. They smile when they speak. You'll learn everything slowly."

Ridhi accepted his words as nothing more than a cultural difference.

After that, Ritesh began encouraging other changes. "Improve your English. Read the news on the computer. Get used to talking to people."

Ridhi thought all of this was simply part of adapting to her new life. Perhaps Ritesh really wanted her to adjust to the society around her. Yet sometimes she wondered why all these changes were happening so quickly.

One night, she finally asked, "Why do you want me to change everything so quickly?"

Ritesh remained silent for a moment. Then he smiled. "Because I don't want people to look at you and immediately know that you've just come from India."

Ridhi smiled faintly and nodded. She had no idea that Ritesh was not simply teaching her to adjust to a new country.

He was preparing her for a role whose true purpose she knew nothing about. That ignorance was about to become her greatest weakness.

The most beautiful day of Ridhi's life finally arrived. After months of waiting, pain, and countless prayers, she gave birth to a healthy baby boy.

The first time she held her tiny son against her chest, she felt as though life had finally placed a balm over all her wounds.

Tears slipped uncontrollably from her eyes. She kissed her baby's forehead and made a silent promise. I will protect you from every sorrow.

Ritesh was there at the hospital. In front of everyone, he played the role of the perfect husband and the proud new father.

He even arranged for Ridhi to speak to her parents and showed them the baby. Ridhi's sisters and parents were overjoyed.

Ritesh thanked the nurses, repeatedly asked the doctor about the baby's health, and offered sweets to everyone who came to see them.

Watching him, Ridhi felt reassured. Perhaps everything would change now. Perhaps they would finally live like an ordinary, happy family. A few weeks later, Ridhi and the baby returned home.

Ritesh seemed even more attentive than before. "Now you're not alone," he would say. "Now our responsibility has doubled."

Ridhi would smile whenever she heard him say it. But one night, life showed her its real face for the first time.

After putting the baby to sleep, Ridhi came downstairs to get some water. The study door was slightly open. Ritesh was inside, speaking quietly to someone on the phone.

Ridhi was about to turn away when one sentence stopped her.

"Now she is completely under our control."

Ridhi froze.

Ritesh continued, "After the baby, she can't go anywhere."

A chill ran through Ridhi's body. She stood there holding her breath.

A moment later, Ritesh spoke again. "Yes. Now there's nothing to worry about."

The glass almost slipped from Ridhi's hand. She quickly steadied herself and silently returned to the bedroom. She could not sleep the entire night.

The next morning, she finally gathered the courage to ask. "Who were you talking to last night?"

Ritesh casually lifted his coffee cup. "One of my business associates."

Ridhi carefully continued, "I heard you say that she was now under your control because of the baby."

For a moment, Ritesh's face became completely expressionless. Then he burst out laughing. "Oh, you heard that?"

He smiled. "I was talking about my new project."

"Project?"

"Yes. There's a business deal in India. I was telling my partner that he could no longer withdraw from our agreement."

He looked at her. "You're strange, Ridhi. You hear half a conversation and create an entire story."

Ridhi lowered her eyes. "Perhaps I misunderstood." But the uneasiness inside her did not disappear.

A few months later, Ritesh held a large gathering at home to celebrate their child's birth. The house was filled with lights as guests arrived throughout the evening.

Ridhi welcomed them with the baby in her arms. They congratulated her, kissed the baby, and praised Ritesh for his good fortune.

Among them were several unfamiliar faces. They stayed close to Ritesh, sometimes speaking to him in hushed voices and occasionally glancing at Ridhi with strange smiles.

Something about their expressions made her uncomfortable. Late that night, most of the guests had left.

Ridhi had put the baby to sleep and returned to the living room when she noticed that only a few people remained.

Ritesh was standing in a corner, talking to them. One of the men approached Ridhi.

At first, he spoke casually but gradually, his manner became inappropriate.

Ridhi immediately stepped back. "Please keep your distance."

The man ignored her. Ridhi became frightened and quickly went toward Ritesh. "Ritesh... I don't like the way he's behaving."

Ritesh looked at her. There was none of the concern she had expected to see.

He silently took her into another room. "What happened?"

"That man…" Her voice trembled. "His behaviour isn't right."

Ritesh remained silent for a moment. Then an unfamiliar seriousness appeared on his face. “Ridhi, do exactly what I tell you.”

She stared at him. “What do you mean?”

His voice became cold. “Go back.”

Ridhi looked at him in disbelief. “I won’t.”

Ritesh pointed toward the baby’s room. “If you don’t listen to me…” He paused. “Then I’ll separate you from the baby right now.”

The colour drained from Ridhi’s face. “Ritesh, what are you saying?”

“And if necessary…” His voice became even colder. “I’ll throw you out of this house.”

Ridhi felt as though the ground had disappeared beneath her feet.

This was not the man who had once promised her parents that he would stand by her for the rest of her life. Nor was he the man who had promised to help her become a doctor.

The promises that had once made her feel safe now felt like distant memories. For the first time, she saw a stranger standing before her. “I’m your wife,” she whispered.

Ritesh answered cruelly, “Today, remember only one thing. If you refuse to obey me, the first thing you will lose is your child.”

Ridhi’s hands began to tremble. She looked toward the room where her little son was sleeping.

For the first time, she understood. She had not simply come to a new country. She had fallen into a trap where her love, her dreams, her identity even her right to be a mother had slowly been placed in someone else's hands.

Outside the room, laughter continued. For the guests, it was still a celebration but for Ridhi, the darkness had finally begun.

Ridhi's lips had gone dry, with a trembling voice, she pleaded, "Ritesh, for God's sake, don't do this. What have I ever done to you?"

The man standing before her no longer resembled the husband she had once trusted.

His voice was ice-cold. "You still think you have a choice?"

Ridhi shook her head helplessly. "I am your wife. I am the mother of our child."

Ritesh stepped closer. "And that is your greatest weakness."

Then he spoke slowly, deliberately. "Your passport is with me. All your documents are under my control."

The blood drained from Ridhi's face.

Ritesh continued. "If you take even one step against my wishes, I only need to make one phone call."

He paused. "I'll tell them you are staying here illegally."

Ridhi stared at him in disbelief. "No. That can't be possible."

Ritesh gave a bitter smile. "You don't know the laws of this country, Ridhi."

Then he pointed toward the baby's room. "And remember this."

His voice became colder. "The child will stay with me."

Ridhi's heart pounded. "No."

"Yes. You'll spend years in prison," Ritesh said cruelly. "Your child will grow up away from you and your parents won't be here to help you."

Tears streamed down Ridhi's face. "I trusted you."

Ritesh looked at her without emotion. "That was your biggest mistake."

He pointed toward the door. "Go."

Ridhi stepped back, shaking her head. "I won't."

Ritesh lost patience. He grabbed her wrist tightly. "You have no choice."

Ridhi struggled to free herself, but her strength was gone. From the other room came the faint sound of her baby crying. Every cry tore through her heart.

Ritesh dragged her down the hallway toward a locked room at the far end. He opened the door.

Ridhi looked inside. A man was already there. She immediately stepped back. "No... I don't want to go inside." Her voice had broken completely.

Ritesh looked into her eyes one last time. "Think about your child."

Ridhi closed her eyes. In that instant, she saw her mother's face, her father's blessings, Rahul's voice, and the innocent smile of her newborn son.

Then Ritesh pushed her into the room. The door slammed shut. A lock clicked from the outside.

Ridhi placed both hands against the door. "Ritesh... open the door... please, for God's sake!"

There was no answer. Only silence.

That night, Ridhi finally understood that she was not merely trapped in an abusive marriage. She had fallen into the grip of an organized criminal network.

Her life had been divided forever between the woman who once dreamed of a future and the woman who now had only one purpose: to survive. Not for herself, but for her innocent child.

The next morning, the sun rose as it always did. For Ridhi, the last light of hope seemed to have died.

She sat beside her baby, holding him tightly against her chest, as if her arms could shield him from the cruelty of the world. The terror of the night still haunted her eyes.

She wished it had all been a nightmare but the room around her was a cruel reminder that reality could be far worse. The door slowly opened. Ritesh walked in.

There was no regret on his face. No shame. He looked as though nothing had happened. He walked straight toward the baby, lifted him into his arms, and smiled.

"Look at our little prince. He's sleeping so peacefully."

For the first time, Ridhi looked at him with something stronger than fear. Hatred.

"You're not human." Her voice was barely audible.

Ritesh smiled faintly. "Human?"

He paused. "Ridhi... in this world, it isn't human beings who survive. It is power."

Ridhi said nothing. She now knew that expecting mercy from him was useless.

From that day forward, Ridhi decided. She would not argue with Ritesh, question him, scream, or cry in front of him.

She had learned that every act of resistance could come at the cost of her child. So, she became silent. Her silence was not surrender. It was waiting for the right moment.

A few days later, Ritesh casually said, "Some guests will be coming next week."

Ridhi's hands began to tremble.

Ritesh immediately noticed the fear in her eyes. He stepped closer and spoke quietly. "If you behave intelligently, nothing will ever happen to your child."

It was not a threat. It was a declaration. Ridhi lowered her eyes.

That night, for the first time, Ridhi opened the computer with a purpose. She began reading about American laws, women's rights, domestic violence, immigration, and places that offered help. Her English was still weak, but certain words stood out Help. Emergency. Shelter.

She did not call anyone or send a message. She simply read, watched, and remembered.

Then she opened the small diary she had once bought to practice English. On the last page, she wrote a date and one sentence:

"From today, I will remember everything."

From then on, she recorded every detail; who came, where Ritesh went, whose calls he received, which cities he mentioned, and when he travelled to India or returned.

She did not yet know where this information would lead but something inside her had changed. Fear was slowly turning into anger, and anger into resolve.

One day, the truth will become her weapon.

Ritesh had now stopped allowing Ridhi to speak to her parents. He would simply tell them that she was fine. He would say that Ridhi was busy with the baby.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in India, Rita's life had moved forward. Yet she still thought about Ridhi.

One day she said to Rahul, "I don't know why, but my heart still tells me that Ridhi isn't happy."

Rahul looked silently at an old photograph of Ridhi lying on the table.

Then he spoke softly. "If she is ever in trouble…" He paused. "I will find her."

Thousands of miles away, Ridhi kissed her sleeping son's forehead. There were no tears left only determination.

She would survive every humiliation, every cruelty, every trial because now, she was fighting not only for her freedom, but for her child's.

More than three years had passed since Ridhi came to America. She had learned when to stay silent, when to smile, and when to hide her pain but one thing remained alive within her a mother's love.

Every day, holding her son, she thought, one day he will speak. He will go to school but if I cannot speak English properly, how will I stand beside him?

With each passing day, the thought grew stronger. One evening, when Ritesh returned from work, Ridhi gathered all her courage.

"Ritesh, I want to ask you something."

Ritesh closed his laptop. "Yes?"

Ridhi spoke softly. "Will you allow me to take English classes?"

Ritesh looked at her in surprise. "Suddenly?"

Ridhi glanced toward her sleeping child and smiled faintly. "Not for myself."

She paused. "For my son."

Ritesh remained silent.

For the first time, Ridhi allowed herself to explain what was truly in her heart.

"When he learns to speak and goes to school, I don't want him to feel embarrassed when he talks to his mother. I want to be able

to help him with his homework. I want to speak to his teachers. I want to understand his world."

Silence filled the room. Ritesh stared at her. Perhaps for the first time, he realized that her wish contained no personal ambition.

After a long pause, he finally said, "Fine."

Ridhi looked at him in disbelief. "Really?"

"Yes."

A tiny spark of hope appeared in her eyes after many months, but the happiness did not last long. Ritesh stood up. "But I'll have a few conditions."

Ridhi became silent. "You will only attend your class and come straight home."

"Yes."

"You will not make friends."

"Yes."

"You will not tell anyone a single word about your personal life."

Ridhi nodded.

Ritesh stepped closer. His voice was quiet, but every word carried a threat. "Remember one thing."

Ridhi looked at him.

"Your passport and all your documents are with me."

Her breath caught.

"If you try to talk too much to anyone, if you tell someone anything about yourself, or if I even suspect that you have disobeyed me…" He paused. "One phone call will be enough."

Ridhi stood silently.

Ritesh continued coldly, "If you are caught in this country without documents, immigration can arrest you."

Then he looked toward the child. "Imagine being in prison while your son stays here. You could spend years without even seeing him."

Ridhi's hands instinctively moved toward her son.

Ritesh's voice remained cold. "So, remember. No friendships. No secrets. No trusting anyone. Only class and straight home."

Ridhi slowly lowered her head. Satisfied, Ritesh walked out of the room. The door closed behind him.

Ridhi pulled her child into her arms, tears filling her eyes. But behind them was something new; a light.

She understood that Ritesh had not given her freedom. He had only opened a narrow path within her prison. Sometimes, even the smallest opening is enough for light to enter.

That day, Ridhi made a silent decision. She would learn English not only for her son, but to break her silence and reclaim her voice.

Perhaps this class would be the first step toward freedom.

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The Open Door

The following week, Ridhi began attending English classes at a small community learning center where people from different countries came to learn. Several women there had also come to America after marriage.

Ridhi arrived early each day, sat in the last row, and listened carefully. As soon as the class ended, she quietly picked up her bag and left. She rarely spoke to anyone.

Ritesh's warning constantly echoed in her mind: "No friendships. Don't tell anyone anything about your life."

One of the teachers was Miss Emily Carter, nearly fifty, soft-spoken, and remarkably observant. She taught more than language; she noticed the silences behind people's faces.

Within a few weeks, she noticed Ridhi. While the other students stayed behind to talk, laugh, or have coffee, Ridhi always walked straight to the door the moment the bell rang.

One day, Miss Emily stopped her with a gentle smile.

"Ridhi."

Ridhi stopped. "Yes, ma'am?"

"You're learning very quickly."

Ridhi gave a faint smile. “Thank you.”

“Would you like to stay for coffee after class?”

Ridhi’s heart began to beat faster. Ritesh’s warning immediately echoed in her mind.

“I’m sorry. I have to get home early.” She hurried outside.

Miss Emily stood there for a long moment, watching the door through which Ridhi had disappeared. For the first time, she realized that this was not shyness. It was fear.

A few days later, the class was given an exercise. Each student had to speak for two minutes about their family.

When it was Ridhi’s turn, she stood up.

“My name is Ridhi. I am from India. I have a son.”

A smile appeared on her face as she said it.

“He is my whole world.”

Everyone in the class smiled. Miss Emily was pleased as well.

Then she asked, “Do you drive?”

Ridhi shook her head. “No.”

“Do you go shopping by yourself?”

Ridhi remained silent for a moment. “Only where my husband allows me to.”

Miss Emily was startled by the answer, but she asked nothing more. She simply smiled and turned her attention to the next student.

Days passed, and Ridhi's English gradually improved. She could now understand ordinary conversations with greater ease.

One day after class, a woman named Zainab approached her. "Are you from India?"

Ridhi smiled. "Yes."

"I'm from Karachi."

For a few moments, the two women stood quietly.

Then Zainab laughed. "Living here teaches you that sometimes language makes people feel closer than borders do."

Ridhi laughed too. It was perhaps the first time since coming to America that she had smiled so openly with a stranger.

Then Ritesh's warning returned to her mind.

She immediately ended the conversation. "I'm getting late." She hurried outside.

Zainab watched her leave in confusion.

One day after class, it began to rain. Ridhi had forgotten her umbrella. She stood outside the building, waiting for the rain to stop.

Miss Emily came out and held an extra umbrella toward her. "Take it. You'll get wet."

Ridhi immediately refused. "No, thank you."

"Keep it. You can return it tomorrow."

Ridhi hesitated for a moment, then slowly accepted it.

Miss Emily spoke gently. "Ridhi…"

She paused. "If you ever need anything not just with your studies please talk to me. You can ask for help without hesitation."

For a moment, Ridhi's heart pounded. Had Miss Emily noticed something? Or was this simply the kindness of a teacher?

Ridhi lowered her eyes. "Thank you, ma'am." She quickly walked away.

When she reached home, she found Ritesh had returned earlier than usual. His eyes immediately fell on the umbrella. "Where did you get that?"

Ridhi's hands trembled. "My teacher gave it to me. It was raining."

Ritesh watched her for a moment. "What did you talk about?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes." she put the umbrella aside.

Ritesh voice turned cold. "Ridhi, remember this. Some people don't help you. First, they earn your trust, and then they destroy your life."

Ridhi remained silent.

Ritesh placed a hand on her shoulder. "I am your family. I am your friend. I am your protector."

Ridhi nodded.

That night, Ridhi set Miss Emily's umbrella aside to return the next day. As she folded it, she noticed something in its small

pocket. Surprised, she pulled out a tiny piece of paper. It contained only one sentence:

"If you ever feel unsafe, you are not alone." Beneath it was a phone number.

Ridhi stared at it for a long time, her hands trembling. First time, someone had seen the fear she had worked so hard to hide.

Perhaps this was the moment fate quietly began to change the course of her life.

Time passed before she knew it, Ridhi had been living in America for more than four years. Much had changed, yet some things remained the same.

Her English had improved greatly. She could now understand everyday conversations and speak with confidence. She had also completed her basic English course.

Then she enrolled in an advanced English class and began a professional computer course as well.

Ritesh did not object. In fact, he seemed pleased. "I always wanted you to keep yourself busy," he said.

Ridhi only gave a faint smile. By now, she had learned that there was always a purpose behind Ritesh's words.

In the advanced class, her circle of conversation became slightly wider. She sometimes spoke with Miss Emily about her studies and occasionally sat with Zainab during the tea break.

Zainab would often laugh and say, "Ridhi, you should come to our house sometime."

Ridhi would smile and reply, “Someday.” She knew that someday might never come.

She never visited anyone’s home, nor did she invite anyone into hers. She had built an invisible wall around herself. She smiled, spoke politely, and behaved normally, but never opened her heart to anyone.

Miss Emily continued to watch her closely. She could see that Ridhi had grown more confident, but the fear in her eyes remained unchanged.

One day after class, Miss Emily asked softly, “Ridhi, you look happier now than you did before.”

Ridhi thought for a moment, then smiled. “Perhaps I’ve learned how to live.”

Miss Emily looked into her eyes. She knew that answer was not the whole truth.

Ridhi had never thrown away the small piece of paper with Miss Emily’s phone number. She kept it safely in a hidden pocket of her purse. Many times, she wanted to call to tell someone everything, but Ritesh’s voice always stopped her.

“Your passport is with me. I’ll take your child away from you.”

Her hand would freeze before reaching for the phone.

Meanwhile, fate was preparing another test for her.

One morning, while returning from the hospital, Ridhi quietly told Ritesh, “I’m going to be a mother again.”

This time, Ritesh was surprised, but he did not get angry. He remained silent for a moment before saying, "All right. This time, take better care of yourself."

Ridhi studied his face carefully. By now, she had learned to read his expressions. There was something different in his eyes, something he was not saying but what? She could not understand.

