

DUSRIYA DEVTA

Aman Sachdeva



BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

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ISBN: 978-93-7139-170-2

Cover Design: Aman Sharma
Typesetting: Pooja Sharma

First Edition: July 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the entire BlueRose team for their unwavering support throughout this journey. Your guidance and professionalism made the publishing process smooth and rewarding.

A special thanks to my editor Dhruvi, whose keen insights, dedication, and careful attention to detail elevated the manuscript to a higher level. Your contribution was instrumental in shaping the final version of this novel.

Thank you for believing in the story and helping me bring it to life.

Prologue: The Return

The road back to Khara Khara stretched ahead, a dusty path filled with forgotten memories. The bus rattled over the uneven road, its old engine groaning under the weight of time. I sat by the window, watching the world change from the noisy city to the quiet countryside.

It had been a long time since I returned to my village—long enough that the years blurred together. What mattered were the memories—clear, untouched by time, waiting to be revived. I could still hear the echoes of my childhood laughter, the soft patter of bare feet on dry earth, the splash of cool canal water against my skin.

They say the city changes a man. At thirty-five, I know it's true. The mirror shows me traces of it—lines at the corners of my eyes, the first strands of grey in my hair. My reflection looks stronger now, more defined. But the weight behind my gaze, the stillness in my shoulders... that's where the change really lives. And yet, beneath it all, something softer remains—the quiet voice of a boy who once believed the village he left behind would never change.

Back then, my younger brother Nanu and I were kings of our little world. Our kingdom stretched across dusty lanes, golden fields, and the shadow of an old mansion we never dared to enter. Mornings meant cricket under the rising sun, afternoons brought board games and half-true tales beneath the whispering neem tree, and evenings ended in laughter, our legs sore from running and our faces painted with dust

and mischief. We believed those days would last forever. Maybe that's what makes them hurt the most now.

I rested my head against the window, my breath fogging the glass. Would the village still be the same? The people, the houses, the banyan tree at the center of the square? And that house—the one at the village's edge, with its dark windows hiding the stories whispered about it.

A strange unease crept into my chest. I shook it off. Nostalgia often brought shadows with it.

Golden fields swayed under the warm afternoon sun, whispering like voices from the past. But were they calling me home... or warning me to stay away?

The bus jerked to a stop, making the passengers murmur in irritation. The driver's voice cut through my thoughts: "*Khara Khara aa gaya. Sab utariye.*"

I blinked, adjusting to the present. The conductor tapped my shoulder, reminding me this was my stop. As I stepped off the bus, the first thing I noticed was the air—thick with the scent of earth, ripened crops, and something else... something old.

Khara Khara was the kind of village that existed outside of time. Small mud houses lined the narrow paths, their walls painted with faded designs of past festivals. The village square had the same old banyan tree, its roots like ancient fingers clutching the earth. The well near the temple still stood, its stone edges smooth from years of use. The only thing that seemed to have changed was the silence—heavier than before, as if the air itself carried an untold secret.

I stood still, absorbing it all, peeling back the layers of time.

Then, I walked.

Each step felt like stepping into the past. I passed the old well where we used to draw water, the temple bell that rang at dusk, and the field where Nanu and I played our fiercest cricket matches. As I turned a corner, expecting to see my house, I hesitated.

A chill ran down my spine. I wasn't sure why.

Shaking off the feeling, I approached a man standing nearby. He had a lean frame, a sun-darkened face, and deep wrinkles that told stories of years spent under the open sky. His dhoti was dusted with flour, as if he had just come from his kitchen.

"Bhaiya..." The word felt foreign in my mouth after so many years. He looked at me strangely, as if I were a stranger. I quickly corrected myself, folding my hands in a 'Namaste'.

"I'm looking for Ramprasad's house. Can you tell me the way?"

His eyes lingered on me, blank at first—searching. Then his brows slowly drew together. "Who are you?" he asked.

The words struck harder than I expected, sharper than they had any right to. For a second, I didn't know whether to laugh or feel hurt.

Had I really changed that much? Or had this village forgotten me altogether?

"I'm his son. I used to live here."

Banwari lips parted, his grip tightening around the worn handle of his walking stick. For a second, he just stared—then his breath caught. "Beta... my beta," he whispered, his voice cracking. Before I could react, he stepped forward and pulled me into a tight embrace.

“It’s really you,” he murmured into my shoulder. “You don’t even remember me, do you?”

I searched his face, trying to stitch memory to flesh. There was something familiar in the eyes, the tilt of his smile—but the years had blurred the edges. He must’ve sensed my confusion, because he let out a gentle, unbothered chuckle. “It’s me,” he said softly. “Banwari Uncle. Have I really changed that much, Naman?”

Memories flickered at the edge of my mind, distant but warm. I forced a smile. “Of course, Uncle. How could I forget?”

He grinned, a glint of something knowing in his eyes. “You don’t remember. That’s alright. Come—let’s take you home.”

We walked in silence through the narrow lanes, the village unfolding around me like a half-remembered dream. And then, through the dust and time, my childhood home slowly came into view. The walls, once bright with fresh paint, now bore the marks of time, patches of plaster peeling like the pages of an old book.

Banwari Uncle knocked on the wooden door, his firm raps echoing in the quiet afternoon. Moments later, the door creaked open.

Nagendra, our caretaker stood there.

Nagendra had always been a strong man, tall with broad shoulders, but age had bent him slightly. His silver hair had thinned, his frame slightly stooped, but his eyes—those same watchful eyes from my childhood—lit up when he saw me.

“*Namo beta!*” His voice was filled with warmth. “*Aao, aao! Kitne saal ho gaye!*”

Later that night, as we ate in the dim light of the dining room, my thoughts drifted to the mansion at the edge of the village—the one that had haunted my memories.

“The mansion... it’s still standing, isn’t it?” I asked, trying to sound casual., trying to mask the weight of the question.

Nagendra’s hand paused midair, the silverware catching the light for a moment. A flicker of something—hesitation? Fear? Flashed across his face before he cleared his throat and forced a chuckle.

“Who knows, *beta*? No one goes there.”

I frowned, his words feeling hollow. “But you’ve lived here all these years. Surely, you—”

“*Beta*,” he interrupted gently, his tone soft, but final. “You’ve just returned. Rest. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

I didn’t believe him.

That night, sleep eluded me. The wind howled through the trees, carrying whispers I couldn’t make sense of. Somewhere, far in the distance, the thud of a cricket ball against the earth echoed—a sound from my childhood, or perhaps just a trick of the night.

I rose, almost unaware, my feet moving on their own—as if something unseen was drawing me to the terrace. My eyes, without hesitation, found the mansion.

One of the windows was glowing faintly. A chill ran down my spine.

Then came a voice—distant, unmistakable—calling my name. Three times. Soft, but urgent.

A chill ran through me, colder than the night air.

I spun around, heart racing. Nagendra stood behind me, his expression a strange mix of worry and something else—fear?

“What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice low and tight.

“I... I just wanted to see—”

“Come. Now,” he interrupted, his tone leaving no room for argument.

As he led me back inside, something echoed in the dark—a ball bouncing, tapping against stone, then rolling into the shadows—a childhood game.

Sleep eventually claimed me, but I was restless—my mind was caught in a tangled web of disjointed dreams.

When I finally found myself asleep, I was beneath the banyan tree—the same one from my childhood, its roots twisting and writhing like serpents in the earth.

She was there.

Roma.

Or someone who felt like her.

Her back was to me, her long hair swaying in the breeze. Barefoot, dressed in white, she stood in the dust.

“I...” Her voice came through, fragile and low, as if she were speaking from a place far beyond.

I moved toward her, but with every step, the distance between us grew. Her face glimmered like water—impossible to focus on—constantly shifting.

“Roma!” I called, voice breaking through the air. But, before I could reach her, something unseen pulled her into the shadows behind the tree.

I woke up with a start, gasping for air, drenched in sweat.

The room was still, quiet—except for a faint scent, lingering in the air. Mogra. Roma's favorite flower.

I glanced around, my heart racing. The window was shut. The air wasn't moving.

And just as suddenly as it came, the scent vanished—a memory I had buried long ago.

Something was wrong in this village—and it had been waiting for me all these years.

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Echoes by the River

It was the first time something like this had ever been planned in our village—a group trip to Haridwar. For us, it felt like a big adventure. My childhood friends—Kapil, Sumit, Ravi, and Vinay—and I had finally agreed to go.

“Hurry up, man! We still have to pack!” Kapil shouted from the courtyard of the old mansion, where we were still playing cricket. His voice echoed through the broken, empty walls.

“Relax. Why are you in such a hurry? It’s not like the bus will leave without us,” I replied, leaning on the bat. Truth be told, I wasn’t as excited as the others. Maybe because I had never stepped outside the village. Everything I loved—my friends, my memories, even my fears—was tied to this place.

“We should just leave him behind in this haunted mansion,” Sumit joked. “Let him play cricket with ghosts!”

“Oh no, what if Naman turns into a ghost while we’re gone?” Vinay added dramatically.

“Then at least we won’t be scared,” Ravi laughed. “He’ll protect us as our ghost-friend!”

“Alright, fine!” I said, smiling despite myself. We all laughed and split up to pack our bags. The plan was simple - be ready by 8 PM and meet by 9 near the Hanuman Temple close to Kapil’s house. It was a bit far from my home, but I didn’t mind.

I packed quickly and started walking to the temple. When I reached, I saw Sumit, Vinay, and Ravi already there, standing under the banyan tree. But Kapil hadn't arrived yet.

"We're just waiting for him," I said.

"There he is," Sumit pointed.

Kapil was walking toward us, a bit slower than usual. He was helping his neighbor aunt, who was also joining the trip. But that's not who caught my attention.

Beside her was a girl.

She looked up, and our eyes met. A calm stillness passed between us, brief but grounding. Her dupatta fluttered gently, hair brushing her cheek. The world around me faded, just for a moment.

"Hey!" Ravi's voice broke my focus. Everyone was hugging Kapil like they hadn't seen him in years—even though we met just two hours ago. I smiled, but my eyes went back to her.

While the others joked, I slowly stepped away and walked toward her. She stood quietly near the temple steps, gently tracing circles in the dust with her sandals.

"Hey," I said, trying not to sound nervous. "You're coming with us too?"

She looked up again. This time, a soft smile formed on her lips.

"Yes," she replied. "Kapil's aunt is my relative. She asked me to come. I've never been to Haridwar."

Her voice was soft, but there was something old in it. Like she had lived a quiet life full of secrets.

I didn't know what to say next. But it didn't feel awkward. It felt like something was unspoken between us, something that didn't need words.

"I'm Naman," I finally said.

She looked at me again and smiled. That tender smile and somehow it felt sad. The bindi on her forehead made her look even more graceful. But there was a stillness in her, like she carried something heavy inside her heart.

I knew I should give her some space, but I couldn't step away. I just wanted to keep looking at her.

"Naman! Come on, the bus is leaving!" Kapil called from a distance.

But I didn't want to leave her.

"Roma," Kapil called to her.

Roma—that name settled into my chest like a secret I never knew I was waiting for.

She looked at me. I looked at her. Our eyes met again—and this time, there was something more.

Then she turned and started walking toward the bus. I followed her without thinking. She climbed into the bus first, and I was about to follow when Sumit grabbed my arm.

"Where were you, man? Walking around like you were sleepwalking," he said.

"I was just... looking at her," I said, still lost in thought.

"What's with you today?" Ravi asked, laughing. "You disappeared!"

“I was right here...” I mumbled, trying to spot Roma again inside the bus. But I couldn’t see her now. She was gone—hidden among the other passengers. I was stuck with my friends around me, all teasing, all laughing.

I sighed and looked at them. “Thank you,” I said dramatically, a bit frustrated.

They looked confused. Then I climbed onto the bus. But inside, an aunty stopped me. “*Beta*, this is the ladies’ bus. The men’s bus is behind this one.”

Oh no! Seriously?

I stepped back, irritated. I just wanted to see her again.

Sumit and Ravi came up from behind and patted my shoulder. “Our bus is that way,” Sumit said, sounding a little annoyed. “What’s wrong with you today?”

I didn’t answer. My eyes were still searching for her.

Then I saw her again through the window. And I felt peace.

“Let’s go,” Sumit said again.

I glanced at Roma, one last time... then finally turned and walked toward our bus.

Our journey to Haridwar had begun.

“Bro, we have to take a dip in the Ganga, okay? I heard the water is ice-cold!” Vinay said excitedly.

We laughed, pushing each other as we climbed onto the bus. There was joy, excitement, and that warm, familiar feeling of friendship. But inside me, something had changed.

Something had started with Roma. And I didn’t even know what it was yet.

“Sumit, stop stealing my seat every time I get up!” Kapil shouted, half-laughing, half-annoyed.

“*Bhai, seat chhoti hai, dil bada rakh,*” Sumit grinned, sliding over with dramatic flair.

The bus rumbled to life as we finally settled in. I sat by the window, the cool night breeze slipping through the cracks, brushing against my face. My friends were already in full swing—laughing, teasing, arguing over snacks.

“Sumit, I swear to God, if you eat all the chips before we even leave the village...” Vinay warned.

“Too late,” Sumit said with a mouth full of chips, grinning.

He then pulled out a packet of mango candies and refused to share—sparking another mini-war. He had smuggled in a pack of sour tamarind candy and was passing it around like contraband. Vinay was busy trying to tune the bus radio to a station that didn’t sound like it was underwater. And Ravi... well, Ravi had already declared he wasn’t going to sleep until we reached Haridwar—not out of excitement, but because he’d brought a packet of cheesy bhujia he swore he’d finish before anyone else could get their hands on it.