That night, as she settled her son into bed, Ridhi remained awake for a long time. She placed a hand over her stomach as silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Am I bringing you into the same world?" she wondered. A world where fear is greater than love?

For the first time, she worried not only about herself, but about both of her children.

Meanwhile, life in India was moving forward.

Rahul had completed his education, yet a hollow space remained inside him. After college, his friends became busy with their own lives, while marriage discussions began at Rita's home.

One evening, Rita told Rahul, "My parents want me to get married this year."

Rahul smiled and congratulated her, but the sadness behind his smile did not escape Rita.

"You still haven't forgotten Ridhi, have you?"

Rahul looked out of the window and spoke softly. "I've tried to forget her." He paused. "But I haven't succeeded."

Silence filled the room. After a while, Rahul said, "I don't know why, but my heart still refuses to believe that Ridhi is happy."

Rita tried to reassure him. "Maybe it's only your imagination."

Rahul shook his head. "No. I know her. If she were truly happy, she would have sent some news at least once."

"Maybe she's busy with her new life," Rita said gently.

Rahul remained silent for a moment before suddenly saying, "I'm going to Canada."

Rita looked at him in surprise. "Suddenly?"

"I had applied for further studies." He paused. "My application was accepted."

Rita congratulated him warmly, though she sensed there was more behind his decision than education alone. For years, Rahul had been surrounded by places and memories that kept reminding him of Ridhi. Perhaps a new country would give him a chance to escape those memories and begin again.

Only Rahul knew the real reason behind his decision.

Canada was not far from America. He had never told anyone not even Rita. Yet somewhere deep inside, a small hope remained alive.

If fate ever brought Ridhi back into his path, this time he would not let her disappear without a word.

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away in America, Ridhi opened the secret pocket of her purse and looked at the old piece of paper bearing Emily Carter's name and phone number.

She stared at it for a long time before quietly putting it back. She still could not decide whom to trust or whom to fear.

She had no idea that fate was preparing to bring someone new into her life. Someone who might not save her but might teach her how to save herself.

Five years passed. During those years, Ridhi spoke to her mother whenever she could. Sometimes, Ritesh allowed her to speak to her mother, though the calls were always brief and under his watch.

"I'm perfectly fine, Ma. Please don't worry about me."

Her mother's voice always carried the same longing. "Come home once, daughter. At least let us hold our grandson in our arms."

Ridhi's eyes would fill with tears. She would glance at Ritesh, always nearby during her calls, pretending to read the newspaper or work on his laptop. Yet she knew he was listening to every word.

She quickly composed herself. "Ma, perhaps it won't be possible this time. Ritesh is very busy with his business. As soon as he gets some free time, we'll come."

"I miss you so much," her mother would say.

"I miss you too." After the call, Ridhi would sit silently for a while.

She could have called for help, but her situation was tightly controlled. She had no money of her own, and Ritesh managed every household expense. Even for her classes, he dropped her off and picked her up himself. Stopping anywhere on the way was out of the question. Even her time did not truly belong to her.

In India, preparations for Rita's wedding had begun.

One day, while shopping in the market, Rita suddenly saw a familiar face approaching. "Madhu?"

Madhu stopped in surprise. "Oh… Rita!"

The two women were meeting after several years. After exchanging a few formal words, Rita smiled and asked, "Where have you disappeared all these years?"

Madhu looked away. "Just… got busy with life."

Rita asked, "And how is Auntie?"

Madhu paused. "She's fine."

"And Ritesh and Ridhi?"

At the question, the colour in Madhu's face changed slightly. "They…" She hesitated. "They're still in America."

"When did they last come?"

"Maybe…" Madhu answered reluctantly, "it's been quite a long time."

Rita studied her. "Do you still talk to them?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Ritesh is very busy," Madhu replied quickly.

Then, trying to change the subject, she added, "Auntie isn't in India right now either."

"Where did she go?"

"Maybe… Dubai."

There was no confidence in Madhu's voice. It was not the voice of someone telling the truth.

Rita asked nothing more, but a faint concern settled in her heart. That evening, she called Rahul. "I met Madhu today."

Rahul immediately became serious. "Then?"

Rita told him the entire conversation.

Rahul listened silently. After a long pause, he asked, "What did you feel?"

"She kept avoiding my eyes," Rita replied.

"And?"

"I felt she was thinking carefully before answering every question."

Rahul looked out of the window. "Ridhi hasn't come to India even once in five years. That has always seemed strange to me. It's now the year 2000. Mobile phones have become common, yet Ridhi doesn't have one or even a personal phone number. You told me yourself that her mother can speak to her only when Ritesh is home."

Rita tried to reason with him. "Maybe Ritesh really is busy with his business."

"Maybe," Rahul said.

Then he added, "But there's one thing I don't understand."

"What?"

"A man who travels to India every two or three months why doesn't he take his wife to her own home even once?"

Rita fell silent. She had no answer either.

Meanwhile, in Muzaffarpur, another piece of good news arrived. Ridhi's younger sister, Nisha, was engaged.

Once again, the house filled with wedding preparations. Her mother called Ridhi happily.

"Daughter, no excuses this time. You must come. How can Nisha's wedding happen without you?"

Ridhi felt as though someone had clenched her heart in a fist. She immediately looked toward Ritesh.

He was silently listening. Then he signalled for her to refuse.

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. "Ma, I may not be able to come this time."

"Why?"

"The doctor has advised me not to travel." Her mother became worried. "What happened?"

Ridhi spoke softly. "I'm going to be a mother again."

The moment her mother heard the news, her voice filled with happiness. "Oh! That's wonderful news!"

Ridhi tried to smile. "Yes."

But pain hid behind that smile. After the call ended, Ritesh said with satisfaction, "That was a good answer."

A few days later, he sent a large parcel to India. Inside were a gold set for Nisha, expensive clothes, gifts, and a considerable amount of money for the wedding.

There was also a letter: “Father, because of Ridhi’s health and pregnancy, it wasn’t possible for us to come this time. Please don’t let our absence be felt. This is a small gift from us for Nisha. May she always remain happy. With love.”

When her mother opened the parcel, her eyes filled with tears. “What a thoughtful son-in-law he is,” she said emotionally.

Her father quietly nodded. Yet, for some reason, a sense of emptiness remained in his heart. They were looking at the wealth not at their daughter.

That same night, Rahul was arranging his documents for his journey to Canada. Suddenly, an old photograph slipped into his hands.

It was from their college days. He, Rita, and Ridhi were standing together, smiling. Rahul stared at the photograph for a long time.

Then he whispered, "Ridhi, if you really are happy, perhaps I'm worrying for no reason but somewhere deep inside his heart, a voice still whispered, "The story isn't over yet."

A few months later, Ridhi gave birth to a beautiful baby girl.

When the nurse placed the tiny baby in her arms, Ridhi looked at her silently. The little girl’s fingers wrapped tightly around her mother’s finger.

Tears streamed down Ridhi’s face. They were not tears of happiness alone. A new fear had been born inside her. She had always worried about her son, but the moment she looked at her daughter, one thought began repeating in her mind.

My daughter will not burn in the same fire in which I burn every day.

She held her daughter tightly against her chest and silently made a promise to herself. Even if I have to give my life, I will save you from this darkness.

Ridhi's life was now divided into two worlds. One was the Ridhi who was a mother in the light of day. The other was the Ridhi who became a prisoner of her own life when night fell.

Every night brought a new terror. A price was placed on her existence, and every morning she woke alive but something inside her had broken a little more.

The only periods of peace came during her pregnancies, beginning around two months before each birth and lasting until about two months afterward. Those were the brief moments when she could sleep at night without fear, surrounded by the innocent breathing of her children.

As soon as that peace ended, the darkness returned; a darkness where each night brought a new test, a new pain, and a new kind of helplessness. Ridhi began marking dates on a calendar.

At first, even she did not understand why. Slowly, however, a strange truth began to emerge.

Ritesh was home for approximately fifteen nights each month. The remaining nights, he spent somewhere else, often returning late at night or just before dawn.

Whenever he left the house, he always took the main door key with him.

Ridhi remained inside, with no way to leave. There was only a telephone. Whenever she tried to call, all she heard was the busy tone.

Many times, Ridhi thought about asking someone for help. But whom? what would she say?

She was still trapped by the fear that one wrong step could cost her children.

Another thing constantly troubled her. Whenever Ritesh travelled to another country or went on a long business trip, a woman came to the house. She was around fifty-five, quiet and reserved, and spoke very little.

Ritesh called her Martha.

Apparently, Martha had come to take care of the children. She cooked, managed the house, and looked after them.

Ridhi soon realized that her real responsibility was something else. She was watching Ridhi. If Ridhi went to the park, Martha accompanied her. If she went to the mall, Martha went with her.

One day, Ridhi asked with a faint smile, "Martha, do you watch me?"

Martha looked at her for a few moments before giving a short answer. "I only do my duty."

With that, she turned her attention back to the children. It was not Martha's answer that troubled Ridhi. It was her eyes. There were sympathy and fear in them. As if she knew much more than she could ever say.

That night, Ritesh left for another trip. The sound of the front door closing echoed through the house.

Ridhi went to the window. She watched as a black car pulled up outside. Ritesh got inside. Within moments, the car disappeared into the darkness.

Ridhi remained standing by the window for a long time. One question kept echoing in Ridhi's mind. Where does he spend more than half the nights of every month?

If his business was truly so successful, why did he hide everything?

If these were only business trips, why did Martha come every time to watch her?

Ridhi felt as though all the pieces were scattered before her, but the picture was still incomplete.

She had no idea that the answers to these questions would one day lead her to the heart of a terrifying network, one that had not only stolen her life, but had silently swallowed the lives of countless other women.

A few days later, something unusual happened. Ritesh suddenly had to leave somewhere. As always, he got ready quickly. But this time, perhaps his haste would become his biggest mistake.

He kissed the children on their foreheads, gave Ridhi only a passing glance, and hurried out of the house.

A few moments later, even the sound of the car disappearing into the distance faded away.

As usual, Ridhi put the children to sleep. Then she came downstairs to get some water. The moment she reached the stairs; her footsteps suddenly stopped. The door to the study was open.

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The First Confession

It was the same room that Ritesh always kept locked. Ridhi's heart began pounding violently. She instinctively looked around.

The house was completely silent. The only sound was the steady ticking of the clock on the wall. Slowly, she pushed the door farther open.

The room looked more like a modern office than a private study. There was an expensive wooden desk, a computer, cabinets, shelves filled with files, and everything was arranged with meticulous precision.

Ridhi stood at the doorway for a few moments. Fear and curiosity battled inside her.

The fear of Ritesh returning still lingered in her heart. Yet after years of unanswered questions, she could no longer turn away. Gathering her courage, she slowly approached the desk.

A file lying on top of it caught her attention. Almost without thinking, she picked it up. With trembling hands, she opened it. The moment she saw the first page, her breath caught.

There was a wedding photograph inside. Ritesh was in the picture. But the bride was not her. Ridhi stared at the photograph again. No, it was another woman.

Attached beneath the photograph were several documents written in English.

Ridhi could not read everything, but she understood enough to realize that they were documents related to a marriage and immigration.

She quickly picked up another file. Ritesh was there too. This time, he was standing beside a different woman.

A third file. Then a fourth. Every file contained a new face. A new bride and Ritesh.

Ridhi's hands began to shake. It felt as though the walls of the room were closing in around her.

"How… how is this possible?"

The words escaped her lips. Fear tightened around her as she realized Ritesh could return at any moment.

She immediately began searching for her passport. She checked the drawers, cabinets, and filing cabinet, but it was nowhere to be found.

During the search, she discovered a thick, register-like file. The first page contained a list of cities: Patna, Ranchi, Lucknow, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Kolkata.

Beside each city was the name of a woman, followed by dates, amounts of money, and brief notes.

Ridhi could not understand everything, but she understood enough to know that this was no ordinary business record.

She turned the page. There were photographs, faces she had never seen before. Then her eyes stopped on one particular photograph. The file nearly slipped from her hands. “Madhu…”

It really was Madhu. Several documents were attached to her photograph.

As Ridhi turned the pages, a horrifying realization began to take shape. This was not a record of marriages. It was a record of women’s lives.

Each file told a different story, someone’s marriage, visa, transfer. After that, there were only brief notes. Beside some names, a single word had been written in red: CLOSED.

Others were marked: TRANSFERRED.

And some: ACTIVE.

A cold wave ran down Ridhi’s spine.

For the first time, she understood with terrifying clarity that Ritesh was not merely a deceitful husband. He was part of an organized network.

A network that lured women from different cities by showing them false dreams, brought them under its control, and then used their lives according to its own will.

Darkness seemed to descend before Ridhi's eyes. Suddenly, she heard the garage door opening outside. Her heart leapt into her throat. "Ritesh!"

Panicking, she hurriedly returned the files to their places. She rushed out of the room, leaving the door half open just as she had found it, and ran upstairs to the children's room.

At that exact moment, she heard the main door open downstairs.

Ritesh had entered the house. Ridhi pulled both her children tightly against her chest. Now she knew only one thing. The man she had lived with for all these years was not the husband she had believed him to be.

In truth, the marriage had survived only because of the children.

Ritesh was the doorway to a dark world whose depth even she had not yet begun to understand. That night, Ridhi closed her eyes, but sleep remained far beyond her reach.

As usual, Ritesh played with the children, warmed milk for them, and then went to sleep peacefully, as though there were no secrets hidden in his life but for Ridhi, everything had changed.

Behind his smile, she now saw deception; behind his kindness, a hidden plan; and behind his silence, another secret.

All night, one question tormented her. What would happen to me if I were one of those women?

Then her eyes fell upon her children. She gently pulled both of them closer. "No."

She spoke silently to herself. "Now I don't just have to survive for myself. I have to survive for them."

The next morning, Ritesh sat at the breakfast table as usual, reading the newspaper. Suddenly, he placed it down and looked closely at Ridhi. "Are you feeling all right?"

Ridhi was startled. "Yes..." She hesitated. "Why?"

"You look very tired today."

Ridhi immediately composed herself. "The baby kept waking up during the night. Maybe that's why I'm tired."

Ritesh studied her eyes for several moments. Then he smiled gently. "Take care of yourself."

Ridhi smiled and nodded, though her heart was racing. Had Ritesh suspected something?

A few days later, Ridhi noticed that the door to the study was being kept even more securely locked than before. It was no longer just the ordinary lock. Whenever Ritesh left, he also activated a small digital lock.

Ridhi thought to herself, “Does he know something?”

One day after class, Miss Emily called out to her.

"Ridhi."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"You seem worried today."

As usual, Ridhi smiled. "I'm fine."

Miss Emily replied gently, "Sometimes 'I'm fine' is the biggest lie."

Ridhi remained silent for a few moments.

For a brief second, she wanted to tell her everything but then she remembered her children's faces. She lowered her eyes. "I'm really fine."

Miss Emily did not pressure her. She simply said,

"Whenever you feel alone, you can come to me. Remember, sometimes asking for help isn't weakness. It's courage."

The words settled somewhere deep inside Ridhi's heart. That same night, Ritesh was preparing to leave for India. He was speaking to someone on the phone in English.

Ridhi understood far more English now than she had before. Several words reached her ears clearly.

"New client. Documents are ready. Jaipur girl. Next month."

The glass in Ridhi's hand trembled. The words seemed connected to the cities she had seen in the register. Jaipur. Ranchi. Kolkata. Patna. Was it merely a coincidence? Or was the same operation continuing?

Ritesh ended the call and noticed Ridhi standing silently nearby. "What happened?"

Ridhi immediately lowered her eyes. "Nothing. I just came to put the water away."

Ritesh watched her for a few moments before smiling. That smile made Ridhi deeply uneasy.

It felt as though she was no longer the only one watching Ritesh. Ritesh was watching her too. Trying to read her.

At night, Ridhi took out the old piece of paper from her purse the one Miss Emily had given her years ago. The paper had aged,

but the phone number was still clearly visible. She stared at it for a long time.

Then she looked at her two children, and a thought slowly took shape in her mind. Surviving was no longer enough. She had to find a way out of this hell.

Next morning, Ridhi had been restless from the moment she woke. She had barely slept the night before. The files she had seen in Ritesh's room.

Madhu's photograph. The names of different cities. The lives of countless women. Everything kept replaying before her eyes.

She knew now that remaining silent meant nothing more than waiting for her own destruction. Speaking meant putting her children in danger. Caught between those two impossible choices, she decided.

Today, she would speak to someone. Even if it was only through hints. Her computer class ended as usual. There were nearly forty minutes before the next English class began.

Ridhi sat on a bench in the corridor, as she always did. Her heart was pounding. Just then, Zainab saw her from a distance and walked over with a smile. "You look very quiet today."

Ridhi forced a smile. "I'm just tired."

Zainab laughed. "Come on. Let's get some coffee from the café across the street. We still have time before class."

Ridhi immediately refused. "No. I'm fine here."

Zainab insisted. "Just twenty minutes."

Ridhi remained silent. Ritesh's threats echoed in her mind. No friendships. Tell no one about your life.

She was about to get up when the faces of her children suddenly came to mind. If she remained silent today, perhaps she would never find the courage to speak again. Slowly, she said, "All right."

They went to the café and sat in a quiet corner. Zainab ordered coffee. For a while, neither woman spoke. Ridhi stared down at her cup. Her hands were trembling slightly.

Zainab noticed. "Is everything all right?"

Ridhi looked up quickly. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course." Zainab reply

Ridhi looked around. Then she lowered her voice. "I have a friend."

Zainab listened quietly.

"She's having serious problems because of her husband. She can't go to the police. She can't go to a lawyer. She doesn't have her documents or money of her own. Is there somewhere she can get help quietly, without anyone finding out?"

Zainab placed her coffee cup on the table. She had become completely serious. "What country is your friend in?"

Ridhi paused. "Here..." She swallowed. "In America."

Zainab thought for a moment. "Look... I know of some organizations that help women. Especially women trapped in domestic violence, intimidation, or human trafficking.

For a moment, Ridhi's heart stopped. It was the first time she had heard someone else say the words human trafficking, but she showed no emotion.

Zainab continued. "I've never personally met them, but I know their websites. They also have ways to contact them confidentially."

Ridhi asked instinctively, "Do they keep things confidential?"

"Yes." Zainab reply

"If there is real danger?" Ridhi asked

"They can provide guidance in different ways, even before involving the police." Then Zainab smiled.

"One more thing. Our Miss Emily also volunteers with several social organizations. If your friend is really in trouble, perhaps she would be the best person to guide her."

Ridhi fell silent. It felt as though someone had placed two roads before her. One was a road where she could finally trust someone. The other was the road she had been walking for years fear, silence, and helplessness.

After a long silence, she said, "No. For now, I don't want to involve anyone. If possible, just write down the names and websites of those organizations."

Zainab took a small notebook from her bag. She wrote down several names and websites. Then she handed the paper to Ridhi.

"Keep this. If your friend ever truly needs help, tell her this: suffering in silence is more dangerous than the fear of seeking help."

Ridhi took the paper. It felt as though she was holding not just a few words, but a doorway to hope.

At that very moment, her eyes moved toward the glass wall of the café. Across the street stood a black car. Ridhi's breath caught. Was it merely a coincidence? Or was someone watching her?

She looked again. The windows were dark, and she could not see who was inside. Still, she had the uneasy feeling that she was not alone.

Even after returning from the café, Ridhi could not shake the feeling. She attended the entire class, but her mind was elsewhere. The teacher explained grammar at the board while the students quietly took notes.

Ridhi's eyes kept drifting toward the window. Had the black car really been there by coincidence? Or had Ritesh sent someone to watch her? With each passing moment, her anxiety grew.

When the bell rang, Ridhi quickly gathered her books and left. The moment she stepped outside, she stopped. Ritesh was standing in the parking lot, as usual, a faint smile on his face. Ridhi silently got into the car.

The drive home passed in silence. Watching the roads disappear through the window, she decided. If she wanted to save her children, she could no longer let fear control her.

She would have to think carefully. After some time, she broke the silence. "Ritesh."

"Yes?"

Ridhi spoke softly. "Zainab took me for coffee today."

Ritesh glanced at her for a moment but said nothing.

Ridhi continued. "I refused at first but if I kept refusing, she might have insisted on coming to the house. So, I only went with her for a few minutes."

Ritesh continued driving silently.

Ridhi's heart raced. She expected him to become angry but after a few moments, he said calmly, "It's all right."

Ridhi looked at him in surprise.

Ritesh smiled faintly. "But always remember one thing." He paused. "Friendship is only good in the amount that you need it."

After another moment, he added, "Getting too close to people often creates problems."

Ridhi nodded quickly. "I'll be careful next time."

Ritesh continued driving, satisfied but Ridhi understood. He might pretend that everything was normal, but he noticed everything.

That night, Ridhi stayed awake for a long time. Both children were sleeping peacefully. She looked first at her son. Then at her little daughter. She gently stroked both their heads.

Since the birth of their daughter, Ritesh had stopped allowing Ridhi to speak to her parents. He spoke to them himself, assuring them that she was fine. He sent photographs and always found one excuse or another to prevent Ridhi from speaking to them.

She no longer knew how her parents were doing, what had changed at home, or how her younger sisters were. Then a painful realization settled over her.

She was no longer the only one trapped in this life. Her children were trapped with her.

Yet she understood another truth. Ritesh did not see the children merely as burdens. Over time, he had grown attached to them. He cared about their education, health, and needs. In his own way, he had formed a bond with them.

Ridhi took a deep breath. Perhaps this is my greatest strength. Her children were both her means of survival and her greatest responsibility.

Then another thought came to her. If she ever escaped, she could not leave without her children. That was the hardest part. She knew Ritesh would never willingly let them go.

Ridhi closed her eyes. She could not act on emotion or rush her plans. She had to protect Ritesh's trust and make him believe she was still the same quiet, obedient woman he had controlled for years.

She had finally learned one thing: sometimes, escaping a prison does not mean breaking the chains. It means waiting patiently for them to loosen.

The next day, Ridhi arrived at the computer center as usual. Something felt different. As soon as she entered the classroom, Zainab saw her. She quietly came and sat beside her. There was no usual smile on her face.

Ridhi immediately sensed that something was wrong. "What happened?" Ridhi asked

Zainab spoke softly. "Ridhi, I need to tell you something."

Ridhi looked at her in surprise. "I told Miss Emily about yesterday."

Ridhi's face went pale. "What?"

Her voice rose involuntarily. "I didn't tell you that you couldn't, but I also didn't tell you to tell someone else!"

Zainab immediately took her hand. "Please, listen to me."

Ridhi pulled her hand away sharply. Fear was clearly visible in her eyes. "Do you even understand what could happen if my"

She stopped herself. "If my friend's husband finds out about this, do you know what will happen?"

Zainab spoke gently. "That's exactly why I told Miss Emily. She's not liked an ordinary teacher. She's been helping women like this for years and I didn't tell her your name. I only told her that a friend of mine had a friend who was in trouble."

Ridhi fell silent. Her breathing was still fast.

Zainab continued, "If you still don't feel comfortable, don't tell anyone anything but at least talk to her once."

After a long silence, Ridhi slowly nodded. "All right Only talk."

After the computer class ended, Miss Emily herself came into the corridor. As always, she smiled. "Ridhi, if you have a few minutes, could you come to my office?"

Ridhi looked toward Zainab. Zainab gave her an encouraging smile.

A few moments later, Ridhi was sitting inside Miss Emily's office. The room was simple but peaceful. Photographs from

different countries decorated the walls. There were several books and a small green plant.

Instead of sitting across the desk from Ridhi, Miss Emily pulled her chair closer. "Don't be nervous. This is only a conversation."

Ridhi nodded faintly.

Miss Emily asked carefully, "Zainab told me that a friend of yours is having a difficult time. Would you like to tell me something about her?"

Ridhi repeated the answer she had prepared beforehand. "I have a friend. Her husband has taken all her documents. She can't ask anyone for help. She has no money and no one of her own. She can't go to the police or a lawyer because she's afraid her husband will find her and take her children away."

Miss Emily listened silently. She did not ask even once who the friend was. She simply said, "If that is really happening, she should not have to endure it alone."

Then she took a piece of paper from her desk. Several website names and the email address of a help center were written on it. She handed the paper to Ridhi.

"These organizations help women while protecting their privacy. They listen first, then provide guidance in a safe way."

Ridhi silently looked at the paper.

Miss Emily continued, "If your friend thinks her husband can see her email, she doesn't need to contact them through her own email."

She took out a small card. "This is my email address. She can send a message to me if she wants. I'll pass her information along. That way, she won't have to leave a record of contacting the organization herself."

Ridhi spoke quietly. "She doesn't know how to use email."

Miss Emily thought for a moment. Then she took out another card. A phone number was written on it.

"This is a confidential helpline. She can call them here. They will talk to her first. They won't rush her, and they won't take any action without her permission."

Ridhi took the card. Her hands were trembling. After a long silence, she asked softly, "What if she doesn't even have her own phone?"

For the first time, Miss Emily looked deeply into her eyes. There was more than curiosity in that question. There was personal pain. She asked gently,

"Does your friend stay with her husband all the time?"

Ridhi immediately lowered her eyes. "Almost. He takes her to class himself and comes to pick her up."

Miss Emily asked no further questions. She simply placed both cards in Ridhi's hands. "Keep these. Maybe not today. Maybe not tomorrow but someday, they may help you or your friend."

Ridhi carefully placed both cards inside her purse. As she walked out of the office, only one question echoed in her mind. Where would she make the call?

The home phone was monitored by Ritesh. She had no mobile phone and after class, Ritesh always waited outside for her.

First time, she understood that finding a way to get help was not enough. Sometimes, reaching that path was the hardest part.

The night was long and painful, as so many had been in Ridhi's life. This time, however, a faint spark of hope had awakened within her. She stayed awake while the children slept and Ritesh remained deeply asleep.

Staring at the ceiling, Ridhi held on to one thought.

What if this is my last chance? Then another thought followed. What if Ritesh finds out? What will happen to my children? The conflict remained with her throughout the night.

Days passed like this. Every day, Ridhi saw Miss Emily. She could not find the courage to speak. Sometimes her children stopped her. Sometimes Ritesh's threats did. Finally, one day, she gathered her courage. After class, she slowly walked toward Miss Emily's office. She knocked.

"Come in, Ridhi," Miss Emily said with a smile.

Ridhi entered and stood silently. Her lips had gone dry. After a long silence, she finally whispered, "Ma'am... can I make a phone call from your office for a friend?"

Miss Emily looked at her in surprise. She did not ask a single question. She simply studied Ridhi's face in silence. After a few moments, she said, "Of course."

She placed her mobile phone on the desk. "I'm going outside for a few minutes."

She reached the door, then stopped. Turning back, she looked at Ridhi. "Take your time."

The door closed. Silence filled the room. Ridhi's hands were shaking violently. She tried dialling the number several times. Each time, her fingers stopped.

Finally, she gathered her courage and pressed the call button. A few seconds later, a soft but confident woman's voice answered.

"Hello. This is the support center. How can I help you?"

Ridhi's voice seemed trapped in her throat.

After a long pause, she managed to whisper, "I... need help."

The woman on the other end replied calmly, "Take a deep breath and speak at your own pace. You're safe here."

At those words, tears began streaming down Ridhi's face. Perhaps it had been years since anyone had told her that she was safe. She told the woman her entire story in brief but clear words. She explained that her husband had all her documents.

That she was living a life that felt like imprisonment with her children. That she was constantly threatened and that she could no longer trust anyone.

The woman on the other end did not interrupt her even once. She simply listened. When Ridhi finally fell silent, there was silence on the other end as well.

Then the woman asked gently, "Can you meet us somewhere safe?"

Ridhi immediately answered, "I can only come to my learning center. I can't go anywhere else. My husband brings me here and comes to take me home."

The voice replied, "That's all right. Where are you calling from right now?"

Ridhi hesitated. Then she said softly, "From my teacher's office. She wants to help me."

The woman sounded reassured. "Good. If you trust your teacher, could we speak with her briefly?"

At that moment, the door slowly opened. Miss Emily had returned. Ridhi looked at her nervously.

Miss Emily silently nodded, encouraging her.

Ridhi whispered, "They want to speak with you."

Miss Emily took the phone. "Hello... this is Emily Carter."

Ridhi sat silently in the chair. She watched the changes in Miss Emily's expression. Sometimes she nodded. Sometimes she gave brief answers.

At other moments, she wrote something in her notebook. About ten minutes later, the call ended. Miss Emily placed the phone on the desk. Then she looked at Ridhi with complete seriousness.

"Ridhi..."

For perhaps the first time, she did not refer to Ridhi's "friend."

She said her name directly. Ridhi looked up in shock. Her heart began pounding. Had Miss Emily understood everything? Silence filled the room for several moments. Ridhi felt that perhaps the most important decision of her life was about to begin.

Miss Emily placed the phone on the desk and quietly looked at Ridhi for a long time. Ridhi sat with her eyes lowered. She knew it would be difficult to hide anything now.

Miss Emily asked gently, "Ridhi... is that friend actually you?"

Ridhi's lips trembled. She did not answer immediately. The ticking of the clock could be heard clearly in the room. After several moments, tears began to fall from her eyes. Slowly, she nodded. "Yes."

That single word felt as though it had opened a door that had been locked for years. Ridhi covered her face with both hands. "I'm so scared, Miss Emily."

Miss Emily moved closer and pulled her chair beside her. "I know."

She paused. "But what you've done today took a great deal of courage."

Ridhi wiped away her tears. "I'm worried about my children. If I were alone, perhaps I could leave somehow. But I can't leave my children behind with him."

Miss Emily immediately replied, "You don't have to go anywhere right now. And you don't have to make any decision today. The first step is simply for us to understand your situation."

Then she looked directly into Ridhi's eyes. "And most importantly, you don't have to do this alone."

Ridhi listened silently.

Miss Emily opened her notebook. "Do you have copies of your passport?"

Ridhi shook her head. "No."

"Your children's documents?" Miss Emily asked

"Most of theirs are with Ritesh too." Ridhi reply

"Do you know anything about his business or another house he may have?" Miss Emily asked again,

Ridhi remained silent for a few moments. Then she remembered the room. The files, photographs, names of the cities and Madhu's face. "I found something."

Miss Emily immediately asked, "What?"

Ridhi lowered her voice. "There is a room that Ritesh always keeps locked. One day, the door was left open. I went inside. There were many files. Photographs of different women and marriage documents."

Miss Emily's expression became serious. "Did you take photographs of the files?"

Ridhi shook her head. "No. I don't have a mobile phone, and I was afraid he would come back."

"That's all right. "Miss Emily's voice remained calm. "Do not try to go back into that room for now."

Ridhi looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

"Because your safety comes first." Miss Emily lowered her voice further.

"If Ritesh realizes that you've seen something, the danger could increase."

Fear returned to Ridhi's face. "Then what should I do?"

"Nothing in haste." Miss Emily spoke firmly but gently. "First, we'll create a safe plan."

She explained that Ridhi must not suddenly change her behaviour around Ritesh.

"He watches you. If you suddenly become too confident or begin distancing yourself from him, he may become suspicious."

Ridhi nodded. "I understand."

"If you need to call for help again, you can use this center." Miss Emily handed her a small piece of paper.

"There is a code word written on this. If there ever comes a time when you can say only one word and cannot explain anything, use this word."

Ridhi immediately placed the paper inside her purse. Then she looked at Miss Emily. "Will you help me?"

Miss Emily answered without hesitation. "Yes."

After a brief pause, she added, "But we'll do everything carefully."

First time in years, Ridhi felt that the door she had been afraid to open might finally be leading somewhere beyond the darkness.

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The Escape

When Ridhi stepped out of Miss Emily's office, Zainab was standing near the door. The moment she saw Ridhi's face, she knew. Something had changed.

"Did you talk to her?"

Ridhi simply nodded. "Yes."

Zainab studied her face for a moment. "Did you tell her everything?"

Ridhi looked at her quietly. Then, in a voice barely above a whisper, she said, "I'm not alone anymore."

Zainab's eyes filled with tears. She reached for Ridhi's hand and held it tightly. "Sometimes, that's all the hope we need."

Before returning home, Ridhi forced herself to regain her composure. She knew the real test had only just begun.

As soon as she approached the car, she put the familiar smile back on her face.

Ritesh was standing beside the car as usual. "You're late today."

Ridhi answered immediately. "Miss Emily gave us an extra lesson."

Ritesh looked at her carefully. "Anything else?"

Ridhi smiled. "No."

Ritesh opened the car door. "Come on."

Ridhi quietly got inside. The car pulled away. Throughout the journey, Ritesh asked question after question.

"Who was in the class? Did you talk to Zainab? What did Miss Emily teach you?"

Ridhi answered every question briefly, naturally, exactly as she would have before.

That night, Ritesh looked at her for a long moment. "You seem different today."

For one terrifying second, Ridhi's heart stopped. She smiled. "Maybe because I learned so many new things in class today."

Ritesh continued watching her. Then he looked away. "That's good."

Ridhi said nothing. But deep inside, another decision had already taken root.

She no longer wanted freedom only for herself. She wanted a safe future for herself and her children. To achieve it, she would need patience, evidence, and above all, Ritesh's belief that she was still the same frightened, obedient woman he controlled.

What she did not know was that Ritesh was about to make a move of his own, one that could put her carefully hidden plan in danger.

The following morning, Ridhi woke earlier than usual. Miss Emily's words had echoed through her mind all night. Don't make any decisions in haste. She looked at her children. Her son was still asleep. Her little daughter was curled peacefully against her mother.

Ridhi bent down and kissed both their foreheads. She knew the road to freedom would not be easy. At least now, she knew there was a road and that thought alone was keeping her alive.

At breakfast, Ritesh suddenly asked, "What time will your class finish today?"

"Around four." Ridhi reply

"Will Miss Emily be there?" Ritesh asked

Ridhi's hand paused for a fraction of a second. "Probably."

Ritesh lifted his coffee cup. "She likes you a lot?"

Ridhi smiled lightly. "She's a good teacher."

Ritesh said nothing but his silence unsettled Ridhi more than his questions ever could.

When Ridhi reached the center that day, she saw Miss Emily from a distance. Their eyes met, but neither woman reacted. There was no smile, no wave, only a quiet, uneasy silence between them.

It was their first silent agreement. Everything had to remain normal. The class began. Ridhi concentrated on the lesson. She took notes. Answered questions. Paid attention.

Anyone watching her would have thought that nothing unusual had happened the day before. During the break, Zainab quietly approached her. "Everything okay?"

Ridhi nodded. "Yes." Then, in a low voice, she added, "Don't do anything yet."

Zainab understood.

A little later, Miss Emily wrote a brief note in her diary and handed it to Ridhi after class. There were only three sentences:

“Don't discuss anything new about your home with anyone. Don't change your daily routine. When it is safe, talk to me again.”

Ridhi read the note carefully. Then she tore it into tiny pieces. When she returned home, Ritesh was already there. He was quieter than usual.

Ridhi took care of the children and went into the kitchen. A little later, Ritesh followed her. "Ridhi."

"Yes?"

"Do you trust me?"

The question came so suddenly that she could not answer for a moment. Then she said quietly, "Yes."

Ritesh looked directly into her eyes. "Really?"

Ridhi smiled and nodded. "Yes."

He seemed to study her answer. Then he said "Good." and walked away.

Ridhi exhaled slowly. She understood now. He had been testing her.

A few days later, Ritesh made an announcement. "I'm going away for a week."

Ridhi's heart quickened. Could this be the opportunity she had been waiting for?

Then he added, "Martha will stay with you."

The hope inside Ridhi dimmed instantly. Ritesh kissed the children before leaving. Then he stepped closer to Ridhi.

"I'll be back soon." He paused. "And remember something."

Ridhi lowered her eyes.

"I know where you go, who you meet, and who you talk to."

"Yes." Ridhi said

"So don't even think about trying to deceive me."

His voice became colder. "You can't imagine what will happen if you do."

Then he walked out. The car disappeared down the driveway. Ridhi watched through the window. Martha stood silently behind her.

After a while, Martha suddenly asked, "Are you afraid of me?"

Ridhi turned. "No."

Martha gave a faint, bitter smile. "You should be."

Ridhi said nothing. Then Martha added quietly, "But not of me." And with that, she walked toward the kitchen.

Ridhi watched her disappear. Those four words opened a dozen new questions in her mind. What had Martha meant? Was she afraid of Ritesh? Did she know about the network? Had she ever helped another woman?

That night, after the children had fallen asleep, Ridhi went into the kitchen for water. Martha was standing there alone.

For several moments, neither woman spoke. Then Martha said without looking at her, "Do you think you're the first woman?"

The glass almost slipped from Ridhi's hand. "What do you mean?"

Martha finally looked at her. There were years of exhaustion in her eyes. "Nothing. Forget it."

She turned away. Ridhi immediately caught her hand. "No. Please tell me."

Martha gently pulled her hand free. "Not now."

"When?"

Martha glanced toward the doorway. Then, in an almost inaudible voice, she said, "When you're sure you can get out of this house."

Ridhi stopped breathing for a moment. Martha walked away.

Ridhi remained standing there. Now she had more than a question. She might have a witness. Yet could she trust Martha? Did she truly want to help, or was this another of Ritesh's traps?

Ridhi had no answers. For the first time, she wondered if she was truly the only prisoner in that house.

The following morning, Martha prepared breakfast for the children as usual. Ridhi watched her silently. The words from the previous night continued to echo in her mind.

"Do you think you're the first woman?"

She wanted to know what Martha knew but she also understood that haste could be dangerous. So, she asked nothing.