“Come on, Sumit! That’s childhood property! We all used to share everything!” Kapil protested.

“Exactly! Used to,” Sumit replied, stuffing another candy into his mouth. “Welcome to adulthood.”

Vinay lunged for the packet, and Ravi joined in—the three of them turning the backseat into a full-on wrestling ring. A few people in the front rows turned back, frowning, while others giggled.

I couldn't help but laugh. This—this madness—was what I had grown up with. They weren't just friends. They were fragments of my childhood stitched into my soul.

Kapil was sitting beside me, half-asleep already. Ravi had pulled out a speaker and was trying to connect it to his phone. "Let's play some travel songs, bro! It's not a road trip without music," he said.

Soon, old Bollywood songs began playing softly—those timeless, nostalgic ones we all grew up with. We sang along, off-key and loud, but no one cared. For a while, we were just a bunch of boys, lost in the freedom of the night.

Suddenly —

"Aaaaaah!" Kapil screamed from the back, followed by roaring laughter.

We turned around. Ravi had dumped a handful of ice cubes down Kapil's shirt—from where had he gotten ice in a non-AC bus was anyone's guess.

"You idiot!" Kapil jumped around like a cat on fire, smacking Ravi while the rest of the bus laughed.

I nodded, glancing at them with warmth. "We've grown up together. Fought together. Cried. Laughed. Done all kinds of stupid things. They're not just friends—they're home."

But even amidst all that noise, my mind kept drifting back to her—Roma.

She was in the other bus, probably sitting quietly, looking out at the same moonlit fields we were passing. I wondered what she was thinking. Did she notice me the same way I had noticed her? Or was I just another stranger?

She was sitting a few rows ahead, near the window, her head resting lightly against the glass. The dim glow from the streetlights kissed her face softly every time we passed a lamppost. It was like watching a dream flicker between shadows and light.

“Still thinking about her?” Sumit nudged me.

I looked at him, surprised. “Who?”

“Don’t act innocent, lover boy,” he laughed. “You were staring at her like she was a dream.”

I didn’t answer, just smiled and looked back out the window.

That night felt longer than usual. All I wanted... was to see her again. Maybe it was the first time I’d ever felt this way about someone. It was quiet. It was special.

This trip wasn’t just a getaway. It was the beginning of something I couldn’t explain yet—something soft, uncertain, and quietly magical.

I sat by the window, looking up at the open sky, stars scattered like secrets waiting to be told. My thoughts kept drifting back to her—her smile, her eyes, the way she said my name. I don’t even remember when I fell asleep. But I did... Still thinking about Roma.

After a long night of bumpy roads and shifting dreams, we finally arrived in Haridwar at dawn. The sun had just begun to rise, casting soft hues of pink and gold across the sky. The air was thick with the scent of incense and the gentle chime of temple bells. It was quietly beautiful.

“*Bhai, Haridwar aa gaya!*” Ravi shouted, throwing his arms in the air.

We stepped off the bus, stretching and yawning, our bodies sore from the endless winding roads. The moment my feet touched the ground, something changed inside me. It wasn't just fatigue lifting—it was peace. As if the earth here whispered ancient tales—of faith, of love, of centuries of prayers surrendered to the river.

A soft golden light spread across the horizon as the sun rose behind the distant hills. The air was crisp, cool, and carried a fragrance of burning incense mixed with marigolds. The sound of temple bells echoed gently through the morning hush. It felt like the city itself was welcoming us.

Haridwar - “Hari ka Dwaar,” the gateway to the divine—is one of the holiest cities in India. Nestled along the banks of the sacred Ganga, it's believed that a dip in its waters can cleanse the soul and offer salvation. Pilgrims from every corner of the country—and far beyond—come here to pray, to heal, to let go. And the river here doesn't just flow. It moves like something alive, something aware.

Many believe that drops of *amrit*—the nectar of immortality—fell here during a great celestial battle. That's why Haridwar is one of the four places where the *Kumbh Mela* is held—a gathering of millions, united by belief. But for me, at that moment, Haridwar wasn't just a city of gods and myths.

It was something personal.

I looked around and saw families lighting *diyas*, *sadhus* meditating beside the riverbanks, and the sky glowing behind tall temple spires. Everything felt alive. Sacred.

Vinay stretched his arms. “Man, the air smells like flowers and *ghee*!” Sumit grinned. “And peace. Don't forget peace.” Kapil rubbed his eyes. “All I smell is sleep.” Ravi stood silently, his

eyes on the river. A rare serious expression settled on his face. “This place... it feels different.” And he was right. There was something different.

Before I could respond to Ravi, I caught a glimpse—Roma, stepping off the bus.

She stepped down from the ladies’ bus slowly, the morning breeze catching her hair as she adjusted her dupatta with quiet grace. She stood by the road, brushing her hair behind her ear as sunlight spilled gently over her face. She looked... divine. As if she belonged here—part of the breeze, the river, the bells... her heartbeat in rhythm with it all.

The sunlight kissed her so softly, it seemed even the light knew how delicate she was. Her eyes scanned the crowd, and for a second, I wondered if she was searching for someone. Maybe me. Our eyes met again, not by accident. This time, we looked at each other on purpose. No words. None needed.

Her eyes carried a story I hadn’t heard yet—but somehow, already believed in. I forgot the tiredness. Forgot the noise. All I saw was her—and in that soft, fleeting smile, something inside me bloomed—a warmth, a beginning.

“Stop staring and help with the bags, loverboy,” Sumit whispered in my ear, smirking.

“Shut up,” I whispered back, but I couldn’t stop smiling. I just wanted to look at her a little longer.

We gathered the bags we’d brought along. Kapil was already negotiating with a rickshaw driver while Vinay and Ravi argued over who had packed snacks and who had forgotten toothpaste.

“Don’t tell me you brought ten packets of *bhujia* and forgot your brush,” Ravi teased.

“I’m here for spiritual growth, not dental hygiene,” Vinay replied dramatically, making us burst into laughter.

Roma stood quietly with Kapil’s aunt, holding a small bag. She looked peaceful—like she belonged here more than any of us.

I wanted to talk to her. Just say something. Anything.

But my feet didn’t move.

“The first thing I’m doing is finding tea,” Sumit groaned, rubbing his eyes. I haven’t slept a bit.

We stayed in a modest *dharmashala* near the river. The caretaker gave us two big rooms—one for the boys, one for the women. They were simple, almost bare—but we didn’t care. We threw our bags and rushed straight toward the river.

The Ganga stretched wide and clear, its water cold and sparkling under the morning light. People were already there, taking dips, praying, laughing.

And it was there, again, that I saw her.

“Go talk to her,” Sumit nudged me.

“What? No, she’s praying—”

“So? Say hi after. At least she’ll know you’re not mute.”

I laughed nervously but stayed where I was.

“She asked about you,” he said with a smirk, then walked off toward the river for a dip.

I stayed back, heart racing a little—just watching her, unsure of what to do next.

I turned toward Roma. She was walking slowly toward the edge of the Ganga, where the first light danced over the water. I followed, my steps unsure, my heart louder than the bells.

She stopped at the bank, her eyes fixed on the flowing river. Without turning to me, she said, “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

I stood beside her. “Yes,” I whispered. “Very beautiful.”

She looked at me—and for the first time, there was no smile. Just a quiet seriousness in her gaze. “This river carries more than just water,” she said softly. “It carries prayers... memories... goodbyes.”

I nodded, not knowing what to say. There was something about her—like she had tasted sorrow, yet carried it like poetry.

“I’ve always wanted to come here,” she added, almost to herself, “and now that I’m here... it feels like something is calling me.”

“I feel that too,” I said.

She looked at me, surprised—but didn’t say anything more.

We stood there in silence, side by side, as the sun rose higher and the city of gods awakened behind us. Bells rang louder. Priests began to chant. Devotees stepped into the icy water with their shoes off and hearts wide open.

“Ready?” Vinay shouted, already pulling off his T-shirt.

“Let’s go!” Kapil yelled, jumping into the freezing river. “IT’S SO COLD!”

One by one, we all leapt in, shouting and laughing like little kids. The chill hit us like a slap, but it felt cleansing—like the water was washing away something we didn't know we carried.

Roma knelt at the river's edge, hands joined in silent prayer. Her *dupatta* fluttered behind her as she dipped her fingers into the water. The morning light made her glow—she didn't look real. She looked like part of a story; a memory wrapped in light.

My heart paused.

After a few moments, she stood and looked around. Our eyes met again—and this time, she smiled. Not just a polite smile. But a warmer one. Softer.

And I—soaked, shivering, heart pounding—just smiled back.

Our friends were still laughing and splashing nearby, but their voices felt distant now. Because this wasn't just a journey anymore. This was the beginning of something else.

Something tender.

Something sacred.

Something that felt a lot like love.

Later That Evening – Ganga Aarti

That evening, we all walked to the *Ganga Ghat* for the *aarti*. The *ghats* were crowded, glowing with hundreds of *diyas* floating like stars on the dark river. The sound of conch shells and chants filled the air, echoing through the twilight. It was magical—ancient and alive.

We stood close together, the five of us, shoulders brushing, eyes wide with awe.

“Bhai, I’ve never seen anything like this,” Ravi whispered.

“I want to come back here every year,” Kapil said softly.

As the flames of the *aarti* danced in the wind, I looked around—and there she was again, a little ahead of us, holding a *diya* in her hands. Her eyes were closed, lips moving in a silent prayer.

In that moment, the chants faded, the crowd blurred—and it felt like the universe had stilled, just for her.

Her *diya* flickered slightly in the breeze, but her hands were steady. I watched her lips move in that silent rhythm, and I wondered who or what she was praying for.

With the *Ganga* flowing, the sky glowing, and prayers rising like smoke, I realised something... I didn’t just want to know her. I needed to understand her.

That night, after the *aarti*, we roamed the narrow lanes of Haridwar—glowing with soft yellow lights, the smell of *jalebis* thick in the air, and the sound of temple bells echoing

through cobbled paths. Street vendors shouted, children laughed, and *sadhus* walked barefoot with glowing eyes.

We were walking side by side, laughing over silly things.

“Sumit, you seriously thought that *sadhu* was floating?” Ravi laughed.

“Bhai, he had no legs! Tell me how that’s possible!” Sumit insisted.

“Optical illusion, *baba*,” Kapil grinned. “Too much YouTube for you.”

I laughed along, but my eyes kept searching. My eyes moved on instinct—and found her

She stood by a small street shop, looking at a tray of glass bangles. The flickering bulb above cast light and shadow across her face. Her fingers moved slowly over the bangles—green, blue, silver—like she was searching for something forgotten.

I told the guys I’d be back and walked over, heart pounding louder than any temple drum.

“Looking to steal all the sparkle in Haridwar?” I asked, smiling.

She turned, surprised, then smiled back. “No... just looking. I don’t wear bangles.”

“Then what are you searching for?” I asked, not even sure where the question came from.

She paused, her eyes fixed on the glinting colours. “I don’t know... something that feels like mine.”

Her voice had that same softness again—like an old melody, familiar yet distant.

“I’m Naman,” I said again, hoping this time she would remember.

“I know,” she smiled. “You told me yesterday.”

There was a pause. The world seemed to quiet around us.

“I’m Roma,” she said finally.

I nodded. “Nice to meet you. Again.”

She looked at me for a moment, not judging, just... observing—like she was trying to remember something lost.

There was something about her that stirred a quiet pull inside me. Not the simple recognition of a face, but something older—like meeting someone you once loved in a dream you barely remember. She felt like a half-remembered song, a name on the tip of the tongue. And in that moment, without a word, a gentle calm settled between us—strange, but warm. Like coming home.

She then pointed toward a narrow lane beside the shop. “Do you want to walk a bit?”

I didn’t hesitate. “Yes.”

The crowd faded behind us as we stepped into the quiet alley. Only a few lamps flickered here, their light warm and weak. The sound of the river still drifted in the air like a forgotten hymn.

She walked slowly, her eyes ahead, her voice calm. “It’s peaceful here... but also strange.”

“Strange how?” I asked.

“Like the past is hiding in the corners,” she said. “Like something is watching.”

Her words made me pause.

“You sound like you’ve felt this before.”

She didn’t answer immediately. “Do you believe that some places remember us?”

I looked at her, intrigued. “What do you mean?”

She stopped walking.

“Like... some walls remember laughter. Some paths recall footsteps. And sometimes, when we return, they whisper—not with words, but with feelings—as if they’ve been waiting to tell us something we’ve buried too deep.”

There was something in her tone—something ancient, something heavy.

I swallowed. “Do you think this place remembers you?”

She looked at me then, her eyes catching the faint lamplight, glistening slightly.

“I think... you do.”

My breath caught. “Me?”

Before I could say more, she asked quietly, almost as if afraid of the answer: “Have you been here before?”

I shook my head slowly. “No... it’s my first time here. But this place... it’s beautiful. Calm. Like yo—” I stopped mid-sentence.

Roma flinched, her hand brushing mine—a spark of warmth in the sudden chill.

The light above us flickered... then went out.

We stood still, breath held. Darkness pressed in around us.

Her hand slipped into the crook of my arm—not holding, just resting. But I could feel her heartbeat against me, fast and uneven.

I turned sharply, scanning the alley. Nothing. Just an empty, breathing path.

“Let’s go back,” she whispered.

I nodded, and we walked back toward the light in silence. But even as we rejoined the laughter and noise of the night, I felt part of me had remained behind... in that dark alley—where her touch had lingered—and something unseen had watched us leave.

The boys were already back at the guesthouse, sprawled on thin mattresses, arguing over card rules they clearly didn’t understand. The room echoed with laughter and mock threats, the kind that only true friends can make and still be loved. It was noisy, chaotic... comforting.