With Ritesh away, the house was unusually quiet. Yet he called every hour or so, asking about the children, Ridhi, and the house.

What disturbed Ridhi most was what he never asked. He rarely asked what the children had eaten or how they were doing. His questions were always about her.

"Where is Ridhi? What is she doing? Has she spoken to anyone?" Ridhi finally understood.

He was more interested in controlling her than caring for his children.

On the third day, Ritesh called again. Martha answered. After speaking with him for a while, she handed the phone to Ridhi. "He wants to speak to you."

Ridhi took the phone. "Hello."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm with the children."

"Did you go anywhere today?"

"No."

"Did anyone call?"

"No."

"Good."

The call ended. Ridhi handed the phone back to Martha. Martha placed it on the table. For a while she remained silent. Then she said, "He watches you very closely."

Ridhi looked at her. "How do you know?"

Martha did not answer. She simply looked out of the window.

That evening, something strange happened. Ridhi was arranging her son's clothes when Martha suddenly closed the door.

"What happened?" Ridhi asked.

Martha lowered her voice. "If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone?"

Ridhi looked into her eyes. "No."

Martha's expression changed. "Not even Ritesh?"

"No."

Martha remained silent for several moments. Then she said, "I'm not here only to take care of the children."

Ridhi's heart began pounding. "Then why are you here?"

Martha finally said, "I was ordered to watch you."

Fear spread across Ridhi's face. "Why?"

"Because Ritesh suspects that you may try to get help."

Ridhi's hands went cold. Miss Emily. Zainab. The phone call. Did Ritesh know?

Martha immediately took her hand. "Don't panic. If he knew everything, I wouldn't be telling you this."

Ridhi stared at her in disbelief. "Then why are you helping me?"

Martha lowered her eyes. "Because I know what it is like to be imprisoned in this house."

Ridhi became completely still. "You too?"

Martha did not answer. Tears simply appeared in her eyes.

The next day, Martha finally gave Ridhi a name. "Sarah."

"Who is Sarah?" Ridhi asked

"A girl who once lived in this house."

Ridhi's heart pounded. "Where is she now?"

Martha looked away. "I don't know."

She paused. "But before she left, she told me something."

"What?"

Martha's voice became faint. "She said that if another girl ever came here, I should tell her not to remain silent."

A chill passed through Ridhi. "Where did she go?"

Martha looked down. "Ritesh said she had gone to another city with her family."

She hesitated. "But..."

Her voice faded. "I never saw her again."

Silence filled the room. For the first time, Ridhi understood that this was not merely her story. The pattern had begun long before her and there was no guarantee that it would end with her.

That night, Ridhi looked at Miss Emily's number again. Then she looked toward Martha. She wondered if those two paths might somehow lead to the same destination.

At that exact moment, the sound of a car stopping outside broke the silence. Martha's face changed. "Ritesh is back."

Ridhi immediately closed her purse.

A few moments later, the front door opened. Ritesh entered. He looked at the children. Then at Ridhi. Then at Martha.

"Everything all right?"

Martha answered immediately. "Yes."

Ritesh looked at Ridhi. "And you?"

Ridhi smiled. "I'm fine."

He studied her face for a few moments. Then he smiled.

"Good." Then he walked toward the children.

Ridhi lowered her eyes. One thing had become clear. Martha could be her enemy. Or perhaps she was the first woman who truly understood the darkness from which Ridhi was trying to escape.

Ridhi had not just a secret. She had the possibility of an ally.

The next morning, Ridhi arrived at the center earlier than usual.

Martha's words had kept her awake all night. “I know what it is like to be imprisoned in this house.”

Did Martha truly want to help her? Or was she another part of Ritesh's trap? Questions crowded Ridhi's mind.

Before class began, she went straight to Miss Emily's office. She knocked.

"Come in."

Ridhi entered and closed the door behind her.

Miss Emily looked at her face. "What happened?"

Ridhi sat down and spoke almost in a whisper. "Miss Emily, I need to tell you something."

She told her everything. Martha's confession. The fact that she had been ordered to watch her. The story of Sarah and the possibility that Ritesh suspected she was seeking help.

Miss Emily listened carefully. When Ridhi finished, she said immediately, "Ridhi, listen to me very carefully."

Ridhi looked up.

"Do not trust Martha completely yet."

Ridhi was startled. "But she..."

Miss Emily gently interrupted her. "I'm not saying she's lying. I'm saying we don't know who she really is yet."

She paused. "It is also possible that Ritesh instructed her to say these things in order to gain your trust."

Worry spread across Ridhi's face. "Then what should I do?"

"Exactly what you've been doing. Stay quiet. Continue your normal routine. Don't become too close to Martha, but don't treat her as your enemy either."

Ridhi nodded slowly. Miss Emily closed the file in front of her. "Now listen carefully to the most important thing."

She leaned forward. "We've spoken to the help center again."

A faint light appeared in Ridhi's eyes.

"They may be able to help you leave."

Ridhi could barely believe what she was hearing. "With my children?"

"Yes." Miss Emily answered immediately. "With your children."

Tears filled Ridhi's eyes. For the first time, someone had told her she could leave with her children, not without them.

Miss Emily held her hand. "But we have to plan everything very carefully."

Ridhi listened.

"You must continue behaving normally in front of Ritesh. Don't tell Martha anything. And don't give Zainab any unnecessary details."

Ridhi nodded silently.

"First, we get you and the children somewhere safe. After that, everything else will be handled through the proper legal channels."

Ridhi whispered, "And Ritesh?"

Miss Emily looked at her for a moment. "Our first priority is not to get him arrested."

Ridhi looked surprised.

"If he realizes that you're seeking help, you and the children could be in immediate danger. We get you out first." She paused.

"Then we deal with him." She emphasized every word. Your safety and your children's safety comes first."

Tears rolled down Ridhi's cheeks. "I'm so scared."

Miss Emily answered softly, "Being afraid is natural." Then she added, "Now there is one difference. You are not alone."

Ridhi walked out of the office with lighter steps than before.

She believed that perhaps there really was an end to the darkness, but she still had to go home. She still had to smile in front of Ritesh as though nothing had changed.

That evening, when she returned home, Martha opened the door. She studied Ridhi's face. "You look very happy today."

Ridhi paused for a moment, then smiled. “Class went well.”

Martha looked into her eyes. Ridhi lowered her gaze. She understood now. In this game, every word, glance, and silence mattered.

A little later, Ritesh came home. He picked up the children. Then he looked at Ridhi. "What happened?"

Ridhi smiled. "Nothing."

Ritesh studied her. Then he smiled faintly. "Good."

For the first time, Ridhi thought, yes, Ritesh. That’s exactly what you should believe. Nothing had changed because everything had changed.

Ritesh still had the power. Yet Ridhi now had something she had never had before hope, help, and a plan. Now, she only had to wait for the right moment.

Life appeared to continue as normal, but behind the curtain, everything had changed. Ridhi now lived each day with extraordinary caution.

In front of Ritesh, she remained the same a frightened wife and a mother seemingly concerned only with her children and afraid of the world outside.

After her last conversation with Miss Emily, she abandoned any thought of acting impulsively. She knew one wrong move could endanger not only her, but both of her children. So, she waited. For the right moment.

Meanwhile, in India, Rahul's life had also reached a new turning point. He had left for Canada after being accepted into college. Now he was living in Toronto. His family was happy.

Rahul's mother had another wish. She wanted her son to get married in Canada.

One evening, she said lovingly over the phone, "Son, you've nearly finished your studies. Now you should think about marriage. How will you live alone over there?"

Rahul smiled. "Ma, I don't want to get married yet."

"Why?"

"I want to stand on my own feet first."

His mother watched him for a moment. "After that?"

Rahul looked away. "Then we'll see."

He could not tell his mother the real reason. For years, he had carried a single name in his heart. “Ridhi.”

Even he did not know whether he would ever see her again. Yet a small hope remained. He wanted to establish himself in Canada first, then somehow make his way to America.

Just once, he wanted to see Ridhi with his own eyes, to know whether she was truly happy or whether the uneasiness he had carried for years had been telling him the truth.

He often reminded himself that if Ridhi was happy, he would quietly walk away. But if she was not, he did not know what he would do. That question stayed with him, unanswered.

One day, Miss Emily's office phone rang. It was the same help centre. She listened carefully. When the call ended, she immediately sent a message to Ridhi asking her to come and see her when she arrived at the centre.

An uneasy feeling settled inside Ridhi. Had the danger increased? Or had a way out finally been found?

The next day, when Ridhi arrived at the centre, she received Miss Emily's message. She went straight to her office.

"Ridhi, I spoke with the help center again today."

Ridhi looked at her silently.

"They've studied your situation carefully. They're working on a way to get you and the children out safely."

Hope flickered in Ridhi's eyes. "How?"

Before answering, Miss Emily closed the door. Then she called the help centre on speakerphone. The same woman's voice came through.

"Ridhi, we don't want you to take any sudden step that could put you or your children at risk."

"Yes."

"First, tell us where you normally take the children when they need medical care."

"There is a hospital where they have their regular checkups."

"Do you ever go there without your husband?"

Ridhi thought for a moment. "Usually Ritesh comes with me."

"All right. We want you to go there with the children for a normal medical reason."

Ridhi's voice trembled. "And then?"

The woman replied carefully, "Once you're there, you'll receive instructions about the next step. Do not attempt anything dangerous on your own." She paused. "If Ritesh comes with you, the plan can still be adjusted."

Her voice softened. "The most important thing is that you remain safe with your children."

Ridhi listened in silence, her heart pounding so hard she feared he might hear it. She had dreamed of this moment for years, but now that it seemed within reach, terror tightened around her hope.

One wrong word, one small mistake, and everything could fall apart. What if Ritesh noticed the change in her? What if he became suspicious and took away the only chance she had left?

What if he came to the hospital? What if Martha told him everything?

Miss Emily seemed to read her thoughts. "Ridhi, remember this isn't a desperate escape attempt. It's a safety plan."

She spoke firmly. "You don't have to become a hero. You only have to follow the instructions given to you by the help centre."

Ridhi nodded. "I understand."

The woman on the phone spoke one final time. "When the day comes, don't panic and don't rush. We won't leave you alone."

The call ended. Silence filled the room. Ridhi looked down at her hands. Then she looked at Miss Emily.

"Can I really leave with my children?"

Miss Emily took her hand. "Yes. But only at the right time."

Tears welled up in Ridhi's eyes tears of fear yet touched by a fragile hope. That evening, when Ridhi returned home, Ritesh asked as usual, "How was class?"

"Good."

"Did you talk to Miss Emily?"

Ridhi's heart stopped for a moment, but she answered immediately, "Yes. We talked about the class."

Ritesh studied her for a few moments. Then looked away. "Good."

Ridhi went to the children. She looked at her son and daughter and pulled them both into her arms. She whispered to them silently, just a little more patience. Then we'll be out of this house.

The house was unusually quiet that night. After tucking the children into bed, Ridhi gently closed their door. Her mind

remained fixed on the plan Miss Emily and the help centre had prepared.

One question kept returning: Would she really be able to leave with her children? Would someone truly be waiting for her? Or would this be another locked door at the end of a hopeless corridor?

Lost in thought, she began walking down the stairs. Then she heard Ritesh's voice. Ridhi stopped. The door of the study downstairs was not completely closed. Inside, Ritesh and Martha were talking.

Ridhi froze. She held her breath. Ritesh's voice came through the gap. "Martha, have you noticed anything?"

Ridhi's heart slammed against her ribs.

Martha remained silent for a few moments. Then she answered, "Nothing so far. I don't think she's trying to get help from anyone."

Ridhi's eyes widened.

Ritesh asked, "Are you sure?"

"Yes. She spends most of her time frightened about the children. She stays home most of the time. She doesn't talk to many people. Even when she goes somewhere, she comes straight back."

A cold wave passed through Ridhi's body. Miss Emily had been right. Martha really had been placed there to watch her.

Ritesh was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Good."

His voice sounded satisfied. "I had a feeling she's beginning to understand her situation." He paused. "She won't go anywhere now."

Martha said nothing. Ritesh continued, "If you ever see her talking to someone, tell me immediately."

His voice hardened. "Especially if she starts spending more time with that teacher or her friend."

Ridhi's heart began pounding faster. He knew about Miss Emily. He was watching her every step.

Martha finally said, "Don't worry. I'm watching her."

Ritesh replied calmly, "I trust you."

For Ridhi, those words meant everything. Martha was not her protector. She was her watcher.

Ridhi quietly backed away. She reached her room with trembling hands. She closed the door and leaned against it.

Suddenly, everything around her seemed dangerous. Miss Emily, Zainab, the help centre, even the hospital. Any of them could attract Ritesh's suspicion.

What if he discovered the hospital plan?

She looked at her sleeping children. They were peaceful and unaware. Ridhi made an immediate decision. There could be no mistakes now.

A little later, Martha came upstairs to check on the children. Ridhi looked at her and behaved as though she knew nothing.

"Are the children asleep?" Martha asked.

Ridhi nodded. "Yes."

Martha studied her for a moment. Then turned to leave.

Ridhi did not stop her. She looked deeply into Martha's eyes. Was Martha truly loyal to Ritesh? Or was she simply obeying his orders because she had no choice? Ridhi could not decide.

Meanwhile, Ritesh sat comfortably in his room. He believed Ridhi was still the same frightened woman who could never take a step against him. He told himself, "She won't go anywhere. The children won't let her."

That was his greatest comfort. He did not know that Ridhi had made another decision. The hospital plan was now more important than ever, but she had realized she was not only escaping Ritesh. She had to hide every move from Martha too.

Inside that house, one woman was trapped while another watched. Neither knew who would break free first. Sometimes, life opens the door we have spent years searching for.

One morning, Martha suddenly became seriously ill. Her face was pale, and her breathing was faster than normal.

At first, Ritesh told her to rest at home, but when her condition did not improve after several hours, he took her to a doctor.

Ridhi remained at home with the children. She was deeply uneasy. She did not know what was wrong with Martha, but a strange fear settled inside her.

Several hours later, Ritesh returned. His expression was serious as usual. Martha was not with him.

Ridhi gathered her courage. "Where is Martha?"

"She'll have to stay at a dialysis centre for a few days."

Ridhi stared at him. "She's that sick?"

"Her kidneys aren't functioning properly." Ritesh said it almost casually. "The doctor wants to keep her under observation for a few days."

Ridhi fell silent as Miss Emily's words echoed in her mind.

Martha was gone. Now only Ridhi, the children, and Ritesh remained. Perhaps he believed she was completely under his control and no longer needed to be watched.

Years of captivity had taught Ridhi to fear every move. Ironically, that was Ritesh's greatest mistake.

The following day, Ridhi used her usual excuse to go to the centre. The moment she arrived; she took Miss Emily aside.

"Martha isn't at home anymore. She's been admitted to a treatment centre for a few days."

Miss Emily listened carefully.

Ridhi continued, "My daughter's vaccination is also due in two days."

Miss Emily thought for a moment. Then a faint glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes. "That could be our only chance."

Ridhi asked immediately, "Can I take the children to the hospital?"

"Yes." Miss Emily's voice was firm. "But only on one condition. You do nothing on your own."

Ridhi nodded.

Miss Emily immediately contacted the help centre and explained the situation. A short while later, they received a response. A safe meeting could be arranged for Ridhi at the hospital, but everything would have to be handled with extreme caution.

Miss Emily looked at her. "We don't know whether Ritesh will let you go alone or whether he'll come with you. So, we'll prepare for both possibilities."

Ridhi whispered, "What if he comes with me?"

"Then you don't panic. You are simply taking your daughter for her vaccination. Nothing more."

Ridhi clasped her hands tightly. "I'm afraid."

"I know." Miss Emily looked at her gently. "But remember, you are not doing this alone. The help centre's team will be there in an appropriate way."

Ridhi took a deep breath. Only two days remained. She looked at her children, her heart filled with fear and hope. Could this finally be the chance she had waited for all these years?

One question remained: Would Ritesh let her take the children to the hospital? If he came along, could she escape, or would one wrong move destroy her only chance?

That night, Ritesh himself mentioned it. "The baby's vaccination is in two days, isn't it?"

Ridhi hid her surprise. "Yes."

"I'll take you to the hospital." For a moment, Ridhi's heart stopped. Then she lowered her head. "Okay."

Ritesh walked away, satisfied. Ridhi remained standing there for a long time.

First time, she felt that the door to freedom had finally opened but she still did not know who would be standing on the other side and now there were only two days left.

Time suddenly seemed to accelerate. Ridhi's English and computer classes were nearing their end, and the following week would be her final one. After that, she would have only two reasons to return to the centre: her examination and, later, to collect her certificate.

Miss Emily knew. The help center knew. Ridhi knew.

If anything was going to happen, it had to happen within those few remaining days. After that, Ritesh could stop her from returning. This might be her last chance.

The day of the vaccination finally arrived. From early morning, Ridhi's heart raced with a fear she could barely contain.

She forced herself to remain calm, gathering the children's essentials and checking their medical cards twice before placing them in her purse.

Finally, she looked at herself in the mirror. Her face appeared calm, but her eyes betrayed her; a mixture of fear, determination, and a fragile hope. Today, everything could change.

Ritesh watched as Ridhi got the children ready.

"Everything packed?" Ritesh asked.

"Yes," Ridhi replied.

"The baby's card?"

"Yes."

"Your son's file?"

"That too."

Ritesh nodded, satisfied. He saw nothing unusual. To him, this was simply Ridhi's normal routine before a hospital visit.

He picked up the car keys. "Let's go."

Ridhi pulled both children close and glanced back at the house one last time. How many years, tears, and silent screams were buried within those walls?

She looked away, lifted her daughter into her arms, took her son's hand, and walked toward the car. As she settled into the car, Ridhi looked out the window.

The roads seemed different today, as if every turn, building, and traffic light were leading her toward another life. Yet one question remained: Would someone really be waiting for her at the hospital?

Miss Emily had assured her. The help centre had promised. Still, years of fear had taught Ridhi one thing: Never trust hope too quickly.

Ritesh drove without suspicion. From time to time, he asked something about the children. Ridhi answered briefly.

Outwardly, everything seemed normal. Inside her purse, however, were a few carefully chosen belongings she had taken for herself.

She did not know whether the journey would last a few hours or much longer. She only knew she could not turn back.

The hospital finally appeared ahead. Ridhi took a deep breath. Her heart felt as though it might burst from her chest.

Ritesh parked the car. Then he looked at her. "Come on."

Ridhi's heart began pounding violently. The moment she had waited years for was finally here and she had no idea what waited for her on the other side of the hospital doors.

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A Haven

The sight of the hospital building made Ridhi's heart pound violently. She had no idea what awaited her inside.

Slowly, she opened the car door. She lifted her little daughter into her arms, took her son's hand, and began walking toward the hospital entrance.

She did not know that only a few steps ahead, a decision would be made that could determine the course of the last several years of her life.