But Kapil wasn’t around.

“Where were you, Romeo?” Sumit called out with a smirk as I stepped in.

“Just walking,” I said, trying to keep my voice casual.

“With her?” Ravi raised an eyebrow.

I didn’t answer. I just smiled and took my place on the floor. But my mind—my heart—was still somewhere else. Still in that narrow, quiet alley where the air had smelled of jasmine and damp earth... where her voice had softened the cold wind.

Her face hadn't left me. That look in her eyes. That half-smile. That quiet something that lingered between us.

I lay on my back, staring at the cracked ceiling, the fan creaking overhead like it too was trying to fall asleep. But sleep didn't come. Her voice echoed in my ears—not just the words she said, but the way she said them, like they were meant for just me.

Somewhere, in the distance, I thought I heard the river. A faint murmur, like whispering silk.

But when I sat up, there was only silence.

I lay back again, pulling the pillow over my face, trying to block out the world. But I couldn't block her out. All I could see was her smile.

Somewhere between that memory and the hum of the fan, sleep finally took me—with her face imprinted softly in my dreams.

The sun spilled across the river like liquid gold, catching on the ripples and dancing between the boats. Birds circled overhead, and temple bells began to ring in the distance, calling the day to life.

We were all awake, or rather, forcibly woken up by Kapil. "Bro, wake up! Do you want to enjoy the Ganga bath or keep dreaming?" he shouted, throwing a pillow at Vinay's half-conscious face.

"Let me sleep, *yaar*," Vinay groaned, curling up like a stubborn child.

"No, bro, you can wait. Ganga can't," Kapil laughed, yanking his blanket away. "Today we purify our sins!"

“What sins?” Sumit stretched, yawning. “We’re saints, remember?”

“Saints who steal *pakoras* and cheat at Ludo,” Ravi added.

Laughter broke out like a burst of colour.

By the time we made it to the river, we were a mismatched parade of sleepy eyes, half-wet hair, and borrowed towels. The *ghats* were alive—pilgrims, *sadhus*, splashing children, and chants that rolled through the morning air like prayer woven into breath.

I saw Roma standing near the water’s edge, her hands folded in prayer, her *dupatta* dancing in the breeze like a flame. The sunlight caught in her hair, turning it to strands of copper. For a moment, everything else faded—the crowd, the laughter, the river itself.

Just her.

Sumit nudged me. “Bro, are you just going to watch? Go ahead!”

I rolled my eyes. “Shut up.”

But my feet were already moving.

“Good morning,” I said softly, standing beside her.

She turned, and her smile... God, her smile was like morning breaking on a cloudy day. “It’s beautiful here,” she said.

“Yeah,” I replied. “Peaceful.”

She gestured to the first few steps leading into the river. “Come.”

We sat side by side, the sacred water lapping gently at our legs. The river was cold, but next to her, I felt warm—grounded.

“When I was little,” she said, gazing at the flowing water, “I used to think Ganga was a person. A real one. Like she could listen.”

“Maybe she can,” I said, half-smiling.

She turned to me, eyes curious. “Then maybe I should tell her a secret.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Will you?”

“Not yet.” She looked away, but a smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

Our hands brushed underwater—just a graze—but neither of us moved away. The touch was quiet, gentle... but electric. Like the river itself had conspired to bring us closer.

I didn’t want to move. I could’ve sat there forever.

After the prayers, chaos returned in full force.

“Yaar, itna thanda?!” Vinay shouted, splashing wildly.

“That’s the whole point!” Sumit laughed and shoved him deeper in.

Vinay slipped, falling flat with a dramatic splash. Water flew everywhere, soaking us all.

“WAR!” Ravi roared.

In seconds, all hell broke loose. Kapil tackled Sumit, Sumit dragged Ravi, Vinay flailed about seeking revenge. I tried—unsuccessfully—to dodge the madness.

Roma stood at the edge, laughing—really laughing—her eyes lit up like I’d never seen before.

And then... *Splash!*

Ravi slipped again, this time right in front of Roma, drenching her salwar suit with icy water. She gasped, then looked at me. There was a pause. And slowly, a mischievous smile curved on her lips.

“Oh, now it’s war.”

She cupped her hands, scooped water, and flung it right at me.

I stood stunned, soaked, and strangely thrilled.

“Okay, okay,” I said, grinning through the water dripping off my nose. “I deserved that.”

We sat on the sun-warmed steps, drying off like lazy lizards. Someone passed around *chai* in clay cups, the warmth soaking through our fingers into our bones.

“I swear, Vinay falling like a Bollywood hero was the best part,” Sumit said between sips.

“I hope all your cups crack,” Vinay muttered.

“You’ll haunt us!” Ravi grinned. “Bro, you already look like a ghost!”

There was laughter again.

Roma sat close beside me, knees pulled up, the edge of her *dupatta* brushing my arm like an accidental promise.

“You have good friends,” she said, voice soft.

“I do,” I nodded. “And now you’re part of the group.”

She looked at me, surprised. “I don’t know if I belong.”

“You do,” I said without hesitation.

There was a pause—not awkward, but heavy—full of meaning that hadn’t found words yet.

She looked at me, her expression unreadable. “You’re strange.”

“I get that a lot,” I smiled.

And then... there was silence. But not the empty kind. The full kind. Like something in us was settling into place.

As the sun dipped low, the river turned to molten gold. Someone—probably Kapil—shouted, “Boat ride! Come on, let’s go!”

We rushed down to the wooden boats lined up at the edge. Sumit bargained like a true uncle. The rest of us piled in—unsteady, laughing, threatening to tip the boat over before it even left.

"Sit straight, you crazy people!" the boatman yelled.

We laughed harder.

The boat drifted slowly, slicing through the glowing water. The city’s noise faded behind us. *Diyas* floated by, flickering in the dusk, carrying whispered prayers into the night.

Vinay tried to sing horribly. “*Chand sifarish jo karta hamari...*”

“*Bas kar, bhai!*” Sumit threw a marigold at him.

Then Ravi stood up like a hero in a climax scene, arms wide open. “I just want to feel the moment!”

"You'll feel the moment in the Ganga if you fall," I pulled him down.

We all burst out laughing.

And as the boat floated further into the river's embrace, I looked across the boat at Roma. She was watching the *diyas*, the golden light reflecting in her eyes like tiny stars.

Something changed in me right then.

This wasn't a vacation.

It wasn't just a photo album in the making.

It was the start of something I didn't have words for yet.

Later that evening, when the city had quietened and the air held the weight of unsaid things, I stepped up to the rooftop.

Roma was already there. She sat cross-legged near the edge, her *dupatta* wrapped tightly around her arms. The river shimmered in the distance, reflecting the dim glow of the moonlight. The breeze moved gently through her hair. She didn't turn when she heard me.

I sat beside her. Neither of us spoke. And yet, it didn't feel empty.

Below us, the Ganga whispered to the night, carrying the prayers of strangers and the ashes of lives once lived. Beside me, Roma watched it in silence—eyes focused, but distant, as if trying to remember something she had never known.

"They say if you ask with a clean heart, the river listens," I said softly.

She smiled, not looking at me. "I didn't ask for anything. I think... I just needed the quiet."

Another moment passed.

She turned slightly, her eyes finally meeting mine. "You don't talk much, do you?"

I shrugged. “Some things don’t need words.”

She didn’t look away. “That’s rare. Most people fill silence with noise.”

A soft silence settled between us again—this time not awkward, but shared. The wind shifted. The temple bells in the distance rang out faintly, rhythmic and ancient.

Roma leaned back on her palms, eyes toward the stars. “It feels like this place remembers things we’ve forgotten.”

I looked at her. “Or maybe it holds space for things we haven’t said yet.”

She didn’t reply. But her hand moved just slightly—closer to mine. Not touching. Just close enough. And that said enough.

As dawn touched the sky with soft gold and shades of rose, the holy city of Haridwar stirred to life one last time for us. It was the final day of our journey, yet something inside me felt unfinished—like a chapter left open, a line unspoken.

We followed the same morning rituals—bathing together in the Ganges, the chill of the water washing over our bodies, but not over the growing ache in my heart. I watched the ripples catch the sunlight, wondering how something could be so calm on the surface and still carry so much beneath.

We returned to our *dharmashala* for the *langar*. The hall was alive with quiet prayers, the sound of metal plates, and the warmth of food passed from hand to hand. We served the *pooris*, *sabzi*, and *halwa* as part of our *seva*, and I moved mechanically, basket in hand, until my eyes fell on her.

Roma—sitting among the devotees, a soft scarf covering her head, her face framed by the morning light like something out

of a forgotten dream—she wasn’t just beautiful—she was serene, like the silence after a storm.

My heart went still. For a moment, time seemed to slow.

“*Poori?*” I asked, my voice soft, careful.

She looked up, her eyes meeting mine with quiet knowing, and smiled—faintly, as if the smile carried more than words ever could. She gently shook her head.

That moment lingered even as Vinay nudged me forward. I continued serving, but my mind was no longer in the *langar* hall. It was with her.

As the meal ended and people slowly began to leave, I saw her rise and quietly step out into the sunlight. I didn’t even think—I followed.

The crowd was heavy in the courtyard, voices and footsteps echoing all around, but she wasn’t there. I scanned the *dhabas* across the road, the busy temple gates—but she had vanished like a breath of wind.

Then something pulled me—an unspoken feeling—and I walked toward the back of the *dharmashala*.

And there she was—sitting alone on the lower steps by the Ganges, her feet almost touching the water, the river glowing in the golden morning light. She was lost in thought, her face calm but her eyes far away, as if searching the water for answers.

I sat beside her without a word. For a while, we just listened to the river, to the quiet around us, to something larger than both of us.

“You found your peace?” I asked softly.

She nodded. “I wanted to keep this moment. Lock it inside me.”

My eyes drifted to the locket around her neck. “It looks special.”

“It was my parents’,” she said, her fingers brushing it gently. “They’re not here anymore.”

I could feel her pain in the air, like a distant storm, silent but heavy. I placed my hand over hers, not to comfort, but to be with her at that moment.

She didn’t pull away. She looked at me. And in her eyes, I saw everything—grief, strength, and a soft, fragile kind of love.

I knew that I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to return to the world we came from.

We walked back in silence, the unspoken between us deeper than anything words could hold. The others were already ready, backpacks loaded, the bus parked outside the *dharmashala*, waiting to take us home.

But before boarding, we all decided to go to the market—one last stroll through the narrow lanes filled with bells, beads, and the sweet scent of *prasad* and incense. We laughed, took silly photos, and bought cheap souvenirs; for a while, it felt like nothing had changed. But inside me, everything had.

I knew why I felt so restless; why my heart felt so heavy—because it had awakened something in me—a feeling I couldn’t name, but couldn’t let go of either.

Friends. Laughter. Truth. And maybe... Roma.

I didn’t just care for her. I wanted to be there for her.

She needed someone. Someone who could understand her silences, who could sit beside her in pain and not look away. And I wanted that someone to be me.

But even as I watched her walking ahead, laughing softly with Ravi, I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. Something held me back—fear, maybe, or the weight of our past, or the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

I knew what I wanted. I wanted to stay. I wanted her to stay. But I didn't know how to say it.

The bus engine started. Our journey was calling us back.

I stood there for a moment longer, the wind brushing my face, the scent of temple flowers still lingering in the air, watching Roma step onto the bus with a glance that lingered—just a second too long.

Maybe she was waiting for me to stop her.

Maybe... next time, I will.

The wheels of the bus hummed steadily on the highway, but my mind was far from the road.

Outside, the sun had begun its slow descent, casting long shadows over the fields. We were leaving behind the sacred calm of Haridwar, and with every passing mile, it felt like the peace I had found there was slipping through my fingers.

As I settled into my seat on the bus heading home, my thoughts were consumed by Roma's absence. She was travelling separately in the women's bus, and the physical distance, though small, felt immense to him. The laughter and chatter of his friends faded into the background as I gazed out the window, the passing scenery a blur. My mind replayed their moments together—the gentle touch of her hand under

the water, the way her eyes reflected the morning sun, and the serene expression she wore while sitting by the Ganges. Each memory intensified his longing, making the miles between them seem even greater. I wished for her presence beside him, to share in the journey back, to bridge the gap that now lay between them. The ache in his heart was a testament to the deep connection he felt, a bond that no physical distance could diminish. The laughter of my friends filled the bus, light-hearted and warm. But for the first time, it felt distant. Like a sound from another life.

Something had changed. In me. In her.

And maybe between us.

Beneath Still Shadow

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling, my mind restless after returning from the abandoned mansion. The image of the cricket ball bouncing down the stairs played over and over in my head. How had it moved on its own? The more I thought about it, the deeper I fell into old memories.

Fifteen years ago, that very mansion had been our playground. I could still picture myself and my friends—Kapil, my cousin Nanu, Ravi, Vinay, and Sumit—gathering there, our laughter echoing through the eerie silence of the ruins. The moment we stepped inside, an open lawn greeted us, vast and overgrown. Parallel to the entrance stood three doors, always locked, with windows beside each one. One window was slightly ajar, always open, but none of them had ever dared to peek inside. Strangely, despite the mansion's ominous presence, they had never felt fear—not back then. It had simply been their secret cricket ground.

In the shadowed corner of the mansion, a staircase spirals upward. The first flight was accessible—its iron gate broken and hanging off its hinges, inviting anyone to climb. But the second flight was different. Thorny bushes had overtaken it, growing wild and thick, as if nature itself conspired to seal it shut. No one questioned why. No one ever dared to go up.

Then suddenly—

My eyes snapped open.

The world felt wrong. The air around me was still, unnaturally still—thick like a sealed coffin. My chest heaved with ragged

breaths, but the air offered no relief. My skin was damp with sweat, yet the room was bone cold. Too cold.

It had been a dream.

But... had it?

I sat up slowly, my heart pounding as I wiped the sweat from my brow. The remnants of the staircase still clung to my mind—those overgrown thorns, the eerie silence. I turned my head toward the corner of the room.

I froze.

Something was wrong.

The air was heavier now—cloaked in a thick, rotting scent that hadn't been there before. My gaze drifted downward, and I saw it. The ball. Nanu ball. Sitting silently beside the bed.

But... I hadn't brought it inside.

Its once-bright surface was dull now, smeared with dirt as if it had been buried—or worse, dragged from someplace forgotten. A faint smell rose from it—wet wood, mould, and decay. My fingers twitched, instinctively reaching—but I pulled back. I didn't dare touch it.

The air around me pressed in tighter.

Just as I was sinking deeper into thought, the door creaked open.

"*Ram Ram, beta ji!*" came Nagendra Uncle's voice, warm and familiar, too alive for the cold stillness around me.

I jumped slightly and, without thinking, slid the ball behind me, out of sight.

"Ram Ram," I replied, forcing a smile, silently whispering a prayer under my breath.

"Come outside, son. It's already ten o'clock. Your breakfast is getting cold!"

"Ji, Uncle," I said, managing a nod. His presence made the room feel less haunted. For now.

Once he left, my gaze fell on a book lying on the table—one I didn't remember placing there. I reached for it, ready to open its cover, but then paused. A sharp clarity cut through my thoughts.

I needed to see Sumit.

I set the book down, took a quick, cold shower to wash off the lingering dread, threw on a shirt, and stepped out of the house.

As I walked toward Sumit's house, a cold shiver ran down my spine. The village lay ahead, strangely silent, unnaturally still.

There were no rustling leaves, no barking dogs, no distant voices from the *chai* shop. It felt like the land itself was holding its breath. Like time had frozen the moment I left. And maybe... in some quiet, haunting way... it had.

As Sumit's home came into view, my mind suddenly drifted back to the old days—days filled with laughter, with all of us together.

The river was our playground. Sumit, Kapil, Vinay, Ravi, and I were about to begin our usual swim.

Kapil surged ahead almost immediately, his powerful strokes cutting through the water effortlessly. I was right behind him, pushing myself harder. Ravi, Vinay were trailing, and Sumit was last, for now.

The river was calm near the bank, but we all knew the real danger lay ahead. The far edge of our racing path was where the river deepened, and the current turned treacherous. We had always raced up to the edge and stopped just in time. A single mistake could mean being swept away by the strong waters below.

The competition grew intense. I could feel the strain in my arms as I tried to close the gap between me and Kapil. And then, suddenly, I was beside him.

Kapil gave me a determined look, his jaw clenched, and I knew he wasn't going to make this easy for me.

Sumit, who had been lagging behind, suddenly picked up speed. His arms and legs moved like a man possessed, and within moments, he was right next to us.

I exchanged a glance with Kapil. Neither of us was willing to lose. But Sumit was playing with us—he had been holding back, letting us think we had a chance. And just when the finishing edge was in sight, he made his final move.

With a powerful burst of energy, Sumit shot forward, overtaking both of us. "NO!" Kapil groaned, trying to push harder, but it was too late. Sumit slapped the edge first and let out a victorious yell. "YES!" Kapil and I reached a second later, gasping for breath, frustration clear on our faces. Ravi, Vinay arrived last, panting.

"You remember the bet, right?" Sumit said smugly, wiping water from his face.

The Four of us groaned. "Yes, yes!" we mumbled.

The bet was simple: the loser had to treat the winner. And Sumit, the winner, was going to get free beer while the three of us paid for it.

That day had ended with laughter, chilled beer, and a sunset we never thought would be our last together in that place.

We were just kids then—chasing runs and teasing each other, unaware of the darkness waiting to find us.

But that was fifteen years ago.

Now, as I reached Sumit's house, a strange feeling settled deep in my chest—something between nervousness and dread. I knocked twice. The sound echoed too loudly in the quiet of the night.

After a long pause, the door creaked open. Sumit stood there, staring at me like he was seeing a ghost. Once broad-shouldered and full of life, he now looked thinner, his posture slightly hunched, as if the years had quietly weighed him down. His face bore the tired lines of someone who had seen too much and said too little. The sharp spark in his eyes was gone, replaced by a cloudy silence—eyes full of questions, but lips that forgot how to ask them. Fifteen years had passed, and time had clearly not been kind.

“Namo...” he breathed, voice shaky. “You came back.”

“I had to,” I said softly, pulling the old red ball from my bag and holding it up.

Sumit's face turned pale. His hand gripped the doorframe as if it were the only thing keeping him steady.

I smiled gently. I was truly happy to see him after so long. But something felt... off. Like the warmth between us had a crack in it. Like something—*someone*—was missing.

“You need to leave,” Sumit whispered suddenly. “Now.”

Before I could say anything, he closed the door.

I stood there, stunned. Waiting.

Five minutes passed.

Then the door opened again. He looked at me with searching eyes... and then, without a word, we hugged. A tight, emotional hug. For a moment, everything felt normal.

"I've missed you," I whispered.

He nodded, smiling. "Come, let's eat something."

"Not here," I said. "Let's go somewhere else."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Our old place."

"Where?" I asked, confused.

"Come. I'll show you," he grinned.

We hopped on his bike and rode past the village boundaries. The road was familiar yet strange, like a faded dream. We passed an old river—its still water shimmered under the sunlight. Something about it made me shiver.

Further ahead, we passed crumbling shops, faded signboards, and a dusty liquor store. Then we stopped in front of a small, quiet café.

"This place..." I whispered. "Is it the same one where we all—me, you, Roma, Ravi, Vinay, Kapil—used to hang out?"

Sumit nodded. "Yeah. The good old days."

But today, the place felt empty. Hollow. Like all the laughter had been stolen from the walls.

"Sonu!" Sumit called to a boy behind the counter. "Bring something for my friend!"

"What will you have?" he asked me.

"You forgot?" I smiled. "It's always tea."

Sumit chuckled. "Sonu, make that fast!"

As we sat down, he leaned closer. “So, why are you really here?”

I took a deep breath. “I missed you guys. I missed this place. It’s been too long.”

“Missed us? Hah!” he laughed. “If you missed us, you would’ve called, idiot.”

He laughed again, but I noticed the momentary flicker in his eyes. A shadow.

“You’re still the same Namo,” he said, smiling sadly, “forgetting things you shouldn’t forget.”

Then he changed the topic. “Do you remember how we used to have fun? You, me, Vinay, Nanu, Kapil...?”

I smiled, lost in the memory. “I want to see them again. All of them.”

“Come on,” Sumit stood up suddenly. “Let’s go.”

We rode to a small house nestled under a neem tree, its paint peeling but familiar. A round-faced man with thick glasses stepped out onto the porch, squinting at me like he was trying to recognize an old photograph.

“This is Vinay,” Sumit said. “Do you remember him?”

“Vinay...” I smiled, memories flooding back. “He never stopped eating.”

Vinay let out a hearty laugh, the same booming chuckle I remembered from school. But time had reshaped him too—his once chubby frame had softened further, and his hair was now thinning at the temples. He moved slower, more measured, like life had taught him to be cautious.

“Still haven’t stopped,” he grinned, before pulling me into a warm, lingering hug. There was something in his grip—not just welcome, but relief. As if a piece of the past had finally come home.

Just then, an old woman stepped out from behind him. Her face was full of wrinkles, her eyes sunken and black like deep pits. Something about her felt... wrong.

She stared at me, and then spoke in a scratchy, eerie voice. “You’ve come back... you’ve come back.” The voice was shrill, fragile—belonging to an old woman hunched in the corner of the verandah. Her eyes were cloudy, but they locked onto mine like she recognized something I couldn’t see in myself.

Then she began to laugh. Loud, cracked laughter that seemed to echo off the trees. “You shouldn’t have come back,” she whispered between gasps. “The dead don’t forget... and neither does it.”

My chest turned cold. A chill ran down my spine, as if someone had walked over my grave.

Behind her, a rusted swing creaked in the wind. I glanced at Sumit, but he looked away. *Roma. Kapil. Nanu.* Their names swirled in my mind like smoke. *Was she talking about them? Or... something else?*

“She’s just mad,” Sumit said quickly, too quickly. “Ignore her.”

He forced a laugh and waved it off, but I caught the stiffness in his shoulders. Without another word, he turned and walked ahead.

I followed, but the woman's words clung to me like smoke. Something told me she wasn’t just rambling.

The three of us rode to the riverbank—the same place where we used to swim as kids. Without hesitation, Sumit and Vinay stripped down to their boxers and jumped in.

“Hurry up, Naman!” they called.

I just followed, diving into the cool water.

We splashed, raced, and shouted like old times. For a moment, it felt like we were kids again.

Sumit won the race, of course.

“You guys still can’t beat me!” he laughed proudly.

“We let you win,” Vinay shot back, grinning.

“Loser buys drinks,” Sumit declared.

“That means Naman pays too!” Vinay added, pointing at me.

“Fine,” I laughed. “Beer’s on us.”

We went to a local bar and clinked our glasses together.

“To old times!” Vinay said.

“To survive this village,” Sumit added with a crooked smile.

We all laughed.

“Remember Aditi?” Sumit teased Vinay. “You had a huge crush on her... and then she was caught with her neighbor!”

I laughed out loud for the first time in days.

Vinay turned red. “And what about Payal?” he shot back. “You liked her, but she ended up with me!”

We all burst out laughing—except Sumit, who paused for a second, then smiled stiffly.

Suddenly, Vinay leaned in, his eyes glinting. “Hey... remember Roma?”

The laughter died. The bar went quiet. Sumit’s hand froze mid-air, his smile gone. Vinay shifted nervously.

“Vinay...” Sumit said sharply. “Don’t.”

A chill ran through me.

Roma. That name still felt like a whisper through my soul.

Sumit stood up. “Let’s go. It’s getting late.”

As we stepped out, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I started this journey for a reason,” I said. “To uncover the truth. The *unfinished* truth.”

They stopped. Both of them turned to look at me. There was something in their eyes—terror.

“You... What nonsense are you talking about?” Sumit’s voice cracked.

“I know,” I said quietly. “I know something happened, And I’m here to find out.”

Sumit’s jaw clenched. “Then you should also know what happened to us because of you!”

“I do,” I replied. “But this time, I won’t ask you to come with me—”

“Arey yaar,” Vinay cut in gently, his voice soft but steady, like a thread pulling two frayed ends together.

He stepped between us with a small, crooked smile—the same one he used back in school whenever we fought over cricket scores or lost homework.

“Look at us,” he said, placing a hand on Sumit's shoulder and then on mine. “We’re meeting after fifteen years. Let’s not ruin it in the first ten minutes.”

There was something about Vinay—always the peacemaker, the one who remembered birthdays, who stayed in touch when the rest of us drifted. If anyone had kept this broken circle from shattering completely, it was him.

Before anyone could reply, the café door creaked open again.

Ravi walked in, his presence filling the room like old sunlight through dusty windows. Tall and broad-shouldered, he still carried himself with the same easy confidence I remembered from our school days. His walk had a bounce to it—casual, unhurried—as if the years hadn’t managed to weigh him down at all.

As soon as he saw me, his face lit up. “There you are!” he said, smiling wide, eyes crinkling at the corners. He crossed the room in quick strides and pulled me into a firm, bone-cracking hug. “It’s been so many years... Where did you disappear?” His voice was warm and full of happiness, no hesitation, no hidden questions—just the joy of seeing an old friend again. I could feel that he meant it. For a moment, I smiled too. I felt the same. Around him, the room somehow felt lighter.

We all sat down again.

Later, as we rode back under the night sky, everything around us felt still... too still.

Then we saw it.

A huge crowd had gathered near the ruins. People were shouting. Murmuring. Their faces were pale. Eyes were wide.

“What’s going on there?” I asked.

Sumit squinted ahead. “I don’t know...”

“Let’s check.”

And just like that, the past was pulling us back again—back to where it all began.

We rushed towards the crowd, pushing our way forward. As we got closer, my breath caught in my throat.

The crowd parted slowly, whispers thick in the air. Someone sobbed. Others just stared, faces pale.

I stepped closer, heart pounding.

Then I saw her.

Swinging gently from the old banyan tree, her lifeless body twisted in the wind.

Her mouth was open, frozen mid-laugh.

And carved into the bark behind her, deep and jagged, was a single word—

"Nanu."

Whispers Beneath the Stones

We were all sitting at Sumit's café—me, Ravi, Vinay, and Sumit—talking about what happened last night.

“Has he come back?” Vinay asked, his voice barely above a whisper. His arms were crossed tightly, like he was holding in more than just cold. His usually calm eyes flickered—not with panic, but with something older, like a warning whispered from long ago.

“He never really left,” I replied, staring out the rain-smudged window. My fingers curled around the rim of the tea glass. The words felt like truth scraping its way out.

“What do you mean?” Sumit stepped forward. His hands twitched at his sides—caught between fists and questions. That restlessness in him was always a fuse, waiting.

“Since I came back to this village,” I said slowly, “I’ve felt something... off. Like whatever happened—whatever started—it’s still here. Unfinished.”

“What is it?” Ravi asked, leaning across the table. His voice was sharper than the others’, not in tone, but in clarity. He wasn’t afraid. He looked excited—like someone pressing their ear to a locked door, just to hear what scratches inside.

“That’s what we need to find out.”

“But how?” Sumit’s tone had an edge now. Rational. Defensive.