Perhaps, somewhere in the silent corridors of this very hospital, a new life was already waiting for her.

Ridhi had barely taken a few steps toward the entrance when Ritesh's phone suddenly rang.

He stopped. "Stay here with the children."

Ridhi froze. Ritesh put the phone to his ear and stepped away. For the first time, Ridhi noticed a seriousness on his face that felt unusual.

Her heartbeat quickened. Who was calling? Had someone discovered something? Had the help centre been exposed? One thought followed another.

She pulled the children closer and stayed where she was. Ritesh spoke in a low voice, occasionally taking a few steps before stopping to listen.

Ridhi kept her eyes on him. Her palms began to sweat. After a while, Ritesh said only two words into the phone. "All right."

He remained silent for a few moments before adding, "I'll look into it." Then the call ended.

Ridhi felt as though her heart had risen into her throat. Something had happened. There was no doubt about it.

Ritesh turned and walked back toward her. Ridhi lowered her eyes. One thought consumed her. Does he know everything?

But Ritesh spoke in an unexpectedly calm voice. "Ridhi."

She slowly raised her head.

"Take the children inside."

She stared at him for a few moments. "You…?"

"I have to attend an important business meeting." He seemed to be in a hurry.

"Get the baby vaccinated. After that, wait for me here. I'll finish my work and come back. Then I'll take you and the children home."

Ridhi could hardly believe what she was hearing. He was leaving her alone. Here at the hospital. With the children and Martha was not even at home.

Ridhi still could not understand what was happening when Ritesh reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. He pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and held it toward her.

"If I'm late, get something to eat for yourself and the children."

With trembling fingers, Ridhi accepted the money. "Yes."

Ritesh glanced at the children one last time. Then he turned quickly and walked toward the hospital parking lot.

Ridhi stood there watching him. A few moments later, Ritesh got into his car. The vehicle slowly disappeared from her sight.

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. She tightened her grip on her son's hand and held her daughter close. A single thought rose within her: Was someone finally listening to her prayers? She looked toward the sky, her lips moving softly. "Has God finally opened a way for me?"

Then she steadied herself. No. It was too soon to celebrate. Perhaps this was the chance God had placed before her, perhaps her final one.

Holding both children close, Ridhi stepped into the hospital. With every step, her heart pounded harder. She had no idea what awaited her inside. Would she walk out through those doors as a free woman, or would she be forced back into the prison she had spent years trying to escape?

One thing was different today. For the first time, the choice was hers, and her children were beside her.

Thousands of miles away, in Toronto, Rahul sat beside the window of his home with a cup of coffee in his hand.

He was thinking about only one thing. Where is Ridhi now? How is she? Is she really happy? Does she ever remember me?

Then, as it had for years, a strange certainty stirred inside Rahul. He did not know where Ridhi was or how they would ever

meet again. Still, his heart kept telling him one thing: You will meet Ridhi again. But when? Where? He had no answer.

Rahul closed his eyes. Memories of their college days returned; Ridhi's laughter, her simplicity, and those quiet eyes that perhaps, once, had held something for him too.

He whispered to himself, "Just once… I want to see her with my own eyes."

He paused. "Whatever happens after that… I'll leave it to fate."

Meanwhile, Ritesh's sudden departure from the hospital was no accident.

As soon as he got into his car, he received a call from the police station. He was told that an issue had arisen regarding his vehicle and that he needed to come in immediately to verify some documents.

The message seemed strange, but Ritesh suspected nothing. He drove straight to the police station.

As he entered the station, an officer asked for his vehicle documents. Moments later, the questioning shifted to his identity and personal details.

Ritesh looked uneasy. "But why was I called here?"

The officer opened a file. "We need to verify some information. Please cooperate."

Ritesh glanced at his watch. His thoughts immediately went to the hospital. "My wife and children are waiting for me there."

The officer gave him a brief reply. "You'll need to answer a few questions."

Ritesh sat down but his attention was nowhere near the questions. His eyes kept returning to the clock.

One hour passed. Then another. His impatience grew.

"Look, I've already answered your questions. I really have to leave. My wife is alone at the hospital. The children are with her."

The officer closed the file. "Just a little longer."

Ritesh struggled to control his anger. "I've told you three times that they're waiting for me."

But the questioning continued. His documents were examined again. The vehicle information was checked. Some questions were repeated.

Ritesh began to realize that he had become trapped in what seemed to be an unnecessarily long investigation.

He took out his Mobile. He thought about calling the hospital but then stopped. Ridhi did not have a Mobile of her own. He had no direct way of contacting her.

For the first time, a faint sense of unease settled over him. It's been so long. Nearly three hours later, he was finally allowed to leave.

The moment Ritesh stepped outside the police station, he breathed a sigh of relief but the next moment, tension returned to his face. "Ridhi…"

The name escaped his lips. He rushed to his car and drove straight to the hospital. One thought filled his mind: She must be waiting for me.

He had no idea that while he was caught up in police questions, the most important chapter of Ridhi's life was unfolding elsewhere in the hospital.

Far away, Rahul held on to nothing but the hope of seeing her again.

Three lives. Three separate paths. Fate was slowly bringing them toward the moment when years of secrets would begin to unravel.

Meanwhile, Ridhi walked deeper into the hospital, struggling to steady her racing heart. Even after Ritesh left, she could hardly believe she had come this far on her own.

She went to the registration desk, placed the children's medical cards on the counter, and completed the formalities.

Her eyes kept scanning the corridor. Every white coat made her tense. Every approaching footstep made her fear that Ritesh had returned.

Suddenly, a nurse approached her. She was carrying a vaccination packet. "Ma'am… please come with me."

Ridhi looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

The nurse smiled. "Your name is Ridhi, isn't it?"

Ridhi stared at her for a few moments before slowly nodding. "Yes."

"Good. Please come with me."

Ridhi pulled her children closer and followed the nurse. After a few steps, she realized they were not heading toward the vaccination room. There was no doctor's office ahead. No paediatric examination room.

Ridhi's anxiety returned. "Where are we going?"

The nurse glanced back. "Just one minute, ma'am. Please don't worry."

A strange uneasiness began to take hold of Ridhi.They reached a quieter section of the hospital. The nurse opened a door. It was a small private room. "Please come in."

Ridhi stood at the doorway for a few seconds. Then she entered with the children the moment she looked inside, she stopped.

An unfamiliar woman was standing in the room. Behind her stood Miss Emily and Zainab.

Ridhi's eyes widened in disbelief. "You…?"

Zainab instinctively moved forward, but Miss Emily stopped her with a gesture.

Ridhi looked from Zainab to Miss Emily, and then to the unfamiliar woman.

A thousand questions rose in her mind. Who was this woman? Why was she here? Why had Ridhi been brought into this room?

Miss Emily spoke softly. "Ridhi, don't be afraid. You're safe."

Those two words were enough to bring tears to Ridhi's eyes. For years, she had longed to hear them and now, they had finally become real. Yet one fear remained.

She whispered, “Ritesh…?”

Miss Emily answered immediately. “He isn’t here.”

For the first time, Ridhi seemed to breathe properly.

The unfamiliar woman remained silent. Miss Emily turned toward her. “Ridhi, I want you to meet her. She’s here to help you.”

Ridhi looked at the woman. The woman introduced herself gently. “My name is Sarah.”

Ridhi’s heart seemed to stop. “Sarah.”

The same name Martha had once told her. The same woman Martha had claimed had once lived in that house before mysteriously disappearing.

Ridhi could not take her eyes off Sarah’s face.

Sarah spoke quietly. “I can understand what you’re feeling just by looking at you because I once stood exactly where you are standing now.”

Tears began to roll down Ridhi’s cheeks. Miss Emily placed a hand gently on her shoulder. “You don’t have to walk this road alone anymore.”

Outside, people moved through the hospital corridors, unaware of what was unfolding inside. In that small room, Ridhi was preparing to leave her old life behind.

Elsewhere, Ritesh waited impatiently, certain that she was waiting for him. He did not know that Ridhi was no longer waiting. She was standing at the moment of choice.

Miss Emily glanced at the clock. “Ridhi, we don’t have much time. We’ll explain everything later. For now, you only need to come with us.”

Ridhi pulled the children closer.

Miss Emily gestured toward Sarah. “This is Sarah. Zainab is also part of this entire arrangement. We all work with the helpline.”

Ridhi stood between fear and disbelief. She still could not believe that, after all these years, someone had come to take her away from that life.

Miss Emily lowered her voice. “We’ll leave through the back entrance of the hospital. There’s an ambulance waiting for you there.”

“Where are we going?” Ridhi asked nervously.

Miss Emily paused before answering. “First, St. Louis. A safe and confidential place has been arranged there. You’ll stay there for a few days. After that, the team there will assess your situation and decide the next step.”

Ridhi looked at her anxiously. “Are you coming with me?”

Miss Emily shook her head. “No. Zainab and I won’t be going with you. Our absence could put you at greater risk.”

Then she looked toward Sarah. “Sarah will go with you.”

Ridhi instinctively tightened her arms around her children. “What if Ritesh finds me?”

Miss Emily looked directly into her eyes. “He won’t be able to find you easily, but you must also be careful not to do anything that could reveal your location.”

Then she emphasized every word. “Right now, your only responsibility is to keep your children safe.”

Zainab handed Ridhi a bag. “These are clothes for the children.” She pointed toward another bag. “This one has food, medicines, and other essentials.”

Sarah added, “We also have the baby’s vaccination records. If any medical care is needed, that will be arranged as well.”

Ridhi looked at them, her eyes filling with tears. For years, she had carried every responsibility for her children alone. Today, for the first time, someone else was caring for them. “How can I ever thank you?” she whispered.

Miss Emily embraced her. “This is not the time for thanks. Just stay safe.”

A few minutes later, they slipped out through the back entrance of the hospital. The corridor was quiet.

Ridhi kept looking over her shoulder, afraid that Ritesh might suddenly appear, but no one came.

An ambulance was waiting outside. Sarah had also brought the children’s vaccine box with her to make sure their scheduled vaccinations were not missed.

Then Sarah opened the ambulance door and helped Ridhi and the children inside.

Ridhi stared at the vehicle for a few moments. Then she took her son's hand, lifted her daughter into her arms, and climbed inside. The door closed. The vehicle began to move.

Ridhi looked out through the window as the hospital slowly disappeared behind them. Tears continued to fall from her eyes.

She looked at her son. Then at her daughter. Then back at the road disappearing behind them. She still could not believe it. Was she really becoming free? Or was this simply another dream that would soon collapse?

For several hours, Sarah told her very little. More than once, Ridhi wanted to ask, "Where are we going?" Each time, however, she stopped herself.

Finally, Sarah looked at her. "We're going to St. Louis. There's a safe place there. You'll stay there for a few days. After that, the help-center team will decide what the next step should be."

Ridhi asked quietly, "Will I be able to start a new life there with my children?"

Sarah did not answer immediately. After a moment, she said, "That decision won't be made in a single day. First comes your safety. Then the children's legal and medical needs. After that, the remaining matters will be addressed."

Ridhi fell silent. She understood that freedom was not simply the act of walking through a door. A long road still lay ahead.

A few hours later, Sarah told her, "We still have a long way to go."

"How far?" Ridhi asked softly.

"From New York to St. Louis is more than thousand kilometres. If we travelled continuously, it could take around twenty hours but with the children, we'll make several stops."

Ridhi nodded.

"Try to rest now," Sarah said.

By morning, Ridhi looked out the window at a completely unfamiliar landscape. The roads, buildings, and surroundings had changed, yet one thought refused to leave her mind: Was Ritesh still looking for her?

She tried to convince herself that he had no idea where she was, but a quiet fear followed every passing car, every unfamiliar face, and every sound behind her. What if he had already started searching?

Ridhi looked at her children and tightened her hold on them. Whatever happens, I must not go back.

A few hours later, Sarah offered her some food. "Eat something."

Ridhi shook her head. "I don't feel like eating."

Sarah spoke gently. "You have to stay strong. Not only for yourself, but for the children too."

Ridhi forced herself to eat a few bites. Then suddenly, tears began to fall. "I never imagined I would leave home like this… with my children."

Sarah remained silent for a while. Then she said, "Sometimes life takes us down roads we never imagined, not even in our dreams."

After more than a day of travel, the lights of St. Louis finally appeared in the distance. Ridhi stared through the window, her heart racing.

She did not know what awaited her in this new city, how she would rebuild her life, what would happen to Ritesh, or whether she would ever return to her homeland.

She knew only one thing: She had escaped that prison with her children.

Sarah looked at her. "We're almost there."

Ridhi closed her eyes. A few tears slipped down her cheeks. Inside her heart, she whispered, "Perhaps today, someone really did hear my prayer."

A little later, the ambulance turned onto a quiet road. There was no sign, no imposing building, nothing to suggest that a safe centre existed there.

It stopped before a simple house. Sarah opened the door. "We're here."

Ridhi stayed inside for a moment, looking at her children. Then she gathered them close and slowly stepped out. Her feet stood on new ground, but her heart was still trapped in the prison she had left behind.

The door opened, and an elderly woman silently welcomed them inside. Ridhi stepped across the threshold. Sarah closed the door behind her.

For the first time, Ridhi understood that more than a door had closed.

She did not yet know that St. Louis would be more than a place of safety. It would become the beginning of another battle for her identity, her children's future, and the secrets of her past that had yet to be uncovered.

Her escape was over. Her real fight was about to begin.

Meanwhile, when Ritesh finally returned to the hospital, only one thought filled his mind. Ridhi must still be waiting here with the children.

The moment he entered the hospital, something felt wrong. He went straight to the children's vaccination department. "A woman named Ridhi came here. She had two children with her."

The staff member checked the computer. "Yes. The baby was vaccinated today."

Ritesh immediately asked, "Where is she?"

The nurse answered casually, "She left after the vaccination."

"Left?"

"Yes."

"With whom?"

The nurse shrugged. "We don't know."

Ritesh looked around. "Did you see her with anyone?"

"No."

He questioned another counter. Then he went to the children's department. He searched the waiting area. Then the second floor. Repeatedly, he asked the same question.

"Where is Ridhi?" Everywhere he received the same answer. "We don't know."

He had the register checked again. It clearly showed that the baby had received her vaccination. Ridhi had been at the hospital. The vaccination had taken place but afterward, she had disappeared.

Sweat appeared on Ritesh's forehead. He immediately took out his Mobile. First, he called Martha. There was no answer.

Then he began calling several people he knew. "Find Ridhi. Get information about her. Find out where she has gone."

He made one call after another. With every passing moment, his anxiety increased. A terrifying thought began taking shape in his mind.

Had Ridhi really left?

Was someone helping her?

And if so… who?

After searching for a long time, Ritesh finally returned home. When Ritesh opened the door, silence greeted him. No children's voices. Ridhi was gone. Martha was gone too. He stood frozen for a moment.

Then something seemed to strike him. He rushed into his office and opened the cupboard. One after another, he pulled out files, papers, registers, and important documents, stuffing them into a large box.

His hands moved quickly. He kept glancing toward the door, as though expecting someone to arrive.

Finally, he sealed the box, carried it out, and disappeared. Where was he going? No one knew.

Hours later, Ritesh returned home. Exhaustion showed on his face, but sleep was nowhere near him.

He paced the room, checked his Mobile repeatedly, then stood by the window, staring into the darkness.

Midnight came. He finally lay down, closed his eyes, then suddenly sat up. One question kept pounding in his mind: Where is Ridhi?

For the first time, he realized that the woman he had believed he could control for years had slipped completely out of his grasp.

Something even more frightening remained. He had no idea where she had gone.

On the other side of the country, in a small safe house in St. Louis, Ridhi slept with her children held close against her.

She did not yet know that Ritesh's desperation would not end with simply searching for her because the box he had carried out of the house under the cover of darkness contained more than papers.

It contained secrets. Secrets that, if uncovered, could change Ritesh's entire world.

The next morning, Ridhi opened her eyes and took a moment to remember where she was. The room, the ceiling, the walls, everything was unfamiliar.

Then she saw her children sleeping peacefully beside her. A deep sigh of relief escaped her. Just then, the door opened. Sarah walked in. "Awake?"

Ridhi nodded. “Yes.”

Sarah smiled. “Have some breakfast and get ready quickly. We won’t be staying here much longer today.”

An unfamiliar fear returned to Ridhi’s heart. “Where are we going?”

Sarah only said, “I’ll tell you when we get there.”

Ridhi asked no further questions. She was beginning to understand that on this journey, nothing would be revealed in advance.

After a quick breakfast, Ridhi dressed the children, checked their belongings, and waited quietly.

About an hour later, she heard a vehicle outside. Through the window, she saw a large black van with its windows covered by thick curtains.

Sarah thanked the woman who had sheltered them. Ridhi took her hand, her voice breaking. “What you have done for us…”

The woman simply replied, “Just keep your children safe.”

Ridhi pulled the children close and climbed into the van with Sarah. The door closed. The van began to move.

A few minutes later, Sarah looked at Ridhi. In her hand was a soft strip of cloth.

Ridhi’s heart sank. “What is that?”

Sarah spoke gently. “I’ll have to blindfold you.”

Ridhi instinctively pulled back. “Why?”

Sarah took her hand. "Because the place, we're going to is a safe location where many women and girls like you are being protected. We cannot allow anyone to discover where it is. Even if a woman leaves tomorrow and begins a free life, she must never know the exact location of this place. This is necessary for your safety and for the safety of everyone else here."

Ridhi stared at the blindfold. She felt uneasy. Once again, she was about to enter darkness, but she had no other choice. Slowly, she lowered her head. "All right."

Sarah gently tied the blindfold over her eyes. Darkness swallowed everything.

Now Ridhi could only guess where they were going by listening to the sounds and feeling the movement of the vehicle.

The van continued forward. Ridhi held her son's hand tightly. Her daughter was in Sarah's arms.

About twenty minutes later, the van stopped. The engine went silent. For several moments, there was complete silence. Then the door opened.

Sarah leaned close to Ridhi and whispered, "Your daughter is in my arms. Now I'm placing your son's hand in yours."

Ridhi immediately held her son's hand.

Sarah continued, "Take my hand. Just walk with me. I'll remove the blindfold in a little while."

Ridhi held her hand. She began walking slowly. She could feel the ground beneath her feet.

The ground beneath her feet was uneven, and dry leaves crackled with every step. A growing unease settled over Ridhi.

She tightened her hold on the children. A strange fear began to rise inside her where they had brought her?

After walking for a while, Sarah stopped. Ridhi stopped too. Then, suddenly, she heard an enormous door opening. The sound was so heavy that a shiver ran through her body.

Sarah held her hand and guided her inside. A few steps later, a massive door closed behind them.

THUD!

Ridhi's heart jolted. At that very moment, Sarah removed the blindfold.

Ridhi blinked repeatedly. It took several moments for her eyes to adjust to the light.

The first thing Ridhi saw was her children. Her daughter was safe in Sarah's arms, while her son held her hand tightly. She slowly looked ahead and froze.