“We need to go back to the ruins,” I said.

Sumit's face changed instantly. "Are you *crazy*?" he exploded, stepping back like the words had struck him. His voice cracked at the edges, panic raw and sudden. "You *remember* what happened last time?"

"I do," I said quietly. "Exactly why I'm saying this."

He moved toward me, eyes wild. "What the hell do you want, Naman?" The name left his lips like it hurt. "So much already happened because of you..." His voice faltered, caught between fury and grief. "You shouldn't have come back."

"They were mine too," I said, softer now. "They meant something to me too."

Sumit turned away, his breath shuddering. "We were just kids..." His shoulders hunched, and the tremble in them said more than his words ever could. "We were all so damn *happy* once... and then your brother Nanu..." He couldn't finish. His voice dissolved into the silence, shoulders shaking.

Vinay moved to him quickly, placing a hand between Sumit's shoulder blades—firm, steady. "Breathe, bhai. Just breathe," he said, low and even. His voice didn't waver. It never did. Vinay had a way of making the world pause for a second longer.

Ravi stood beside me now, arms folded, expression unreadable. "If we're doing this," he said, gaze locked forward, "we do it *together*. No solo hero stuff this time." There was steel in his voice, but underneath, a smile tugged the corner of his mouth. He was always ready to step into the dark—just to flip the light on and say, "See?"

The café grew quiet. The fan spun overhead, but the air felt still. Dense. Like even the shadows were listening.

I looked at Sumit. His eyes were red—not just from emotion, but exhaustion. Not just from this moment, but from years of locking things up and throwing away the key.

“I still remember,” I said, my throat tightening, “how we used to wait for Nanu every summer. Red backpack. That crooked smile. He’d jump off the bus and just... *run* into the fields like a little cyclone.”

Ravi snorted, shaking his head. “And those cheap toffees—remember? The ones wrapped in plastic so loud you could hear ‘em from across the house. He’d say, ‘Only one each! These are rare!’” His grin was boyish, but his eyes were misty. That memory lived inside him like a treasure folded into a sock drawer.

Vinay’s gaze drifted, unfocused. “Those long cricket matches near the ruins,” he murmured. “We’d mark the boundary with old slippers. Score every run like we were in Eden Gardens.” His voice held a kind of reverence. He wasn’t just remembering—he was *re-seeing* it. Like the past had knocked once, then walked in.

Sumit exhaled, long and low. “We thought nothing bad could ever touch us,” he whispered. “Like the world would stay small and soft forever.” He looked down, jaw tight, as if speaking more might break something. “But then... it changed.”

I nodded, the silence stretching between us like a thread being pulled too tight. “After that one summer... everything changed.”

No one said anything after that. The room held our memories like old furniture—worn, quiet, and too heavy to move.

Nanu never had many friends of his own, but he never seemed to mind. He was happiest when he was with me. Whether it was wandering through the narrow village lanes, walking barefoot through the mustard fields, or quietly sitting beside me in school, he found joy in the simplest things—as long as I was there.

I never fully understood how much I meant to him... not until much later.

Fifteen years ago

Like every year, Nanu arrived at my house for the summer vacation, his excitement as boundless as ever. His arrival always brought a different energy to our home—his cheerful voice, his endless curiosity, and his stubbornness to follow me wherever I went.

When I reached home, a soft child's voice called out from behind. "Hello, Namo *bhaiya*!"

I turned around with a smile. I knew that voice. My younger brother had come to meet me—just like he did every summer.

"Hey Nanu, you finally came! I was really waiting for you."

He ran up and hugged me tightly. His energy hadn't changed one bit.

"*Bhaiya*," he said, pulling back and crossing his arms, pretending to be upset. "You went to Haridwar and didn't even take me!"

I laughed. "*Aa haan*, it was a sudden plan."

He smirked. "I know. I was just teasing you."

I ruffled his hair. “So now you’re going to tease your big brother, huh? But Nanu is my favorite. He comes here every summer—and this time, too, he’s back.”

Later that afternoon, we both went to Sumit’s café. Though the café was tucked away in a quiet corner of the village, it was unlike anything else around. With its chalkboard menu, fairy lights, and faint aroma of cinnamon and filter coffee, it felt like a little world apart. Locals came, travelers stumbled upon it, and for us, it had always been our favorite hangout—our shelter from the strange and the heavy

As soon as we stepped inside, the place lit up with laughter and greetings. Hey guys! See who’s here! Sumit called out. Everyone looked up—and in an instant, Nanu was surrounded. They all knew him well. For them, Nanu wasn’t just my cousin—he was like a younger brother to all of us. Vinay ruffled his hair. “*Oye chhotu, tu kitna lamba ho gaya hai!*” Ravi gave him a side hug. “*Bas ab tu bhi humare saath chai peeyega?*” Sumit pulled him into a bear hug. “Nanu is back! *Ab maza aayega!*” Nanu laughed, his eyes shining. He looked so happy—like he was exactly where he belonged.

We all sat together, ordered *chai*, and for a while, it felt like the weight of the years had lifted. The air was thick with laughter, teasing, and that familiar comfort only old friendships can bring.

Roma came late. The doorbell tinkled as she stepped in, her hair loose and slightly tangled by the wind. She wore a pale-yellow kurta—simple, almost faded—but she wore it like someone who never had to think twice about how she looked.

This was the first time I was seeing her since Haridwar. Since *that* trip. Since everything had paused between us, unfinished.

She looked at the group, her eyes scanning briefly, then settled on me. A small smile touched her lips, like she wasn't sure if she was allowed to smile wider.

She walked over slowly and sat beside me, leaving just enough space for breath but not enough for distance.

We didn't talk much. Just shared glances. And silence. But it wasn't uncomfortable. It felt like the beginning of something. Or maybe the return of something that had waited patiently.

The others were too busy joking with Vinay—laughing over some old story about his embarrassing college dance—to notice the quiet between us.

Roma leaned in slightly, her voice low. "You okay?"

I nodded. "I just... miss Haridwar."

Her smile deepened, but there was softness in it. Memory. Longing. "Me too."

For a moment, silence wrapped around us—heavy and charged.

"I liked sitting by the river with you," she said. Her eyes didn't meet mine.

I turned toward her. The same softness in her voice. The same quiet strength in her face. I liked being there with you," I said. "Not just because of the place... but because it was you."

And just like that, something began again. Not loudly. Not with promises. But in the space between *chai*, silence, and shared memory.

She looked down, a little smile playing on her lips. And that was it. No big confession. No dramatic moments. Just honesty. Just closeness.

By the time we finished our *chai*, the sun had dipped low. The sky had turned a soft, bleeding pink—like it had been painted with quiet hands too tired to rush.

One by one, everyone left. Ravi got a call from home, Vinay mumbled something about feeding his cows, and Sumit grumbled about fixing a bulb before darkness swallowed the yard.

I asked Ravi to drop Nanu home. I didn't explain—just said I'd stay back a little longer.

Only Roma and I remained.

We sat in the stillness, not speaking. The silence wasn't hollow—it was full, stretched gently between us like a thread. Not pulling. Just holding. Something real hovered there, fragile and patient.

“Want to walk?” I asked.

She didn't answer right away. She just tilted her head, looking up at the sky, like she was asking it instead of me. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

We took the old path behind Sumit's house—the one we used to race along as kids. It ran beside the open fields, and now it felt like it had been waiting too, dusted in memory.

The air smelled of fresh mud, evening dew, and the faint sweetness of drying hay. Crickets had begun their song, and the first fireflies blinked around us—tiny ghosts, flickering between past and present.

Our arms brushed once—then again. And then... her fingers found mine.

Not in a dramatic moment, not like in the movies. Just... found. And neither of us pulled away.

We kept walking like that—side by side, in step, in silence. Connected.

No words. Just our breaths. Just warmth.

As if love wasn't something we had to declare.

It was just there. Walking with us.

We passed the old fields where we used to fly kites as kids. The grass was taller now, but the wind still carried the same smell of earth and memories. We passed the banyan tree too—the one where we had carved our initials long ago. The bark had grown over the letters, but the mark was still there, faint but real. Like us.

Children ran past us, chasing marbles with sticks, their laughter echoing through the narrow lanes. Roma watched them and smiled—a quiet, soft smile. The kind that says she remembered what it felt like to run barefoot without worry.

We stopped at a small roadside vendor. He had a little wooden cart full of handmade bangles and colorful thread bracelets. Roma picked up a thin red one, rolling it gently between her fingers before tying it around her wrist.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

She looked at me, eyes calm but deep. “A reminder,” she said.

“Of?”

“That this moment happened.”

I didn’t ask anything more. I didn’t need to. Her words stayed with me long after she did.

When I reached home, Nanu had already fallen asleep. He might have waited for me... and dozed off.

“Where were you?” Mom asked quietly. “He was a little upset.”

“I was with my friends,” I replied. “Where else?”

“But Nanu said they all left... He mentioned there was a girl.”

I paused for a second, then glanced at Nanu. He was fast asleep, breathing softly.

“She’s Kapil’s cousin,” I said. “Kapil was just about to come.”

Mom looked at me, a little curious. “Where was she from?”

“Mom...” I let out a tired sigh.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing.”

I waved my hand in the air and walked away.

The sun hung low over the village sky, its golden rays falling like melted honey over the dusty ground where we had gathered, just like old times—for our traditional reunion match: cricket in the ruins.

The *khandar* stood behind us like a sleeping beast, its broken stone walls watching silently. Time had worn the place thin, but to us, it still felt sacred. This was *our* pitch, where memories had been built with chalk lines and laughter.

Vinay missed an easy catch, and the ball bounced off his foot.

“Out! That was clean out!” Ravi yelled, springing up like he’d won a World Cup final. Both arms shot skyward, chest puffed, voice ringing with theatrical outrage. “*Umpire, come on! This is unfair!*”

Sumit, unmoved, stood in his usual stance—arms crossed tight against his chest, one eyebrow raised like a parent watching toddlers fight over a toy. “*You guys need glasses,*” he said with a lopsided grin. “That ball didn’t even kiss his hand.”

“*Arre umpire, are you blind?*” Ravi wailed again, mock-offended but already cracking up. He kicked up a cloud of dust as he stomped around the pitch like a Bollywood hero cheated in a street match. His energy was pure combustion—fiery, fast, impossible to bottle.

Everyone burst out laughing.

Even Vinay, who was bent over with his hands on his knees, breathless from the chase and the moment. A smile broke through the lines of sweat on his face. He was tired—his body creaked now where it once flew—but he was still the first to show up, the one who held the mood together like stitching in an old kite.

“I swear the ball had oil on it,” he said between chuckles, tapping his own foot with mock suspicion. “Not my fault.”

Kapil swaggered up next, swinging the worn-out bat like it was a sword, his spine loose and angled like a kid born in back-

alley fights. “Get ready for a six over that arch,” he smirked, nodding toward the crumbling gateway near the old well. His voice always came with that dry, teasing lilt—like he knew things none of us would ever guess.

First ball. Wild swing.

Whiff.

His feet skidded in the dust and he landed flat on his back—limbs spread like a cartoon character mid-defeat.

The laughter was instant. Loud. Raw. Echoing through the ruins like a secret let loose.

Even Nanu, who had been quiet the entire game, let out a brief chuckle—barely more than a breath, but real. His eyes glinted for a second, and I caught it—that flicker of boyhood—that old mischief, like a match struck in the dark.

For that one golden afternoon, we weren’t stitched together by years of silence, heartbreak, or unspeakable nights. We were just boys again. Barefoot. Loud. Breathless from chasing rubber balls and louder laughter. Sweating under the village sun. Laughing like nothing had ever gone wrong. And for the first time in what felt like lifetimes... I felt *whole*.

As the sun slipped lower, we collapsed under the old banyan tree at the edge of the ruins. Our shirts clung to our backs, dust painted our elbows and knees. Our lungs ached—not from exhaustion, but from joy.

Kapil uncorked an old *Rooh Afza* bottle with a pop and handed it around like contraband. “Stolen from my mom’s stash,” he said proudly, eyes gleaming. “Vintage 2005.”

Vinay, lying on his side with one arm under his head, pointed toward a bushy thicket. “You guys remember the old well?” he

asked softly. “The one behind those shrubs? Where we used to dare each other to spit into it?”

Sumit chuckled, eyes closing briefly. “And that one-time Ravi fell halfway in?”

“*Bas karo yaar!*” Ravi groaned, pulling his cap down over his face. “I *still* get nightmares about that echo! Sounded like a well-laughed back.”

We all cracked up again, but it was different this time—softer—like the laughter had curled inward, hugging something tender inside.

Vinay stayed quiet, eyes scanning the canopy above us. “It’s still there,” he murmured. “The well. The echoes. Maybe they’ve been waiting all this time.”

No one replied. But no one dismissed it either. The laughter had faded, but its aftertaste still lingered in the stillness.

But Nanu didn’t laugh. He sat a little apart from us, right on the edge, back straight, spinning a dry twig between his fingers like he was somewhere else entirely.

I followed his gaze. He wasn’t looking at us. He was staring into the ruins—not like he feared them... but like he *belonged* to them. His expression was blank. Still. Unblinking. Like something in the shadows was whispering only to him.

Where Shadow Waits

The evening light stretched our shadows long across the ground, as if even they were listening.

Ravi was the first to break the silence as we walked along the dirt path toward Sumit's café. "Can I ask you something?" His voice was hesitant—almost too soft for someone usually so loud. He kicked at a stone on the path, hands buried deep in his hoodie pockets.

I glanced sideways. "Yeah?"

He didn't look at me. Just kept walking, shoulders slightly hunched, his usual swagger stripped to something quieter. "What really happened... between you, Kapil, and Roma?"

My steps faltered. Just slightly. The question had always been there—unspoken, hovering between us like a fraying thread none of us dared to pull.

I didn't answer. Couldn't.

They are both gone now. Kapil—buried beneath years we never revisited. Roma—no. Not buried. Just... lost. Somewhere I could no longer reach.

I said the only thing that felt safe.

"Nothing."

Sumit let out a sharp breath through his nose. He wasn't the kind to explode—but he didn't hide disappointment either.

“Do you think we’re fools?” he muttered, eyes fixed ahead but jaw tight. “We were all there, Naman. We *saw* how things changed.”

His voice wasn’t raised, but it struck hard—like a truth spoken too late. His arms were folded now, defensive, as if guarding some old wound he hadn’t let scab over.

“It wasn’t like that,” I said, too fast. “There was just... a misunderstanding. One that got cleared, eventually.”

Behind me, Vinay’s voice slipped in—low, grounding, like leaves brushing against stone. “Or maybe... that misunderstanding changed everything.”

We stopped walking. All of us. As if the words had cracked something in the road beneath us.

I swallowed hard, the evening air catching in my throat. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I’ve thought about it for years. But I still don’t know what we lost... or when.”

A silence hung between us—weighty, but not empty.

Ravi shifted his weight, scratched his head, and muttered, “Sometimes I wish we’d just fought it out back then. Punched each other, screamed, anything. At least it wouldn’t have turned into this... slow ache.”

Sumit stayed still, staring off into the trees. His voice, when it came, was hoarse. “Some things don’t get fixed. They just... get quiet.”

And Vinay—always the observer—looked at me, not with blame, but with something sadder. “Maybe that’s why we’re here now. Not to fix it. Just to stop pretending it didn’t happen.”

We just kept walking. Quiet again, each of us pulled back into our private storms.

But my mind... it had already drifted—back to the soft, sunlit days of that final summer.

When laughter had come easy.

When Roma's voice still carried songs across the fields.

When Kapil cracked jokes louder than he should have.

When love had just begun to take shape—

—and none of us had noticed the cracks forming beneath our feet.

Fifteen years ago

The village had gone still. Only the distant sound of insects and the wind brushing through leaves filled the air.

I stepped out onto the verandah, drawn by something I couldn't explain.

My breath caught for a second.

Roma was there, as beautiful and distant as a star. Standing under the neem tree, her face was lit by the moonlight, and her eyes were stuck on the stars, like she was waiting for an answer.

"You're not sleeping?" I asked.

She turned, surprised but calm. "Too many thoughts," she said softly.

"Want to walk?"

She nodded.

We walked through the narrow lanes of the village. Our footsteps were soft against the earth. The moon followed us, casting a silver glow over the world.

"I never had friends like this before," she said after a while. "Real ones—who see me."

"You're one of us now," I said gently. "You belong here."

She looked down, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sometimes I feel like I don't belong anywhere."

"You do. With us. With me," I said.

She stopped. Turned. "You make me feel like I can just be me. No pretending."

"You never have to pretend," I said.

A silence grew between us. Not awkward. More like the space between two hearts

Then she took my hand.

No words. Just her fingers slipping into mine, like they belonged there.

Later that afternoon, after our race and a hearty lunch, we decided to head to the orchards. The fields stretched wide, their golden hues shimmering under the summer sun. We climbed the trees, plucking ripe apples and wild berries, laughing as we tossed them at each other.

Nanu was with us too, sitting under a tree, his small hands filled with berries as he chewed happily.

"Hey, don't eat everything! Save some for us!" Sumit teased, ruffling Nanu's hair.

"I picked these myself!" Nanu protested, making a face.

Ravi and Sumit climbed higher into the trees, competing over who could pluck more fruit. Meanwhile, Kapil, Vinay, Nanu, and I sat under the shade, enjoying the cool breeze.

My laughter faded as my eyes met hers, standing a little apart, as she always did—quiet, graceful, unforgettable. Roma.

She stood just beyond the curve of the path where the trees thickened, half-hidden. Her hair was tied back in a loose braid, and sunlight filtered through the branches above her, dancing across her face.

She smiled when our eyes met.

I quietly got up, brushing the dust from my hands.

No one really noticed.

Ravi and Sumit were still shouting from the treetops. Vinay was teasing Nanu about berry stains on his shirt. Even Kapil was lost in his own world, lying back with his eyes closed.

Taking slow steps, I walked toward her—drawn by something quiet, something unspoken.

As I reached her, the voices and footsteps behind me faded, replaced by the hush of rustling grass and the soft rhythm of her breath.

We stood under the neem tree, wrapped in a silence that didn't feel empty—it felt like it had waited a long time to exist.

Then she spoke, softly, like testing the shape of the words before they left her lips. "I don't let people in easily," she said. "Not after... everything."

She didn't have to say more. I knew what she meant.

“I’m not here to ask for everything,” I said gently. “Just... don’t shut me out completely.”

She looked at me, eyes reflecting the soft twilight. There was no mystery in them—just warmth, and the ache of someone who’s had to be strong alone for too long.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“Of what?”

“That this—” she glanced between us. “It feels real. And real things don’t always last.”

I wanted to promise forever. But instead, I offered something truer.

“I can’t say what tomorrow brings. But right now... I’m here. For you.”

She leaned her head lightly against my shoulder. The fields stretched out quiet around us. Crickets sang. Somewhere far off, a cowbell rang.

And in that moment, I knew—I was falling for her. And maybe... just maybe, she was falling too.

But moments like that don’t stay hidden long. A whistle cut through the stillness.

“Wah bhai,” Sumit called, smirking. “Berries toh bahana tha... romance pakda gaya!” Vinay nudged Ravi with a grin. “Maine bola tha na—yeh dono kuch toh chhupa rahe the.” Ravi chuckled. “Bas, bas, in dono ko toh photo khichwane chahiye ab.”

Roma laughed, tucking her hair behind her ear, cheeks flushed. I tried to play it cool—but I could feel the heat rising up my neck.

Everyone was laughing... almost everyone.

I saw Kapil, standing a few feet back. His smile was careful. Controlled. But not his eyes. There was something in them—quiet, dark, unreadable. Before I could hold his gaze, he looked away, fixing his eyes on the dust at his feet. A small shift. A crack in the joy.

And for the first time, I wondered... ‘Had I missed something all those years ago?’

Later that evening, as the sun dipped lower and the group began to scatter—some heading back home, others lingering under the trees—I found Kapil standing alone near the edge of the orchard, his back to everyone, gazing out at the fading sky.

I walked over slowly. He didn’t turn when I reached him. For a few seconds, neither of us spoke. The silence between us wasn’t heavy, but it wasn’t light either.

“You okay?” I finally asked, my voice low.

He nodded, still not meeting my eyes. “Yeah. Just tired.”

I studied his face. The tightness around his jaw, the way his fingers fidgeted with a twig—it wasn’t just tiredness.

“You sure?”

He let out a small breath, then glanced at me. “You and Roma... It’s new?”

I paused. I wasn’t sure what to say. Not because I didn’t know how I felt, but because I wasn’t sure how he’d take it.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Maybe. Maybe not. It just... feels right.”

Kapil gave a faint nod, lips pressed together. "She's nice," he said after a beat. "You both looked... happy."

I wanted to thank him. Or say something to ease the awkwardness. But before I could, he added quietly: "She used to talk to me a lot, you know. Back then."

That hung in the air between us, soft but sharp.

I looked at him. "And now?"

Then he spoke, his voice low and oddly calm. "Now, I guess she talks to you."

His words hit me like cold water—I froze. His eyes didn't blink. They just stared straight into mine, unreadable... hollow.

Before I could ask what he meant, something else happened—something I saw coming.

"Why don't you stick to your own business for once, Naman?" he snapped, his voice louder than before. "You're always *there*, hovering around like some lost puppy. Just because she talks to you doesn't mean you're special."

I frowned, caught off guard. "Kapil, what the hell are you talking about?" I said, trying to keep my voice calm.

Kapil looked at me, eyes burning. "Don't act clueless. You think she likes you, huh? You think you're a nice guy now? The quiet one who suddenly means something?" He scoffed bitterly. "You're just playing the part, Naman. Like always."

I stepped forward, lowering my tone. "Kapil... enough. Don't do this. You're angry—but not at me. Don't say things you'll regret."

But Nanu... he didn't take it lightly. His expression changed—just for a moment. Something dark flickered across his face.

And then, without warning, he bent down, picked up a jagged stone from the ground, and hurled it at Kapil with terrifying force. The stone hit Kapil squarely on the arm. Crack. The sound echoed in the air like a warning shot.

Kapil cried out, stumbling back as he clutched his arm. A thin trail of blood trickled down, staining his sleeve.

We all froze.

I looked at Nanu—his chest rising and falling, eyes still wide, but now... blank. No regret. No anger. Nothing.

My breath caught. Anger flared inside me. I had never, ever raised my hand against Nanu, no matter how angry I got. But this time... this time, I was furious.

"Nanu!" I snapped, my voice harsher than I intended. "What the hell was that?!"

Nanu's eyes widened, fear flickering across his face. He looked at me, then at Kapil, as if suddenly realising what he had done.

I didn't waste a second. Ignoring his whimpering protests, I took Kapil straight to my father. He cleaned the wound carefully, wrapping it in a cloth while shaking his head in disappointment.

That evening, my mom and father were beyond furious.

"He's going home," my father declared, his voice cold and final. "Tomorrow morning."

"But—" I tried to argue, but my mom cut me off.

"No, I. He can't stay after something like this. This is unacceptable."

Nanu sat in the corner, silent, his eyes red and watery.

For the first time, the summer didn't feel warm and cheerful. It felt heavy. Suffocating.

And I knew then—something had changed in Nanu. Something I couldn't understand. Something... I should have paid attention to.

"I'm sorry, *Bua ji*... I won't do it again," Nanu sobbed, his small frame trembling with fear and guilt.

I couldn't bear to see him cry. I begged my mom, "Please, just this once. Forgive him. I promise he won't do it again. I'll take responsibility."

She hesitated for a moment, then sighed. "Alright, Namo. Since you're vouching for him, I'll let it go this time. But listen carefully—if he makes another mistake, he won't stay here anymore. And both of you need to go to Kapil's house right now and apologise—not just to him, but to his parents as well."

Holding Nanu's hand, I took him to Kapil's house, just as I had promised my mom. Nanu lowered his head and said sorry to Kapil. Kapil was smart and also my best friend. He knew what Nanu was like, so he forgave him immediately. But his parents were still upset.

Kapil's father looked at me angrily and said, "Look, Namo, we are letting this go because he is your brother. But next time, we won't ignore it."

Kapil's mother, however, was calm. She simply said, "Children shouldn't fight like this. You are all our kids."

Nanu said "sorry" again, this time more seriously. Seeing that, I felt relieved. He had realised his mistake.

Then, Kapil took us both outside, and we all walked back to my house together. Later that evening, we sat down and enjoyed a game of Ludo, just like always.

That night, Nanu couldn't sleep. I noticed him staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. "What's wrong? What are you thinking about? Can't sleep?" I asked.

I wasn't feeling sleepy either. After everything that had happened today, I thought maybe talking would help.

"No, *bhai*," he said softly. He always called me '*bhai*' with that same quiet love. It was the only name he ever wanted to use for me.

Then, after a pause, he added, "Kapil was shouting at you too much today. I didn't like it, Namu."

His voice had shifted—serious now. Watchful.

I sighed. "I know. But that doesn't mean you should've thrown a stone at him. He's a good friend."

Nanu sat up on the bed, looking straight at me. "I don't know why," he said slowly, "but whenever someone talks to you like that, I feel... angry. Like really angry. I feel like hurting them."

I frowned. "I saw that today. But listen—what happened was between Kapil and me. He's my friend. I wanted him to understand, not get hurt."

Nanu's fingers curled into the bedsheet. His breath slowed. His face grew still—too still. Not like a child sulking. More like something brewing just under the surface.

"People like that..." he whispered, more to himself than to me. "People who make you feel small... they should be crushed."

A chill crept up my neck. “What are you saying, Nanu?” I said, followed by a short, nervous laugh, hoping he might snap out of it.

He turned toward me, his wide eyes shining faintly in the dim room. “I don’t like it when people hurt you, *bhai*. I don’t just want to scare them. I want them to stop existing.”

The room felt suddenly colder. His words didn’t sound like a child’s anymore. They sounded like a storm bottled up too long.

“Enough,” I said sharply, my voice low but firm. “Don’t say things like that. Just go to sleep.”

But even as I turned away, I could feel his eyes on me, still, intense, like he wasn’t just looking at me, but through me.

And in that silence, a thought rose up, uninvited: *He only has me. Maybe that’s the problem.*

The Remnants of a Secret

As soon as I reached home, my mind was restless. The horrifying sight of the old woman's body hanging from the tree kept flashing before my eyes. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake off that terrifying image.

Just a while ago, I had been smiling, remembering the old days, those moments of laughter, friendship, and simple joy. For a brief time, it felt like I had gone back to a safer, warmer place.

But then... everything shifted.

My thoughts were suddenly pulled toward the ruins. *Like something was calling me. Like the place itself had something to say—something it had been holding back for years.*

And no matter how much I wanted to ignore it, *I couldn't.*

I felt a cold shiver crawl down my spine, the whisper in the silence—it wouldn't let me look away.

"Come, son, have some dinner," Nagendra Uncle said warmly as soon as I stepped inside. His voice was calm, but I wasn't in the right state of mind to respond with the same warmth.

"I'm not hungry, Uncle. You eat," I replied, barely able to focus on anything except what I had just witnessed. My mind felt cluttered, tangled in confusion and fear.