A vast hall stretched before her, so large that her eyes could barely take it in. Along the long wall, several sentences were written in different languages.

Ridhi looked at Sarah in astonishment. "What… is this place?"

Sarah answered softly, "It's a Haven."

Ridhi was still overwhelmed by the sight of the big hall when Sarah gently said, "Come."

Ridhi pulled her children closer and followed Sarah. The building felt like an old mansion brought back to life after decades of abandonment. Its high, dome-like ceiling, faded paintings, long

corridors, and ancient chandeliers gave the place a strange magnificence.

Somewhere in the distance, children were laughing. Ridhi walked on in silence, her amazement growing with every step. Then Sarah stopped. An elevator stood ahead.

Ridhi stared at it, puzzled. An elevator in a building this old? Sarah opened the doors. Ridhi stepped inside and looked at the numbered buttons. Sarah pressed one. Zero.

Ridhi stared at the display. They had entered the elevator from a floor high above. Now they were going down.

She looked at Sarah in disbelief, as though silently asking, "What kind of place is this?"

Sarah said nothing. The doors closed. A moment later, Ridhi felt the elevator descend. The display changed: Three. Two. One. Zero.

The elevator stopped. The doors opened. Ridhi's eyes widened.

Before her stretched a vast, bright nursery filled with children. Some played with toys, others coloured on the floor, while a few chased each other around the room. Ridhi stood speechless.

Then, suddenly, her son saw the children and ran toward them excitedly. "Wait!"

Ridhi caught her son's hand and pulled him close before following Sarah. Yet her amazement remained. Beneath the old building was an entire world created for children.

Sarah led her down a long corridor lined with rooms. Inside were women and children of different ages, some unpacking,

others folding clothes, brushing their children's hair, or simply sitting in silence.

Ridhi glanced into each room as she passed. Every door seemed to hide a different story.

Finally, Sarah stopped outside a room and opened the door. "For now, this is your room."

Ridhi stood at the doorway, unable to move. She looked inside, then down the corridor at the women and children. Her heart filled with relief, wonder, and a strange uncertainty.

What kind of place was this?

She looked at Sarah, but the question remained unspoken. Who were all these women? What stories lay behind those doors?

For years, Ridhi had known only one prison. Now, after escaping it, she had stepped into a world she had never imagined a world filled with unfamiliar faces, hidden stories, and perhaps a new beginning.

Yet somewhere deep inside, one thought remained: Was this truly the beginning of her freedom?

Sarah looked around the room and then turned to Ridhi. "Freshen up first. Give the children something to eat. If they want to play, let them play for a while. I'm going upstairs to finish some paperwork. Then I'll come back and we can talk properly."

Ridhi nodded silently.

Sarah looked at the children one last time before leaving. A few moments later, the sound of her footsteps faded down the corridor. Ridhi closed the door.

For the first time, Ridhi allowed herself to look around without fear. The room was simple, yet thoughtfully prepared; a small refrigerator, a microwave, a little crib for her daughter, and a bed for her son.

She stood beside the crib, her fingers gently brushing its edge. Her eyes filled with tears. How long had it been since someone had cared for her children like this?

She settled the children, gave them food, and watched as exhaustion carried them into peaceful sleep. For a while, she simply sat beside them, taking in the sight.

Later, lying awake in the quiet room, relief slowly gave way to fear. "Ritesh."

What had he done when he discovered she was gone? Was he searching for her? Had he contacted the police? Could he somehow find this place?

She turned toward her sleeping children. They looked so peaceful, unaware of the danger she had left behind. Yet fear had lived inside her for years. Freedom could not erase it in a single day.

The locked doors returned to her mind. The threats. The endless nights. Ritesh's voice: "Your passport is with me."

Ridhi suddenly sat up, her heart pounding. She looked at her children and whispered, "I won't let you go back there." Her voice trembled, but her resolve did not. "Never."

At that very moment, she heard footsteps outside. Ridhi fell silent. Someone stopped outside her door. For several seconds, there was silence. Then came a soft knock.

Ridhi's heart stopped.

Was it Sarah? Or had someone else discovered that she was here? She opened the door nervously. Sarah stood outside.

The moment she saw Ridhi's face; she understood that the fear inside her had not yet disappeared. Sarah stepped inside and gently closed the door.

"Ridhi…" Her voice was soft. "You have to slowly learn to let go of this fear."

Ridhi remained silent.

Sarah came closer. "You and your children are safe now. No one is coming here to take you away."

Ridhi could not stop herself from asking, "What if Ritesh finds us?"

Sarah answered confidently, "He cannot reach this place. Even if he somehow gets an idea of your location, he won't be able to get to you easily."

Ridhi took a deep breath. There was still uncertainty in her eyes.

Sarah continued, "You'll need to stay here for a while. Approximately fifteen to twenty days. During that time, your legal documents will be prepared."

Ridhi looked at her in surprise. "My documents?"

"Yes; Your photograph will be taken. Your necessary information will be recorded. We'll work with the relevant departments to arrange your legal documents. Everything will be done properly."

Ridhi listened silently. Now she understood that freedom was not simply about getting away from Ritesh.

She needed an identity again. An identity that had been taken away from her years ago.

Sarah continued, "After that, you'll be sent wherever you choose to go."

Ridhi immediately looked at her. "Wherever I choose?"

"Yes. But first, we have to make sure that you and the children have a legal and secure status."

Tears filled Ridhi's eyes. "I can stay with my children?"

"Of course." Sarah smiled gently. "They're your children. No one is going to separate you from them."

Ridhi looked toward her children. A faint trace of peace appeared on her face instead of fear.

A few moments later, something suddenly occurred to her. "Ritesh…"

Sarah fell silent.

"What happened to him? Is he looking for me?"

Sarah watched her for a moment before answering. "I'll tell you everything in a day or two. For now, you don't need to think too much about him."

Ridhi did not press further but the question remained alive inside her.

Where was Ritesh? What had he done? Did he know where she was now?

Sarah suddenly seemed to decide. "Ridhi, there's one more thing you need to know."

Ridhi looked at her.

"Miss Emily and Zainab…" Sarah paused. "They also work with us secretly."

Ridhi's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

Sarah lowered her voice. "We don't reveal our true identities to everyone. In certain situations, we have to operate like ordinary people so that those being watched never become suspicious."

Ridhi suddenly remembered Martha's words.

Sarah. The same name, same story and yet things were beginning to fall into place.

Sarah continued, "Martha knows my name, but she doesn't know much about my actual responsibilities or who I really am. That's why she told you a twisted version of my story. She wanted to see whether you already knew me."

Ridhi stared at her. "So that story…"

"It doesn't necessarily mean everything in it was true," Sarah replied. She told you those things simply to find out whether you had known me before."

Ridhi remained silent.

Now Ridhi began to understand why everyone guarded their identities so carefully. Secrets surrounded her, but one thing was different: these secrets were no longer meant to imprison her. They were meant to set her free.

Sarah walked toward the door. Then she turned. “Rest now. Tomorrow, we begin preparing for your new life.” The door closed behind her.

Ridhi looked at her sleeping children, then turned toward the darkness beyond the window. For the first time, freedom felt real, yet something inside her remained unsettled.

A new question slowly took shape in her mind: If this was the beginning of a new life, would the secrets of her old one ever come to light? She stood silently, watching the darkness, unaware that some of those answers were already much closer than she imagined.

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The Cost of Silence

Two or three days passed quietly. Sarah did not return, and at first, her absence made Ridhi uneasy. Slowly, however, she began to understand the rhythm of the place.

From outside, the building looked old and mysterious. Inside, everything was carefully organized. Staff members moved quietly through their duties, each focused on a different responsibility.

The women lived from the ground floor to the second floor, with nearly thirty rooms in total. Some rooms housed two or three women, while mothers with children were usually given separate rooms for privacy and comfort. Ridhi was in one of them.

The third floor was different. It contained a large office where the administration worked. The women were not allowed there, and Ridhi had never seen anyone enter or leave. She only knew that decisions concerning the residents were made upstairs.

Each morning, the women gathered in the dining area for breakfast. Lunch and dinner were served there too. Some faces carried exhaustion, others silence, and occasionally, a child's laughter broke through the quiet.

What touched Ridhi most was the care given to the children. A large common room was stocked with snacks, juices, milk, baby

food, feeding bottles, and other essentials. Mothers could take whatever their children needed without asking permission.

For Ridhi, this simple freedom felt almost unbelievable.

One day, while taking a snack for her son, Ridhi thought of Sarah. These people truly care about the children.

For most of her life, Ridhi had worried about every expense, even something as simple as milk or food. Here, for the first time, she could take what her children needed without fear.

The children had their own activities. They played, drew, and joined simple learning sessions. Ridhi often watched from a distance as her son played with the others and her daughter slowly settled into her new surroundings. The sight brought a peace she had almost forgotten.

In the evenings, some of the women gathered around the television. Ridhi usually sat quietly, studying their faces. Every woman here has a story. Some had arrived with children, some with little more than a bag, and others carrying only memories of the lives they had left behind.

Yet they shared something: each had survived a different kind of darkness and found safety beneath this roof.

Ridhi began to understand that freedom did not always mean stepping into the outside world. Sometimes, it began with being able to sleep without fearing the sound of a door opening.

For the first time in years, she slept more peacefully. Still, one question remained. Where was Sarah? When would she return with news about Ritesh?

Ridhi did not know that Sarah's absence had a reason and when she finally returned, she might bring news that would change everything.

Meanwhile, Ritesh's anxiety was growing with every passing day. Ever since Ridhi had disappeared, he seemed to have lost his ability to think clearly.

He was searching for her everywhere he could. Sometimes he called the hospital. He questioned people he knew and sometimes, late at night, he would drive around himself, searching different places but there was no trace of Ridhi.

Finally, one day, he called Madhu. "Madhu, do you know anything about Ridhi?"

Madhu immediately replied, "No... why?"

Ritesh remained silent for a moment. "You were her friend. Find out if she has spoken to any of her friends or contacted her parents."

Madhu sounded slightly nervous. "I'll try."

After the call ended, Madhu sat quietly for a while. Then an idea occurred to her. She called Rita.

"Rita..."

"Yes?"

"Do you have Ridhi's number?"

Rita fell silent for a moment. "No."

Madhu quickly added, "Her number has somehow disappeared from my mobile. I haven't been able to speak to her for several days."

Rita found that strange. She slowly said, “Madhu, I haven't spoken to Ridhi either since she left. If you needed her number, you could have asked Auntie. She's related to Ritesh.”

Madhu had no proper answer. She changed the subject.

“Never mind. If you ever hear anything about her, let me know.” The call ended.

Rita remained seated for a while, the mobile still in her hand. A question kept troubling her. Why had Madhu suddenly asked for Ridhi's number?

A few days later, Auntie also contacted Ridhi's family. She called Ridhi's mother. “Is everything all right? We haven't heard from Ridhi or Ritesh for quite some time. Have you spoken to either of them?”

There was silence on the other end. Then Ridhi's mother answered, “Ridhi never calls us. Ritesh used to call once a month, and even then, he wouldn't let us speak to Ridhi properly, but it's been quite some time since we've heard from him either.”

Concern briefly crossed Auntie's face. “Oh.”

She said nothing more but as soon as she ended the call, she informed Ritesh.

The moment he heard, his fists tightened. “What did you say? They haven't heard from her either?”

“No,” Auntie replied.

Ritesh fell silent. Anger and fear were both growing inside him. Where had Ridhi gone?

Now he widened the search. He instructed his people to gather information about anyone Ridhi might have known Zainab, Miss Emily, and the place where Ridhi used to attend her classes.

He had several names followed and investigated. But every lead brought him back empty-handed. No one seemed to know where Ridhi was. Or at least, no one was willing to tell him.

One day, in frustration, Ritesh slammed his hand against the table. "Where the hell did, she go?"

Papers were scattered across the desk. His mobile kept ringing but no news came that could give him any relief.

For the first time, he realized that the web he had spent years building to keep Ridhi under his control had developed a hole and that hole had become large enough for Ridhi to escape through.

Meanwhile, Ridhi was breathing freely for the first time in years. She was safe with her children, but her story was far from over.

The question remained: Would Ritesh ever find her, or had Ridhi finally slipped beyond his reach?

Rita, too, had begun to feel an unfamiliar uneasiness.

After Madhu's call, several questions had entered her mind. She tried to dismiss them as nothing more than her imagination, but she could no longer convince herself.

Finally, she decided to contact Ridhi's parents directly. She immediately called Muzaffarpur. After a few formal exchanges, Rita asked softly, "Auntie, have you heard from Ridhi?"

Silence followed. Then Ridhi's mother said, “No, dear. We haven't received any call from her for quite some time.”

Rita's heart skipped. “What about Ritesh?”

“He hasn't called either.” Then her mother seemed to remember something. “Ritesh used to call once a month, but he never let us speak to Ridhi properly. He would say she was busy with the children and that he would let us talk to her later but this time, many days have passed, and we haven't heard from him either.”

Rita's heart sank. After a moment, she asked, “Have you ever tried contacting Ridhi yourselves?”

Ridhi's mother answered sadly, “We don't have her personal number, dear. We always waited for Ritesh to call.”

Rita's hands went cold. Madhu's words suddenly came back to her. Why had Madhu suddenly wanted Ridhi's number?

Then there was Auntie's repeated concern about Ridhi and now her own parents were saying that they had heard nothing for days.

Rita asked quietly, “Auntie... has anyone else called you?”

“Yes. Ritesh auntie has also been calling from time to time, asking about Ridhi.”

Rita fell completely silent. This no longer felt like a coincidence. Something was wrong. Something was terribly wrong.

She quickly said, “Please don't worry. If I hear from Ridhi, I'll tell you immediately.”

After ending the call, Rita remained seated for a long time. She did not know whom she could question or what she could do but one thing had become clear.

Ridhi was not merely silent. She might be in trouble. Rita immediately called Rahul. The mobile rang for quite some time. Finally, Rahul answered.

"Hello, Rita?"

There was clear panic in Rita's voice. "Rahul, I need to talk to you. It's very important."

Rahul immediately became serious. "What happened?"

Rita told him everything from Madhu's phone call to her conversation with Ridhi's parents.

"The strangest thing is..." she paused. "Ritesh hasn't contacted them either. Auntie keeps asking about Ridhi. Madhu suddenly wanted her number. Rahul... I have a terrible feeling."

There was silence on the other end. Then Rahul asked, "What are you trying to say?"

Rita spoke quietly. "I think Ridhi is in trouble."

The colour drained from Rahul's face. He rose from his chair and walked toward the window.

"Are you sure?"

"No..." Rita's voice trembled. "I'm not sure but I feel terrified. Something isn't right."

Rahul closed his eyes. Ridhi's face immediately appeared before him. Those quiet eyes. That simple smile. The day she had

once told him about her life, when he had wanted to send his parents to ask for her hand.

Suddenly, the uneasiness that had remained buried in some corner of his heart for years felt as though it had finally become real. “I'll find her.”

Rita immediately asked, “But how?”

Rahul fell silent. That was the problem. He knew Ridhi was somewhere in New York, but he had no address, no phone number, not even Ritesh’s office details. All he knew was that she was somewhere in America living her life, or perhaps no longer free to live it.

Rahul said anxiously, “I don't even know her home address.”

Rita spoke softly. “Then what will you do?”

Rahul had no answer. His eyes fell on a file lying on his office desk. He had once planned to go to Canada and somehow make his way into the United States to find Ridhi.

Now the thought filled him with even greater restlessness. If Ridhi really was in danger, could he afford to wait? He gripped the mobile tightly. “Rita...”

“Yes?”

“Whatever you find out, tell me immediately. I'll try to find her somehow too.”

“Rahul, please hurry,” Rita said. “I'm scared.” Then she ended the call.

Rahul remained standing there for a long time, the phone still in his hand. Only one question echoed through his mind. Where is Ridhi?

For the first time, Rahul understood that the reunion he had dreamed of for years might begin with a search, a search for a woman whose whereabouts were still unknown.

What he did not know was that, thousands of miles away, Ridhi was living quietly with her children in a secret safe house in America. Their lives seemed far apart, yet fate was slowly drawing their paths together again.

A week had passed. Ridhi had now been at the secret centre for seven days, but Sarah still had not returned. At first, Ridhi worried about her. She even asked some of the other women about her.

Every time, she received the same answer. “She comes when she needs to. Sometimes she brings someone here. Sometimes she takes someone somewhere else.”

Then they would smile reassuringly.

“Don't worry. Everything will be fine.”

There was no shortage of anything at the shelter; food, clothing, milk, medical care, and activities for the children. Yet Ridhi felt the absence of one thing every day: contact with the outside world.

There were no phones, no internet, and no way to reach anyone without permission.

At first, the restriction felt strange, but she gradually understood that the secrecy was what kept them safe. Still,

questions remained in her heart: Did her mother miss her? Had Rahul learned anything about her? And was Ritesh still searching?

That morning, Ridhi sat quietly in the nursery, watching her son play with the other children while her daughter sat nearby. Then suddenly, a familiar voice came from the nursery doorway.

"Ridhi..."

She immediately looked up. "Sarah."

Seeing her after an entire week, Ridhi felt both surprise and relief. Sarah entered, glanced around, and then walked directly toward her. "Ridhi, come with me to your room."

There was something different in her voice. The usual warmth was missing. There was seriousness in her expression.

Ridhi immediately asked, "What happened?"

Sarah simply said, "I need to talk to you about a few things."

Ridhi studied her face carefully. She knew this was not an ordinary conversation.

She called her son and then said to the woman in charge of the nursery, "I'll be back in a little while. Please look after the children."

The woman nodded.

Ridhi looked at both her children one last time. Then she followed Sarah out. As they walked through the corridor, a dozen fears began racing through her mind.

Had something happened to Ritesh? Was she going to be moved somewhere else? Had a decision finally been made about her future?

Sarah walked ahead in silence. Finally, she stopped outside Ridhi's room. She opened the door.

Ridhi entered. Sarah followed her inside and closed the door. For several moments, there was complete silence.

Then Sarah looked at her. “Ridhi...” She paused. “There are some things I need to tell you now. Things you've been waiting to hear for the past week.”

Ridhi's heart began pounding. She sat on the edge of the bed. Her eyes remained fixed on Sarah. She had a feeling that today, finally, she was going to learn the truth about Ritesh.

Sarah sat down on a chair. Ridhi remained on the edge of the bed, watching her. She knew Sarah was about to tell her something important.

Sarah took a deep breath. “Ridhi, I want to tell you about Ritesh first.”

Ridhi's heart began beating faster.

Sarah spoke slowly. “Ritesh has been searching for you everywhere. He didn't only try to find you here. He also contacted people in India.”

Ridhi's eyes widened. “In India?”

Sarah nodded. “Yes. It's possible that he even tried to contact your parents.”

Ridhi immediately thought of her mother.