Without another word, I walked straight to my room, threw myself onto the bed, and stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. My heartbeat was still fast, my hands slightly trembling. I sat

up, went to the bathroom, and splashed cold water on my face, hoping it would clear my head.

As I splashed cold water on my face, a chill ran down my spine. Something felt off. The air around me grew dense, suffocating.

I slowly lifted my head, eyes locking onto the mirror.

My reflection wasn't alone.

Behind me, a frail, decayed figure stood—her skin sagging like melted wax, her eyes hollow voids filled with something far worse than death. A guttural croak rasped from her throat, her lips trembling as if trying to form words.

Then, with inhuman speed, her skeletal fingers lunged toward my throat. The pressure was unbearable, her grip tightening like iron chains. My lungs burned, my vision darkened. I clawed at her hands, but they felt as solid as stone.

Just as my strength was fading, a metallic *click* echoed in the room. The locket around my neck snapped open.

The moment the old woman's eyes landed on the small photograph inside—Nanu's photograph—her entire body convulsed. A screech ripped through the air, sharp and deafening. Her grip loosened instantly as if some invisible force had repelled her.

I stumbled backward, gasping for air. But before I could regain my senses, she was gone. As if she had never been there at all.

Nagendra Uncle heard the commotion and rushed towards me. "What happened, I? What's wrong?" he asked, his face filled with concern.

I could barely speak between my heavy breaths. I pointed towards the bathroom, unable to form words.

Nagendra Uncle hurried to the bathroom. Moments later, he came back, looking confused. "There's nothing in there, son."

"She was here! That old woman! She tried to strangle me, but when she saw Nanu's photo, she let go!" My voice was shaky, my heart still racing.

Nagendra Uncle examined my neck, searching for any bruises or marks, but there was nothing. "There's no sign of anything on your neck. And the bathroom is empty." He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Maybe it was just a bad dream, I. You're exhausted. Try to rest."

I nodded weakly, though I knew what I had seen was real.

I sat on the edge of my bed, my mind spinning with questions. Nothing made sense anymore. I looked around the room, hoping for some kind of answer—anything that could help me understand what was happening.

I needed to get out. To breathe. To be around the only people who still felt real.

Later that evening, we were all sitting together at Sumit's café—me, Ravi, Vinay, and Sumit.

The smell of chai mixed with the warm, golden light of the setting sun as it poured through the open windows. The old wooden fan creaked overhead, spinning lazily, just like it did when we were kids.

It felt strange... familiar, yet distant. Like we'd stepped into an old photograph.

We sat in silence for a while, sipping our tea. It wasn't awkward—it was heavy. The kind of silence that holds memories, unspoken thoughts.

I looked around at their faces. A few lines here and there, a little less shine in the eyes—but still the same boys I had grown up with.

“You remember how we used to mess around here?” I said, my voice soft, as if louder words might break the mood. “The pranks, those insane bike rides, late-night escapes, stupid dares...”

Sumit smiled, setting his cup down gently. “*Haan... wo bhi kya din the.*” His voice carried warmth, but also a distance, like he was guarding something behind that smile.

We all chuckled. Even Ravi—usually the loudest in any room—just gave a small laugh, looking down into his cup like it held some old secret.

I leaned back, eyes on the sky outside as it shifted to gold.

“We need to remember it all,” I murmured. “Before we go back to the ruins... we need to rewind everything. All of it.”

Vinay raised an eyebrow, half sceptical. “You serious about going back there, Naman?” His voice was sharp, as if trying to cut through nostalgia. Vinay was the practical one. Always scanning the ground before taking a step.

I didn't answer right away. My thoughts were somewhere else—deep in the past, buried in the soil of that place.

Then I nodded. Slowly.

Vinay sat up straighter, tension tightening his jaw. “I don’t think we should go back,” he said suddenly. “Whatever happened back then... maybe it was supposed to stay buried.”

Ravi nodded, his tone uncharacteristically quiet. “Yeah, bro. That place... it changes people.”

He leaned forward, tapping the edge of his glass like a nervous tic. “You saw what happened to Kapil. And Roma.” He didn’t joke this time. That alone told me how much it haunted him.

Sumit still hadn’t said anything. He stared into his cup, watching the tea swirl slowly.

He was always the quiet one—thoughtful, but hard to read. His silence said more than words ever could.

I exhaled, leaning in. Both hands on the table, voice low. “I wasn’t going to say anything yet... but something happened last night.” All three looked up. The air seemed to shift. “I saw her,” I said. “The old woman—the one hanging from the tree. She came to me. In the mirror.” Vinay’s expression hardened. Ravi stiffened. “She tried to choke me,” I continued. “I couldn’t breathe. I was dying. Then... something saved me. The locket I wear—it opened. She saw Nanu’s photo inside... and she vanished.”

Ravi blinked fast. “Wait... what?” He sounded more confused than scared, trying to logic his way out of what he’d just heard.

Vinay muttered, “That sounds like a nightmare, man...”

He rubbed his neck, avoiding eye contact. He didn’t believe me. Or maybe he didn’t *want* to believe me.

“It wasn’t,” I said sharply. “I *still* feel her hands around my throat.”

They fell silent again.

“It wasn’t,” I snapped, more from fear than anger. “It was real. I still feel her hands around my neck.”

I exhaled shakily, trying to hold the rising panic at bay. “And it wasn’t just an attack. It was a message. A warning. We didn’t end anything back then. We just... buried it. And now it’s clawing its way back.”

Sumit finally looked up. His eyes were glassy, unsure. “But Naman... What’s left to face? We saw how it ended. We lost people.” His voice faltered slightly. “We *paid* the price. Then we moved on.”

“No,” I said, firmer now. “That’s what we told ourselves. But something is still there. Waiting. Feeding off what we left behind.”

I looked at each of them—Vinay, arms crossed tightly, jaw clenched like he was trying to physically hold himself together; Ravi, tapping his foot rapidly, his eyes darting, refusing to settle, like he didn’t want to look anywhere too long; Sumit, sitting almost still, except for the tightening grip on his cup.

“You all feel it too, don’t you?” I said quietly. “The dreams. That feeling in your chest you can’t explain. The sense that... something’s watching you when you’re alone.”

They didn’t reply.

But I saw it—the flicker of recognition in their eyes, the fear they thought they’d buried, and the shared *knowing* none of them wanted to admit aloud.

“Please,” I said, softer now. “Don’t ignore this. Whatever is coming... It’s not over. We have to be ready.”

I let the words settle in the space between us.

“Only the ruins know what’s left. Until we go back there... we won’t understand any of it.”

Outside, the wind rustled the dry leaves. The ceiling fan creaked again, slow and tired. The room felt heavier now, like time itself had paused to listen in.

“Just rethink everything,” I whispered. “What exactly happened back then? What did we miss?”

There was still no answer.

But their silence had changed. Before, it was avoidance. Now, it was dreadful.

Sumit finally spoke, voice low. “I still hear his voice sometimes. Kapil. In dreams. Screaming. Then silence.”

Vinay shook his head, eyes narrowed, as if trying to shake something loose. “I used to think it was guilt. Maybe it still is. But it’s *always* the same dream. Same place.”

Ravi swallowed hard, then said, almost reluctantly, “There’s a shadow in my room at night. Stands near the window. Doesn’t move. Just watches.” He glanced up. “I told myself it was just in my head. But... it’s not going away.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t need to. I could feel it now—that silent bond of shared fear, resurfacing.

The wind outside picked up again, brushing against the windows like fingertips on glass. The past was listening. And maybe... it had been all along.

And just like that, my mind drifted back again.

We were just boys then.

And the ruins—they weren't haunted back then.

They were our kingdom.

But we never knew what *ruled* beneath.

Fifteen years ago

That morning, the village felt warmer... lighter, almost as if it was trying to hide what was already beginning to rot beneath the surface—as if even the air had softened after the trip. And we all found ourselves at the ruins again—the same crumbling mansion at the edge of the village that had always been wrapped in strange stories. The elders warned us to stay away, whispering tales of curses and spirits, but for us, it was our favorite spot growing up.

We used to sit out on the overgrown lawn in front, tossing jokes back and forth like old memories. It was always me, Vinay, Ravi, Sumit, and Kapil. But today, Kapil wasn't there. Instead, Nanu was.

That was the only difference... yet somehow, it made everything feel off.

We were in the middle of our usual game of basketball—well, what passed for basketball on the broken stone tiles of the mansion's courtyard. The hoop was just a rusted ring nailed to an old wooden beam, but it had seen years of laughter, competition, and childhood pride.

After a while, breathless and drenched in sweat, we collapsed on the grass, catching our breath.

“Man, why didn't Kapil show up today?” Sumit asked, trying to sound casual—but it didn't land. His voice had that

tightness again, the kind that creeps in when he's trying too hard not to care. He kicked a loose pebble with the side of his shoe, arms folded like always—a shield against whatever truth he didn't want to admit.

“How would I know?” I snapped—sharper than I meant to. The words came out jagged, like broken glass. The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was sharp. Immediate.

Sumit blinked. The casual mask slipped. “Whoa. Chill, bro,” he said slowly. “I was just asking.”

There was no anger in his voice. Just something softer—disappointment, maybe. Or concern, curling underneath like smoke. He wasn't used to seeing me like this. None of them were. And I hated that they were seeing the cracks, the hairline fractures I'd kept hidden.

Ravi stepped in, almost reflexively—like throwing a towel over a flame. “Maybe he had something to do,” he said, voice breezy, tossing an arm around my shoulder for a second before backing off. “Knowing Kapil, probably off charming some poor girl with that fake poetry of his.” He laughed—too quickly, too loudly.

It was vintage Ravi. Deflect the tension. Smother it with humour before it can grow teeth.

I exhaled hard, trying to push out the tightness in my chest. “Okay,” I muttered. “Let's just head out. We'll meet again at Sumit's café later.”

As we turned to leave, I caught Vinay watching me, quiet, unreadable. He hadn't said a word, but his eyes were moving, always moving—like he was scanning for something the rest of us hadn't noticed yet.

He didn't say anything then. He didn't need to.

Everyone began gathering their stuff, the mood still off-kilter, when I felt a small tug on my sleeve.

"*Bhaiya*," Nanu said softly, pointing to the crumbling staircase that vanished into the shadows above, "can I go upstairs?"

"No," I said instantly. Too fast. Too loud.

His eyes widened in surprise. "But why, *Bhaiya*? I just want to see—"

"I said no," I cut him off again. My voice came out louder, harsher—this time laced with fear more than anything else.

Nanu froze, his little shoulders stiff. The playful curiosity drained from his face. He looked more hurt than scolded, taking a tiny step back, fists clenched—not in rebellion, but in quiet confusion. That hit me harder than I expected.

I knelt beside him, my voice low and softening. "I'm sorry," I said, guilt bleeding through.

He looked down, murmuring, "It's okay, *Bhaiya*..." But his voice was small, and the shine in his eyes had dulled.

"I mean it," I said, locking eyes with him. "Listen... I know this place looks like an adventure. We used to think that too, remember? But it's changed. Or maybe... maybe it was always like this, and we just didn't see it."

He tilted his head, trying to understand. "Changed how?"

"There are things here I can't explain yet," I said quietly. "But upstairs... it's not safe. Not for you. Not even for us."

"But why not?"

“Because some places...” I paused, swallowing the dread in my throat, “some places stop being places. They become something else.”

Nanu didn’t reply. He didn’t fully understand. But he *felt* it. Kids always do.

A cold wind swept in through the broken windows. Dust stirred. And then—a faint creak, barely audible, from above. A sound that didn’t belong to any of us.

Nanu glanced up, then quickly looked away. He nodded slowly. But I knew that somewhere deep inside him, a question had taken root. And somewhere above us, in that hollow, broken floor... something had started listening.

Sumit’s café had become our usual spot again. By afternoon, the whole group had gathered there, one by one, like pieces of a puzzle slipping back into place.

Vinay was the first to show up, shouldering open the café door with a rustling paper bag in one hand and a grin that lit up the space before he spoke.

“Gentlemen,” he announced, holding the bag aloft like a rare trophy, “brace yourselves. Today’s flavor is nostalgia—with a side of indigestion.”

He flopped into his usual chair with the easy sprawl of someone who never needed permission to belong. Legs apart, arm hooked over the backrest, posture loose as if he’d been here all day. Vinay didn’t sit—he *settled*. Like this was home.

Ravi followed seconds later, storming in like a breeze that couldn’t decide which direction to blow. His shirt hung half-tucked, helmet dangling from one wrist, hair doing whatever it wanted.

“You brought food?” he asked, sniffing toward the bag like a bloodhound. “Nice. But don’t think I forgot—you still owe me *chai* from Haridwar, *yaad hai?* That hilltop stall, the one where I nearly died carrying your snacks.”

Vinay didn’t even look at him. He just tossed a napkin in his direction. “You bring that up like it’s some life-altering debt. Are you planning to sue me for emotional damage?”

Ravi caught the napkin mid-air with a smirk, flopped into a chair with a reckless swing of his legs, then tilted it back on two legs. His hands folded behind his head in exaggerated leisure, like a man sunbathing in the middle of a battlefield.

Their banter snapped back and forth, sharp and practiced. The kind of rhythm only time and too many shared memories could make. But even as the laughter settled into the walls of Sumit’s café, one chair remained stubbornly, visibly, empty—Kapil’s.

His absence sat with us like an extra guest—one no one invited but couldn’t ignore.

I tried to keep my voice even. “Anyone heard from Kapil?”

Sumit looked up from behind the counter, mid-pour. The stream of tea stuttered for a second. Barely a pause, but I caught it.