Sarah continued, “We were monitoring the phone number you gave us. We received some information through it, but Ritesh was extremely careful. Even in ordinary conversations, he never left enough of a trail for us to understand what he was really doing.”

Ridhi listened silently.

“He is a very clever man,” Sarah continued. “We have been keeping an eye on him. Our priority was to get you to safety first and then take action against him.”

A faint wave of fear crossed Ridhi's face. “What happened then?”

Sarah was silent for a moment. “Perhaps he somehow realized that he was being watched. For the past two days, he hadn't left his house. Then yesterday, the police suddenly raided his home.” Sarah stopped.

Ridhi anxiously asked, “He wasn't there?”

Sarah slowly shook her head. “No. He had already escaped.”

Ridhi stared at her. “Escaped?”

“Yes.” Sarah's voice became serious. “He is still being searched for.”

Silence filled the room. Ridhi clasped her hands tightly. Part of her felt relieved.

Ritesh couldn't reach her. Not now but another fear immediately took its place.

What if he found her again?

Sarah seemed to read her thoughts. “You don't need to worry about that right now. Your safety is our responsibility.” Then Sarah told her something else. “Martha is still in the hospital.”

Ridhi immediately looked up. “Martha?”

“Yes. Her condition has become quite serious. She's currently under treatment, and we are keeping an eye on her as well.”

Ridhi fell silent. The moment Ridhi heard Martha’s name, those painful days came rushing back; the woman once presented as her protector, who had instead become another source of fear.

Sarah looked at her. Then she fell silent again, as though she still had something far more important to say. After a moment, she began again.

“Ridhi, all the necessary government documents for you and your children have now been prepared.”

Ridhi looked at her in surprise.

Sarah continued, “You now have two choices.”

She paused. “The first is that we can arrange for you to return to India through proper legal channels, where you could stay with a trusted relative.”

Ridhi remained silent.

“The second option is that we can move you to a relatively remote city in Canada, where you could begin a new life with your children.”

Ridhi listened without saying a word.

Sarah paused again. Then, in a more serious tone, she said, “But I do want to give you, my advice. Ritesh has not been

arrested yet. As long as he remains free, returning to India may not be completely safe for you."

Ridhi lowered her eyes.

"We also need to consider whether he will continue trying to find you," Sarah continued. "You have to make a decision that keeps you and your children as safe as possible."

She glanced around the room. "There is something else. We cannot keep you here indefinitely. This place has limited space, and the rescue team brings new women here almost every day. We constantly have to make room for someone new."

Ridhi sat silently.

Suddenly, two futures stood before her. One led back to her homeland, her parents, and her sisters. The other led to a country where she knew no one, had no family or support but perhaps, for the first time, a life beyond Ritesh's reach.

Sarah understood her silence. "I won't force you to decide quickly. Think about it, about your children, about your future and then tell me what you want."

Sarah stood up, then paused. "Ridhi, this decision isn't only about your life. Your children's entire future is tied to it." She fell silent.

Ridhi's thoughts turned to her children. Her son was playing in the nursery, while her little daughter slept peacefully in her crib. Tears filled Ridhi's eyes.

Could she really return home, rest her head in her mother's lap, and finally tell her parents everything? Or should she choose

a place where her children could grow free from the shadow of her past?

She gently ran her fingers through her daughter's hair, then looked at Sarah.

Sarah had reached the door. "Think carefully, Ridhi. I want your decision tomorrow. Just remember…" She said nothing more. Turning away, Sarah quietly closed the door behind her.

Ridhi was alone. She closed her eyes, realizing that freedom had brought its own difficult choices. Throughout the night, she wrestled with the decision. Sometimes her heart pulled her toward India, her mother, and the life she had left behind. At other moments, the thought of raising her children in a new country felt safer yet frightening.

Her mother's face returned to her mind, followed by the shadow of Ritesh. Caught between love, fear, and her children's future, Ridhi finally drifted into an uneasy sleep.

When morning came, she felt somewhat calmer. A little while later, Sarah entered her room. "Ridhi, have you made a decision?"

Ridhi remained silent for a moment. Then she looked at Sarah. "Sarah, there's something I need to tell you."

"Yes. Tell me."

Ridhi took a deep breath. "After everything you've told me, I feel that Auntie and Madhu may also be keeping an eye on my family. They may be trying to stay in contact with my parents."

She paused. "That is why I want to speak to my mother once. After that, I will make my decision."

Sarah watched her for several moments. Then she said, “I can arrange that.”

A faint ray of hope appeared in Ridhi's eyes. But Sarah immediately added, “On one condition.”

Ridhi waited.

“You cannot tell your mother where you are; who you are with, and you cannot tell her what is going to happen next.”

Ridhi nodded. “All right.”

Sarah explained, “Just tell her that you are safe. Don't say anything that could reveal your location or who brought you here. We have to protect your mother as well.”

Ridhi nodded slowly. “I understand.”

Sarah said, “Stay here. I'll be back in ten minutes.”

She left the room. Ridhi sat quietly. Her heart was pounding. After so many years, she was finally going to hear her mother's voice. Ten minutes felt like ten hours. Finally, the door opened. Sarah returned.

“Come.”

She pointed toward the children. “Leave the children at the nursery first.”

Ridhi quickly prepared them. She held her son's hand carried her daughter in her arms as she walked toward the nursery. Before leaving them with the woman in charge, she kissed both children repeatedly.

There was a strange fear inside her. She knew this was not simply a phone call. It might become a conversation that would decide the course of her future.

She left the children in the nursery and followed Sarah. They walked down the corridor and reached the elevator.

Sarah pressed the button. The doors opened. They stepped inside. This time, the elevator went upward. Ridhi silently looked at Sarah.

After a few moments, the elevator stopped on an upper floor. The doors opened. A room stood directly ahead. Unlike the rest of the building, this floor was unusually quiet.

Sarah opened the door. “Come inside.”

Ridhi paused for a moment, looking around. Then she followed Sarah into the room. The door closed.

Sarah said, “You can speak to your mother from here.”

She continued, “your parents have already been told everything by our contact in India, but they have not been told where you are. So, tell them only what you want to tell them. They have also been made to understand that, even though they know the truth, they must not tell anyone.”

Ridhi's eyes widened. “Everything?”

“As much as they needed to know.”

Ridhi's eyes filled with tears. Her gaze fell upon the phone lying in front of her. Her hands began to tremble. She stared at it for several moments. Then slowly, she reached toward it.

After all these years, she was finally going to hear her mother's voice. Ridhi picked up the phone.

Sarah pointed toward it. “Your mother and father are both on the line. Talk to them.”

Ridhi stared at the phone. Her hands were trembling violently. Her throat had gone dry.

She tried to speak, but her voice seemed trapped somewhere inside her. Tears streamed down her face. Finally, with trembling fingers, she lifted the phone to her ear.

“Hello...”

For several moments, there was silence on the other end. Then she heard a voice she had waited years to hear. Her father's voice.

“Beta...”

Just one word and then his voice broke. “Forgive us.”

He began to cry. Ridhi's tears flowed freely. “Baba...”

After that, there were only sobs on both sides. A few moments later, her mother took the phone.

“Ridhi...”

The sound of her mother's voice awakened years of buried pain inside her but before Ridhi could say anything, her mother spoke.

“Forgive us, my child. We made a terrible mistake.”

Ridhi opened her lips. She wanted to ask why?

But her mother continued. “We won't tell anyone that you called.”

Ridhi froze.

Then her mother began speaking as though forcing herself to say words that were breaking her own heart. “Ridhi, don't misunderstand us. What had to happen has happened.”

“Everyone knows that you are in America and that you are happy. You stay there, my daughter. Don't come back.”

Ridhi's breath caught in her throat.

Her mother continued, “Otherwise, your disgrace will destroy your sisters' lives. People will ask questions. Your sisters' marriage prospects will be ruined. We cannot bear that.”

Ridhi's voice trembled. “And what about me, Mother? What was my fault? Did I choose that marriage myself?”

Her mother's voice grew heavier. “I don't know. Forget what happened in the past. Now we are dead to you, and you are dead to us.”

The words entered Ridhi's heart like a blade. Her fingers loosened. The phone slipped from her hand.

“Thud.”

It struck the floor and with that sound, something inside Ridhi shattered too. For several moments, she remained completely still.

Then she slowly looked at Sarah. Tears filled her eyes. Her voice came out broken. “What was my fault?”

Sarah remained silent.

Ridhi's tears would not stop. “What was my fault, Sarah? Was it only because my parents couldn't afford a dowry? Was that my fault?”

"They couldn't afford a dowry; they handed me over to Ritesh. So, their house could prosper, their other daughters could have better lives. That was my price."

Her voice rose. "That was the price of my entire life. They sold me for their greed. For the promise that their daughter would become a doctor. That she would go to America and then what?"

Her breathing became heavier. "My life, dreams who saved them?"

She pressed a hand against her chest. "Every day, I died. Every night, he put a price on my life. He sold my soul. He sold my existence and I..." Her voice broke "I only stayed alive for my children, and for the hope of seeing my parents again and meeting my sisters."

Sarah stepped forward, trying to steady her but Ridhi was finally releasing the weight she had carried for years.

"What crime had I committed? All I did was trust my parents."

Her voice suddenly became faint. Her eyes closed. Her body went limp.

Sarah caught her immediately.

"Ridhi!"

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The Unwritten Future

Ridhi had fainted. Sarah helped her into a chair and sat beside her for a few moments, silently watching her pale, tear-streaked face.

Then her eyes fell on the phone lying on the floor. Its screen was still glowing, and, in that moment, one thing became painfully clear to Sarah.

Ridhi had escaped Ritesh, but the wound inflicted by her own family's decision was still deep.

After a while, Ridhi began to regain consciousness. Sarah returned to her, supported her gently, and slowly helped her back to her children.

Both children were asleep in their places. Ridhi stood there for a few moments, simply looking at them.

Sarah gave her a tablet and some water. "Rest for now," she said softly. "We'll talk tomorrow."

She paused for a moment. "I heard everything."

Ridhi slowly raised her eyes.

Sarah continued, "Whatever decision you make now, we are with you. No one is going to force you into anything." With that, Sarah left. The door closed behind her.

Ridhi sat beside her children. Tears continued to roll down her cheeks. Her entire being felt shattered.

What was she going to do now? Where would she go? Who would she have to depend on?

Her parents had refused to take her back. The path to India now seemed closed. She had no idea where Ritesh was. Her identity, her life, everything seemed to be beginning again from zero.

She lifted her little daughter into her arms and held her tightly against her chest. "I have to live for you," she whispered. "No matter what it takes."

But another question immediately rose in her mind. Would she really be able to raise both children alone? She had no answer.

Thousands of miles away, Rahul was exhausted from his own search. He had already travelled to New York twice and returned. Each time, he carried the same fragile hope with him that perhaps this time he would see Ridhi somewhere.

Rahul searched different neighbourhoods, questioned people he knew, and drove through the streets, hoping to find some trace of Ridhi or Ritesh. Each attempt ended in disappointment.

Ridhi seemed to have vanished among the millions of lives in New York. Exhausted, Rahul finally returned to Toronto, but one question remained: Where was Ridhi?

He had no idea that the woman he was searching for was far away in a secure location, trying to decide what future she could build for herself and her children.

Meanwhile, the search for Ritesh continued. Police gathered information about his contacts and watched his possible hideouts, but there was still no sign of him. It was as though he had vanished without a trace.

Then came another grim update from the hospital. Martha's condition had deteriorated rapidly. Her kidneys had suffered severe damage, and despite the doctors' efforts, she could not be stabilized. One night, her breathing stopped. Martha was gone, taking many secrets with her; secrets that might have revealed another part of Ritesh's past.

With her death, a crucial link to Ritesh may have disappeared before the police could uncover it.

Yet the story was far from over. Ridhi was facing a decision about her future, Rahul was still searching for her, and somewhere beyond their reach, Ritesh remained free.

The next day, Sarah returned to Ridhi's room. When she opened the door, Ridhi was sitting beside her children.

Sarah came closer. "How are you feeling now?"

Ridhi gave a small nod. "Better."

Sarah remained silent for a moment before asking gently, "So, Ridhi… what have you decided?"

Ridhi looked at her for several seconds. The tears of the previous night still lingered in her eyes. Then she took a deep breath. "I've made my decision."

Sarah waited. "I will go to Canada, but…" Ridhi stopped. "I don't know where I'll live once I get there. Where will the money come from? How will I raise my children?"

Her voice trembled with helplessness. "I have never had to think about my life alone. Suddenly, I have to begin again in a new country with two children. I don't know what to do."

Sarah watched her carefully.

Ridhi continued, "And what if Ritesh's people see me somewhere along the way? What if they find us and take us back? I cannot put my children through that life again."

Sarah moved closer and took her hand. "Ridhi…You don't need to worry about all of that."

Ridhi looked at her questioningly.

Sarah spoke with quiet confidence. "That is our responsibility. We will arrange your accommodation. Your children's basic needs will be taken care of. Your legal documents will be completed. And you will not be left alone there."

Tears filled Ridhi's eyes. "But I cannot depend on other people forever."

Sarah smiled. "We are not planning to keep you dependent forever. We want you to stand on your own feet. You will have the opportunity to learn a skill and work. Proper arrangements will be made for your children. Slowly, you will take control of your own life."

Ridhi listened silently.

"As for Ritesh's people," Sarah continued, "you will be transferred safely. They will not be able to reach you easily."

For the first time, Ridhi breathed a little easier. She looked at her children. Her son was playing with a toy on the floor, while her little daughter lay quietly nearby.

Ridhi whispered, "I just want to become strong for my children."

Sarah smiled. "And you will. Because you are no longer the Ridhi who needed someone else to make every decision for her. Now you will decide your children's future yourself."

Ridhi closed her eyes and took a deep breath. A new country, a new life, and countless challenges lay ahead. Yet, for the first time, the decision was entirely hers.

Perhaps that was the first true sign of her freedom.

Sarah stood. "Prepare yourself. We leave tomorrow. I'll complete the remaining arrangements today."

Ridhi quietly nodded. As soon as Sarah left, Ridhi looked around the room.

She had very few belongings, some clothes, the children's things, a few documents, and the last traces of her old life. She packed slowly, feeling both disbelief and sadness. At times, she could hardly believe she was leaving. At others, one question haunted her: Where was fate taking her now?

She packed the children's clothes, toys, and medicines, then folded her own things. The luggage was small, but the memories she carried were not.

Night fell over the centre. The building grew quiet, and the children gradually fell asleep. Ridhi lay awake, staring at the ceiling.

Canada. A country where she knew no one. Where would she live? What would she do? How would she raise her children? Would she find work? Would people accept her? And what if Ritesh found her again?

A cold wave ran through her. She immediately looked at her children, sleeping peacefully. Rising quietly, she walked over to them.

She gently stroked her son's hair and kissed her daughter's forehead. "I won't let anything happen to you," she whispered, "No matter what."

Yet fear remained. Escaping Ritesh would not be easy. He had power, contacts, and people who could help him find her.

Ridhi returned to bed, but every sound woke her. The night seemed endless until the first light appeared through the window.

She rose, checked on the children, dressed them, and placed the bags nearby. After one final check, she sat beside the door.

Now there was only one thing left to do: wait for Sarah. Every approaching footstep made her heart race.

Finally, she heard footsteps approaching.

Ridhi immediately lifted her head and pulled the children close. A strange feeling tightened her heart. Today, she was leaving this place, but she had no idea where the next door would lead or what awaited her beyond it.

A knock broke the silence. Ridhi took a deep breath. The journey was about to begin. Sarah entered. Ridhi was already dressed and ready. Sarah smiled. "Are you ready?"

Ridhi nodded. "Yes."

"We're going to Canada," Sarah explained, "but the journey will be by road."

Ridhi looked at her silently.

"You will be taken out the same way you were brought here. At an appropriate point during the journey, the blindfold will be removed. The vehicle has everything you and the children will need food, drinks, children's supplies, medicines, and other essentials."

Ridhi hesitated. "You're not coming with me?"

Sarah gently shook her head. "No. I won't be going with you from here." Then she gave her two names. "Ron and Ada will accompany you."

Ridhi immediately looked worried. Seeing her expression, Sarah reassured her. "Don't be afraid. You are in safe hands. They will make sure you and the children reach your destination safely."

Ridhi pulled the children closer. Before leaving, she looked around the room one last time.

Fifteen days earlier, she had arrived here frightened, uncertain, and broken and today, she was leaving with her children, heading toward a new life.

"Come," Sarah said.

Ridhi picked up her bag. She took the children and followed Sarah. They reached the upper floor by elevator. A short while later, Ridhi's eyes were blindfolded again. She held her son's hand tightly.

Sarah carried her daughter in her arms. Together, they moved silently through the building. After some time, they heard the doors of a vehicle opening. Ridhi was helped inside.

Sarah leaned toward her and whispered, "Take care of yourself."

Ridhi instinctively held her hand. "Thank you,"

she whispered, her voice breaking.

Sarah simply said, "Don't look back."

The door closed. The vehicle began to move.

Now, Ridhi had stepped outside the shelter where she had spent fifteen days, but she still had no idea which city in Canada she was being taken to. She only knew that a new road lay ahead.

The vehicle continued for hours. Ridhi's eyes remained covered. All she could hear was the sound of the engine.

Sometimes she heard her children. Sometimes Ada gave them water. Sometimes Ron spoke briefly on the phone. Ridhi had completely lost track of time.

Eventually, after travelling a considerable distance, the vehicle slowed.

Ada turned toward her. "Ridhi, I'm going to remove the blindfold."

The cloth was removed. Ridhi blinked rapidly. The light was bright. After a few moments, she looked outside. It was around noon.

She was sitting inside a large black van with heavily tinted windows. Nothing outside could be seen clearly. Ridhi took a

deep breath. It felt as though a weight had finally lifted from her eyes.

Ada smiled. "Don't worry. Everything will be fine. Just relax." Then she looked at the children. "Enjoy the journey with them."

For the first time, Ridhi tried to look through the window. The road stretched endlessly ahead. She did not know which city they were travelling toward.

She did not know what awaited her there, one thing was different this time. She had chosen this road herself. Perhaps this was the road that would take her toward a life she had never even dared to dream of.

The van continued forward. Ridhi tried to look outside through the dark glass, but the windows were so heavily tinted that she could barely make out the landscape.

She placed her hand against the glass. The sun was shining brightly outside. It was almost noon. Ahead of her lay a completely new journey and the destination?

Calgary, Canada but at that moment, Calgary was only a name to Ridhi. She had no idea what awaited her there. A new life, another test or perhaps peace?

Ada opened a bottle of water for the children. "Would you like something to eat?"

Ridhi shook her head. "No."

A few moments later, she looked at her son, who was trying to see outside. She smiled involuntarily. "Come on. Eat something."

She began feeding the children. Her hands were busy, but her mind was somewhere else. What if Ritesh finds me? The thought suddenly came to her, and her fingers stopped.

She immediately looked at her children. Then she whispered to herself, "No. Not anymore. I'm not alone now."

Ada seemed to understand the change in her expression. She said quietly, "Let what happened stay behind you for now. Today, just look ahead."

Ridhi looked at her. A faint smile appeared on her lips.

Hours passed. The road and landscape kept changing, city buildings gave way to open fields, endless highways, and vast skies that sometimes-reminded Ridhi of her homeland.

How strange life is. How many times can a person begin again in one lifetime?

She looked at her children and smiled, thought of her parents with tears in her eyes, and sometimes felt a sudden fear of Ritesh. Yet, with every passing mile, a quiet peace grew inside her.

She was getting farther from him, farther from the life she had left behind. Near evening, the van stopped at a secure location.

Ron turned toward her. "Take the children outside for a little while. Let them get some fresh air."

Ridhi looked at him. "Where are we?"

Ron gave a brief answer. "Near Kansas City."

Ridhi stepped out of the van.

After so many hours, the open air felt strangely comforting. She looked up at the sky. It was the same sky. Yet today, it felt different.

Her son became excited the moment his feet touched the grass. He began running around. Ridhi watched him and suddenly laughed.

For the first time in years, there was no fear hidden inside her laughter. For a few precious moments, she was simply an ordinary mother watching her child play.

Ada handed her a cup of coffee. "You have the right to be happy too, Ridhi."

Ridhi took the cup. Her eyes became moist. "Perhaps I had forgotten that."

They spent the night at another secure location. After settling the children, Ridhi remained awake for a while, gently touching her son's face before looking at her daughter.

A quiet dream took shape in her heart. Perhaps one day they would ask, "Mother, how did you save us?" And she would smile and say, "I didn't save you. You saved me. You gave me a reason to live."

The journey resumed the next morning. The roads grew quieter, with open fields and endless stretches of highway passing beyond the windows. Ridhi told the children stories, played with them, and sometimes simply watched the changing landscape.

After noon, the sky suddenly darkened. Clouds gathered, the wind grew stronger, and a few drops of rain struck the window.

Ridhi looked toward the glass. A sudden fear entered her heart. “Are we on the right road?”

Ada smiled. “Yes. Just a little farther.”

“How much farther?”

“There is still quite a journey ahead.”

Ridhi took a deep breath. she thought how long the road toward freedom could be.

The second night passed at another quiet location. The children soon fell asleep, exhausted from the journey. Ridhi stepped outside and looked up at the night sky as the cold wind touched her face.

For a moment, she thought of Rahul. Where is he now? Then she pushed the thought away. Her future had to come before her past. Yet the heart rarely obeyed reason.

By the third day, the final stage of the journey had begun. Ridhi spoke less, sensing that they were getting closer.

With every mile, her heartbeat grew faster. Whatever awaited her at the end of the road, she knew her life was about to change again.

Calgary. The name was no longer simply the name of a city on a map. It was about to become the beginning of her new life.

A few hours later, a faint range of mountains appeared in the distance. Ridhi stared through the window. “What are those?”

Ada smiled. “The Rocky Mountains.”

Ridhi watched silently; the mountains, the sky, the endless road, and her two children beside her. Tears filled her eyes.

She had lost so much: her home, her dreams, and the trust of those she once called family. Yet perhaps not everything was lost.

She lifted her daughter into her arms and held her son's hand. This journey is not just about changing cities. It is about changing my entire life.

The van continued toward Calgary. After three long days, it finally began to slow. Buildings appeared along the road, cars filled the streets, and unfamiliar faces moved through the city. Shop signs and road signs surrounded her.

It felt like another world; a world she had never imagined calling home.

Ridhi knew nothing about the challenges ahead. But one thing was certain: this time, she would choose the direction of her own life.

Ada spoke softly. "We're almost there."

Ridhi's heart began beating faster. She looked at her children. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

A few minutes later, the van entered a quiet residential neighbourhood and finally stopped in front of a house.

Ron switched off the engine. "We're here."

Ridhi gathered the children and stepped out. The house was ordinary but to her, everything was new. The door opened, and a woman welcomed them.

"Come inside. You must be exhausted."

Ridhi simply nodded.

That day, she asked very few questions. She just took her children inside. She was given a room where she could rest with them.

The children played for a while, ate their meal, and soon fell asleep from the exhaustion of the journey.

Ridhi lay down beside them. That night, after a very long time, she closed her eyes without fear.

The following morning, Ron and Ada showed her the rest of the house. Then Ada said, "Ridhi, you need a place of your own."

She led her downstairs. There was a clean, well-kept basement. It was not dark or abandoned. A small separate room had been prepared for her.

There was a window, a bed, a wardrobe, and enough space for her belongings. There was also a small sitting area.

Ada smiled. "This space is for you and the children."

Ridhi stared at the room in disbelief. "We can stay here?"

"Yes."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I can't believe I have a place of my own now."

Ada smiled. "This is the first step toward your new life."

The next day, Ron took Ridhi around the neighbourhood, showing her the grocery store, pharmacy, bus stop, and nearby routes. She watched carefully, trying to memorize each road.

He then took her to the shop where a job had been arranged for her. The work seemed manageable, but everything was unfamiliar.

Ron explained her hours and responsibilities, and Ridhi listened quietly. Fear and a quiet happiness stirred inside her. First time, she would earn for herself and her children.

Later, Ron showed her the school where her son would soon study. The little boy stared at the building as Ridhi held his hand.

"You're going to school," she whispered, a faint smile touching his face.

The boy nodded innocently. Ridhi smiled. Tears filled her eyes. Perhaps, she thought, "I really can give my children the life I once dreamed of."

Then they showed her a nearby childcare centre for her daughter, where she could remain safely during Ridhi's working hours. Ridhi looked at both places several times. She wanted to remember every road.

Before leaving, Ada handed her a piece of paper with important phone numbers written on it. Then she saved her own number in Ridhi's phone.

"If you ever have a problem, call me immediately."

Ron added, "And if you ever get lost, don't panic. Call us."

Ridhi looked at both. "You're leaving?"

Ada answered gently, "Yes."

For a moment, fear returned to Ridhi's heart. For so long, she had depended on people like Sarah, Emily, Zainab, Ron, and Ada.

Now, for the first time, she had to stand on her own.

Ada seemed to understand what she was feeling. "Ridhi, it's time for you to manage your own life. But that doesn't mean you're alone. If you ever need us, call."

Before leaving, they made sure the house had everything Ridhi needed, children's clothes, daily necessities, food, milk, cleaning supplies, and nearly a month's groceries.

Ridhi looked around in disbelief. She had never imagined strangers could do so much for her. She thanked them quietly; her eyes filled with gratitude.

Ada smiled. "No more thanks. Take care of your life. That is enough for us."

Ron hugged the children gently. Then he moved toward the door.

Ridhi watched them leave. The van slowly disappeared down the street. She remained standing at the door for a long time.

Then she looked at her children. Her son was quietly examining his new toys. Her daughter was playing nearby. Ridhi closed the door.

She returned inside. Took a deep breath and whispered to herself, "No one is going to tell me how to live anymore."

She remained silent for a moment. Then she looked at her son. "Now I will decide for myself and for my children."

After the imprisonment she had endured in Ritesh's house, Ridhi finally woke to a life where fear remained, but the power to choose was hers.

Slowly, Calgary became familiar. At first, a ringing doorbell or an unfamiliar face could still make her heart race.

But with each passing day, she found her rhythm work, her son's school, her daughter's daycare, bus rides, homework, and evenings at home.

For the first time, her life was taking shape on her own terms. The woman who had once lived in fear was now earning, caring for her children, and making her own decisions.

The past still returned in her dreams; Ritesh, locked doors, those endless nights. But each morning, her children brought her back to the present. She would remind herself, what happened to me is not my whole life. My life is still ahead of me and that thought kept her moving forward.

One day, Sarah called. Ridhi answered. Sarah's voice came through the mobile. "Ridhi, I have some news."

Ridhi became silent. "What happened?"

Sarah said, "Ritesh has been arrested."

The mobile nearly slipped from Ridhi's hand. For several moments, she could not speak. Then she whispered, "He was caught?"

"Yes." Sarah continued, "They had been searching for him for a long time. Eventually, after raids at several locations, they arrested him."

Ridhi closed her eyes. It felt as though a war that had lasted for years had suddenly come to an end.

Sarah continued, "Five girls were rescued during the operation."

Something shifted inside Ridhi. Five girls. Five lives. Five stories. Perhaps they too had been living in fear inside someone's house.

Sarah's voice continued, "So far, the investigation has revealed that Ritesh had trapped and sold more than thirty girls through different methods as part of the network."

A cold wave passed through Ridhi's body. She instinctively looked at her daughter. Her mind returned to the time when she herself had been caught in that world.

Sarah spoke softly. "Ridhi…There is something I want you to remember." She continues,

"Your second pregnancy became one of the reasons you were eventually spared when Ritesh wanted to use you further in that business.

Your children became a responsibility in his eyes, and he grew attached to them. That is one reason your story took a different course from many of the other girls."

Ridhi pulled her daughter close to her chest. Tears streamed down her face. There had been times when she thought her children were her weakness but today, she realized that perhaps her children had been the greatest reason she had survived.

She said to Sarah, "I want what happened to me to never happen to another girl."

Sarah replied, "Perhaps one day you will tell your story yourself. Then many girls will understand that staying silent is not the only way." After that call ended.

Ridhi remained silent for a long time. Then she looked at her children. A faint smile appeared on her face. The past was still inside her, but it no longer controlled her life.

Meanwhile, Rahul's life had also entered a new phase. He became busy with his work, but Ridhi never truly left his heart. He still believed she was somewhere out there. He simply had no way to reach her.

Then one day, a work assignment required him to travel to Calgary.

When he received the travel information, he did what he normally would. He checked his files. Prepared the necessary documents. Made his travel arrangements.

Rahul had no idea that the city he saw as a business destination had become the beginning of Ridhi's new life. After all these years, fate had brought them to the same city; Calgary.

Neither of them realized how close they had come. After all these years, fate had brought them to the same city. Now, only one unexpected meeting stood between them.

Meanwhile, Ridhi's life had settled into a quiet routine: getting the children ready, taking her son to school, dropping her daughter at daycare, working, and returning home to them.

The past still lived somewhere inside her, but she had learned that not every wound needed to be reopened every day.

That day, too, she was returning from work. The streets were crowded. Ridhi adjusted the strap of her bag and walked quickly. Then she suddenly noticed a man approaching from the opposite direction.

She stopped. He saw her too. For several seconds, neither of them moved. Ridhi's breath seemed to stop.

That face. Those eyes. That voice that had once been the most beautiful part of her life. "Rahul."

Rahul stared at her as if he could not believe what he was seeing. "Ridhi?"

Her lips trembled. "Rahul…"

They stood there silently. All those years. All those questions and suddenly, they were standing face-to-face again.

Rahul finally asked, "You… here?"

Ridhi had no answer. She simply nodded. He looked at her carefully. Time had left its marks on her face, but her eyes were still the same.

Then his gaze fell on the bag in her hand. "Are you okay?"

Ridhi gave a faint smile. "Yes…I'm okay now."

Those two words settled heavily in Rahul's heart. "Now I'm okay."

Which meant; before?

He wanted to ask but standing in the middle of the street, he could not bring himself to say it. He pointed toward a nearby café. "Could we sit somewhere for a while?"

Ridhi thought for a few seconds. Then she quietly nodded. They entered the café and sat at a table in a quiet corner. For a while, neither of them said a word.

It was as though neither knew how to compress years of separation into a few sentences.

Finally, Rahul asked, "Where were you?"

Ridhi lowered her eyes. "It's a very long story."

Rahul looked at her. "I have time."

For the first time, Ridhi looked directly at him. Her eyes filled with tears. "Not today."

Her voice was barely a whisper. "I can't tell you yet."

Rahul did not press her. Instead, they spoke about ordinary things. Their work, lives and children but the real question remained silently between them.

What had happened to Ridhi? After a long while, they left the café. Before they parted, Rahul said,

"Ridhi… if you're comfortable with it, could I see you again tomorrow?"

Ridhi looked at him. This time, she did not refuse. "Okay."

The next day, Rahul called. "Ridhi, if you don't mind, could I come to your home?"

There was a pause. Then she said, "Okay."

She gave him her address. That evening, Rahul arrived at her house. When Ridhi opened the door, they stood silently for a moment.

Rahul stepped inside. He looked around. It was a simple home. Children's toys were arranged in one corner. Pictures made by the children decorated the walls.

Ridhi asked him to sit and went to make tea. For a while, they talked about ordinary things. Then Rahul placed his cup on the table. He looked at her. "Ridhi…"

She raised her eyes. "There's something I want to ask you." He paused. "Where is Ritesh?"

The cup nearly slipped from Ridhi's hand. Her face changed instantly. The past she had buried for years came rushing back through that single question. Her eyes filled with tears.

Rahul immediately said, "If you don't want to tell me"

"No." Ridhi stopped him. Her voice trembled. "Today, I'll tell you everything."

She remained silent for a few moments. Then she took a deep breath. "Ritesh…"

Her voice broke as she spoke his name. "He was not the man my parents believed he was."

Shock appeared on Rahul's face. Ridhi continued. At first, slowly. Then, as though a door that had been locked for years had finally opened.

She told Rahul how her life had changed after marriage and how, once in America, Ritesh took her passport, confined her to the house, and controlled her every move. She spoke of the people she was forced to meet, her children, her helplessness, and the nights she still struggled to remember.

Then she revealed the truth she had discovered: Ritesh was not only destroying her life; he was trapping other girls in the same network.

Finally, she told Rahul how she had been given a chance to escape, how she fled with her children, and how a secret support team brought them to safety before she was eventually sent to Canada.

Then her voice became quieter. "I spoke to my mother too."

Rahul looked at her in surprise.

Ridhi closed her eyes. "I thought maybe…" Her voice broke. "Maybe my mother would ask me to come home."

She wiped her tears. "But she told me to stay in America."

She paused. "She said that if I returned, my sisters' lives would be ruined. That people would ask questions. That their marriages could be affected."

Rahul stared at her. He looked almost unable to breathe. "Your parents… said that?"

Ridhi lowered her head. "Yes, and that was when I first felt…" She wiped her tears again. "Maybe I really am dead to everyone."

Rahul's eyes became wet. He wanted to say something, but no words came. The girl he had carried in his heart for years was sitting in front of him.

After hearing what had happened to her, Rahul felt as though he had been standing for years before a truth he had never even imagined. He spoke softly.

"Ridhi…"

She looked at him.

His voice broke. "Forgive me."

Ridhi was startled. “What did you do?”

Rahul lowered his eyes. “Nothing Perhaps I simply couldn’t find you in time.”

A painful smile appeared on Ridhi’s face. “How could you have found me? I didn’t even know where I was.”

Silence filled the room again. They sat across from each other. Within that silence were years of distance, love, regret, and a pain that perhaps could never be completely expressed in words.

After meeting Ridhi again, Rahul’s restlessness only increased. He had searched for her for years. When she suddenly appeared before him, he had no idea how to gather all those lost years into one life.

Rahul was in Calgary for only two weeks. Now those two weeks seemed like the most important two weeks of his life.

He began seeing Ridhi almost every day. Sometimes he brought something for the children. Sometimes he took Ridhi for coffee after work. Sometimes they sat in a park for hours while the children played.

Slowly, Ridhi became accustomed to his presence. Rahul grew close to the children. Her son became excited whenever he saw him. Even her little daughter began reaching for him.

Ridhi would stand at a distance and watch them. A strange peace would settle inside her heart but along with that peace came fear. Could she trust someone again?

The two weeks passed quickly. One evening, Rahul came to Ridhi’s home. The children were playing. Ridhi brought tea and sat down.

Rahul remained silent for a while. Finally, he spoke. "Ridhi, there's something I want to say."

She looked at him. "Tell me."

Rahul took a deep breath. "I want you to marry me."

Ridhi's hands froze. For several moments, she could not believe what she had heard. "What?"

Rahul repeated, "I want to marry you."

Ridhi immediately lowered her eyes. Tears filled them.

"Rahul…I'm not even worthy of your friendship anymore."

Rahul stared at her in disbelief. "What are you saying?"

Ridhi's voice broke. "You don't know what I have become. A lot has happened in my life. I'm the mother of two children. There are wounds in my past that I can barely look at myself. I don't want to bring you into my life and make your life difficult."

Rahul spoke softly. "Why do you think you are less because of your past?"

Ridhi remained silent.

Rahul moved closer. "What happened to you was not your crime. You didn't deceive anyone. You didn't hurt anyone. You were simply trying to survive."

Tears rolled down Ridhi's cheeks.

Rahul continued, "And your children…" He paused. "They are not your weakness. I don't see them separately from you."

Ridhi looked at him for the first time. There was certainty in his voice. "I don't want to marry you because I pity you. I want to

marry you because, even today, I see the same Ridhi in you the woman I loved years ago."

Ridhi lowered her eyes. Silence filled the room. Outside, evening was falling. The children were playing nearby and between the two of them stood a decision capable of changing the rest of their lives.

After a long silence, Ridhi finally spoke. "Rahul… not yet."

Rahul became quiet.

Ridhi raised her eyes. "I'm not ready for that decision yet. My life is still trying to gather its broken pieces. I need to think about my children. I need to understand myself again."

Rahul slowly nodded. "I can wait."

Tears filled Ridhi's eyes. She whispered, "If it is meant to be…" She stopped. "Perhaps one day, we will find ourselves standing at this same place again."

Rahul looked at her. "And if fate changes the road?"

Ridhi gave him a faint smile. "Then perhaps we will have to accept that some people do not enter our lives to stay forever. Some people come only to remind us that love is still alive."

The next morning, Rahul was leaving Calgary. He came to Ridhi's house. The children ran toward him and wrapped their arms around him. Rahul hugged them both.

Then he stood before Ridhi. For a few moments, neither spoke. Finally, Rahul said only, "Take care of yourself."

Ridhi answered, "You too."

Rahul turned toward the door. Just before stepping outside, he stopped. He looked back at her. Ridhi was looking at him too.

There was so much between them. Yet nothing needed to be said. Rahul walked outside. The door closed behind him.

Ridhi remained standing there for a while. Then she went to the window and looked outside. Rahul's car was slowly disappearing down the street.

Ridhi closed her eyes. One question remained in her heart. Was this really their last meeting?

Or… had fate hidden another chapter for them?

She did not know. Neither did Rahul but perhaps that was the greatest truth about love.

Some stories do not truly end. They simply stop at a turning point where time chooses the road that comes next.

For the first time in Ridhi's life, that road was being chosen neither by Ritesh nor by her parents.

This time, the decision belonged to Ridhi and to time itself.

We left it behind, believing it was only a story from the past. But perhaps destiny had not yet written its final chapter.

Some relationships disappear beneath the dust of time, only to return when we least expect them.

Whether time had written another fate for them or whether their story had truly over remained unknown.

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