“No. Nothing today,” he said finally, drying his hands on a towel. His voice was calm, but something in his eyes flickered—like he knew more than he was saying, or didn’t trust what he felt.

“He’s been... off, lately. Quiet. Maybe he just needed space.”

Ravi didn’t buy it. He cracked his neck to the side like he was loosening tension from a fight no one else had seen. “Yeah,

or maybe he's out playing monk again," he muttered, still balanced on two chair legs. "Comes back with that smug grin and a new theory about the universe. 'Guys, I had a *vision*. I'm giving up carbs.'"

Normally, that would've earned a few chuckles. Today, no one laughed.

Even Vinay, who had just begun unwrapping the contents of the bag—old *samosas* from some ancient haunt—froze for a moment. Then quietly placed one on each plate, as if distributing silence.

Sumit placed the tea in front of me last. "He'll come," he said softly, more to himself than to us.

The conversation drifted. Food. Music. An old teacher we all hated. We tried. We reached for normalcy like kids poking a fire with sticks, hoping it would catch.

But every so often, someone's eyes flicked to the café door. Just a glance. Just in case.

But Kapil didn't come.

Then Roma walked in.

She moved forward cautiously, unsure if she should interrupt or join the conversation. Her hair was still damp, tied in a loose braid that hung over one shoulder, the ends curling slightly. She smelled faintly of sandalwood and something rain-like. Her eyes scanned the room, settled on me, and her lips lifted with a small smile.

She slid into the seat beside me, her movements quiet but certain—never rushed, never hesitant. Roma always had this way of making silence feel full, not awkward.

And just like that, the room changed.

We teased Sumit about the girl he'd had a crush on in tenth grade—the one who used to read poems aloud during lunch.

"I knew this would come up," he groaned, rolling his eyes, but there was a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Ravi reenacted the prank from our trip to the river—the one where we tricked him into thinking his phone had fallen in. He threw his hands in the air dramatically. "You all are lucky I didn't drown from heartbreak."

Vinay was doubled over, struggling to breathe between laughs. "You were crying, man. Real tears!"

Phones came out. Memories, too. We scrolled through old photos from Haridwar. Roma showed a picture of me half-asleep on the bus, mouth open, eyes closed, head tilted awkwardly.

"Delete that," I said, lunging for her phone.

"No chance," she smirked. "This is evidence. You snore."

The café filled with laughter—real, unguarded, familiar. For a moment, the world outside didn't exist.

We weren't haunted boys or broken men. We were just us. It felt whole.

But in the corner of my eye, I still saw it. That empty chair. And it kept feeling heavier.

As the sun dipped behind the trees and painted the sky in pink and orange, we clicked photos, made promises we might not keep, and laughed until our eyes were wet.

For a while, we forgot the darkness waiting in the corners of our lives.

But later, just as I was about to head to bed, something caught my eye.

From my window, I saw a figure walking toward the ruins. Slowly. Silently. Holding something in their hand.

My heart tightened. *Alone. Who is... heading back to the Ruins.*

And this time, the shadows didn't seem like they would let him return.

Then I realised Nanu wasn't there. I asked my mother if she'd seen him. She looked confused and said, "He said he was going to see you. That was almost an hour ago."

My heart dropped. I checked every room in the house again, but he wasn't there.

Something cold brushed down my spine. Without wasting another second, I ran out the door, through the darkening village streets.

There was only one place I could think of. The ruins.

Maybe he had gone back there. And maybe... he wasn't alone.

The moment I reached Kapil's house, I jumped off my cycle and banged on the door. "Kapil!" I called out, urgency clear in my voice.

Kapil came out, frowning. "What happened? Why do you look so tense?"

"Nanu is missing," I said, trying to catch my breath.

Kapil's eyes widened. "Wait, what? Where did you last see him?"

I clenched my jaw. "At my house, obviously! Where else?" My irritation slipped into my tone.

Kapil raised an eyebrow. "I mean, when was the last time you saw him? And where exactly was he?"

I exhaled sharply. "Last night, in our room. I scolded him pretty badly, and then I left. This morning, he's gone."

Kapil gave me a look of disapproval. "Why did you scold him? He's just a kid, Namo. You need to handle him with care."

I ran a hand through my hair, frustrated. "Look, I don't have time for this right now. Are you going to help me find him or not?"

Kapil sighed. "Fine, let's go," he said, quickly informing his mother before stepping outside.

As we walked, I hesitated before asking, "He hit you yesterday. Why are you helping me look for him?"

Kapil gave me a small smile. "Because he's your younger brother. And honestly, he's sweet. He loves you, Namo. That's why he acted out yesterday. For me, he's like a little brother too. When he apologized, I forgave him immediately. I was never really angry at him."

Hearing that made my chest feel lighter. "Thanks," I muttered. Somehow, I felt a little relieved. But the worry about Nanu still lingered.

As we continued searching, we passed by the old ruins—the abandoned structure we always played in during our childhood. The moment we walked past it, Kapil suddenly stopped in his tracks.

"Namo," he whispered, nudging me. His eyes were fixed on something inside the ruins. I followed his gaze.

The ruins loomed ahead, their broken walls swallowing the morning light. A gust of wind whistled through the cracks, carrying an eerie stillness.

"Namo..." Kapil's voice was barely above a whisper. He grabbed my arm, his fingers tightening. "Look."

My breath caught in my throat.

In the farthest, darkest corner of the ruins—where no sunlight reached—sat Nanu.

He wasn't just sitting. He was *still*. Unnaturally still. His arms rested at his sides, his head slightly tilted downward, his face hidden beneath a curtain of unkempt hair.

But his lips... His lips were moving.

Muttering something.

"Nanu?" My voice was hesitant, almost afraid.

He didn't react.

I stepped closer, my heartbeat echoing in my ears. Kapil hesitated but followed.

"Nanu," I called again. This time, my voice cracked.

Slowly, ever so slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes—dark, hollow, unreadable—locked onto mine. And then... he smiled.

I swallowed hard as I took another hesitant step forward.

Nanu was still sitting there, in the cold embrace of the ruins, his body as motionless as a statue. The dim light barely

touched his face, but his lips... they remained curled in that same unsettling smile.

A shiver crawled down my spine. This wasn't normal. I had never seen him like this before.

My hands felt clammy, my pulse hammering against my temples. But despite the growing fear gnawing at me, I had to check if he was alright.

Cautiously, I crouched beside him, my fingers trembling as I reached out.

"Nanu?" My voice came out quieter than I intended.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. His skin felt ice-cold beneath my fingertips. He didn't flinch. Didn't move.

The eerie smile was still stretched across his face, his lips slightly parted as if frozen in time. His dark eyes bore into me, empty yet brimming with something unspoken—something deeply unsettling.

I forced myself to swallow the lump in my throat. "Are you okay?" I asked again, gripping his shoulder lightly.

Nothing. No reaction.

A creeping sense of unease tightened around my chest like an iron grip. I wasn't sure if it was the cold air or something far more sinister, but I suddenly felt like I shouldn't be here. Like I shouldn't be touching him.

"Nanu, where did you go?" I continued, trying to mask the growing fear in my voice.

Still, he remained silent. His lips parted just slightly, as if he were about to speak. But nothing came out. Not a whisper. Not even the sound of his breath.

The silence was suffocating.

I exhaled, forcing a weak smile. “Are you mad at me?” I asked, hoping—praying—that this was just some twisted way of showing anger. “Look, I know you’re upset, but I’m not angry with you, Nanu. Just come home, okay?”

Still nothing. His expression didn’t change, his eyes unblinking.

I turned to Kapil, hoping for some reassurance, but he only shook his head, just as confused as I was.

Kapil cleared his throat, stepping forward with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Come on, man, let’s not make this weird,” he said, extending his hand. “Whatever happened, forget it. It was my mistake. Shake hands, huh?”

For the first time since we found him, Nanu’s head moved. It was not a normal movement—it was slow, jerky—like a marionette being forced to mimic human motion.

And then, ever so slightly... his smile widened.

I felt my stomach drop.

His fingers twitched.

Kapil extended his hand further, urging Nanu to shake on it.

And then—Nanu moved.

Without warning, he grabbed Kapil’s hand.

For a brief moment, relief washed over us. Me and Kapil both let out a small, nervous laugh. Maybe this was it—maybe Nanu was finally coming back to normal.

But then... Nanu’s grip tightened.

Kapil's smile faded instantly as his fingers bent awkwardly under the pressure. I saw it happen in slow motion—the way Kapil's face twisted from confusion to discomfort, and then, finally, to sheer terror.

"Nanu—" Kapil stammered, trying to pull his hand away. But Nanu didn't let go.

His fingers clamped down harder.

Kapil winced. "H-hey, let go, man—"

Still, Nanu didn't move. He just kept staring at him—and that same eerie, frozen smile. His dark, unblinking eyes locked onto Kapil's face, as if studying him, as if waiting for something.

"Let go, Nanu!" I shouted, stepping forward. I grabbed Nanu's wrist, trying to pry his fingers off. But his grip was like iron. Kapil let out a sharp cry of pain. "Shit—I, do something—he's—he's crushing my hand!"

I pulled harder, but it was useless. Nanu wasn't even reacting. *His strength—where was this coming from?*

Kapil's breathing became ragged, his body trembling. His fingers were turning white. Panic flickered across his face, and for the first time in my life, I saw true fear in his eyes.

And then, suddenly—Nanu turned his head. His gaze shifted to me. Our eyes met, and a cold dread slithered down my spine. For a second, I forgot how to breathe.

Nanu's expression didn't change. That same unsettling smile. Those hollow, empty eyes.

And then—just as suddenly as he had grabbed him—he let go.

Kapil staggered backward, gasping, cradling his hand. His skin was red, his fingers trembling from the force of Nanu's grip.

Without thinking, I lunged at Nanu, grabbing him by the shoulders. "What the hell is wrong with you?!" I shouted, shaking him. "What do you want from us?! Just get lost! Stay away from me!"

Nanu didn't move. He just stood there, staring.

Something inside me snapped. I turned away, grabbing Kapil's arm. "Come on, we're leaving."

But just as we stepped away—a sound—soft at first, a whisper carried by the wind, and then—a sob—a choked, desperate cry. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

I turned back.

Nanu had crumpled to the ground, his body shaking as he sobbed into his hands. His voice broke with every word.

"You... you got mad at me," he whimpered, his shoulders trembling violently. "You left me. You hated me."

He lifted his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks, his lips quivering. His hands, now folded together in silent plea, shook as he begged.

"Please... please forgive me," he whispered, his voice breaking. "I... I didn't mean to... I just... I just don't want you to hate me..."

Kapil and I exchanged glances.

Just moments ago, Nanu had been terrifying—his presence suffocating, his strength inhuman. But now... now he was just a broken child, sobbing like a lost boy, desperate for reassurance.

Kapil hesitated before stepping forward. “Come on, man... let it go. He’s just a kid.”

I clenched my jaw, my fists still trembling. “Did you even see what he just did?!”

Kapil sighed. “Yeah, I saw it. But look at him now. He knows he messed up. He didn’t mean it.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the look on Kapil’s face stopped me. I turned back to Nanu. His head hung low, his hands still trembling. Something about the way he sat there—defeated, broken—made my anger falter.

I exhaled sharply. “Fine,” I muttered. “Let’s go.”

Nanu’s head shot up, his tear-streaked face filled with childlike hope. “Really?” His voice was small, fragile.

I looked away. “Yeah. Just... don’t do that again.”

Nanu wiped his tears, nodding eagerly. “I won’t! I won’t! I promise!”

Kapil patted his shoulder. “Alright, let’s go home.”

For the first time, Nanu smiled—not the eerie, unsettling grin from before, but something softer.

But as we turned to leave, I caught something in the corner of my eye. A flicker. A movement too quick to register. And then— That smile. His smile wasn’t reassuring. It was hollow. Stretched too wide. The kind of smile that didn’t reach the eyes. The kind of smile you remember from a nightmare but can never explain. That same twisted, unnatural smile curling back onto Nanu’s face as he followed us home. A chill ran through me.

We walked back in silence. I stayed a few steps behind, watching his shadow move under the streetlights. My heart thudded heavy in my chest. Every part of me was screaming that something wasn't right.

When we reached home, my mother opened the door and looked at us with relief. "So, *you have arrived*," she said, glancing at Nanu, her voice soft and tired.

I didn't reply. I just nodded and led him straight to our room.

The moment the door closed behind us, I turned to him. "I told you not to go there," I said, my voice low but sharp with anger.

He said nothing. Just smiled. That same strange, unnatural smile.

"Are you even listening to me?" I snapped.

He looked at me for a long moment. Then said, in a soft voice, "Sorry." And smiled again. This time, the smile sent a chill through me.

It was too quiet in the room. Too still. As if even the walls were holding their breath.

I stared at him, trying to find the brother I knew—the one who used to laugh, joke, get scared of silly ghost stories. But I couldn't see him anymore. There was something else in his place now. Something pretending to be him.

"Nanu," I said, my voice firmer now, hiding the edge of fear, "If you ever do something like this again... I'll send you home. Do you understand?"

He didn't respond.

I didn't wait.

I turned and walked out of the room, not looking back. And behind me, as I closed the door, I heard it again—that soft, steady smile. Still there. Still watching.

I shut the door gently behind me. For a moment, I just stood in the hallway—hand still resting on the doorknob, heart pounding like it hadn’t slowed down since the ruins.

The house was quiet. Too quiet.

I could still feel Nanu’s smile behind the door. Not see it. Not hear it. But feel it. Like it had imprinted itself on the back of my mind, refusing to fade.

I walked toward the kitchen, trying to steady my breath. My mother was humming softly to herself as she chopped vegetables, unaware of the weight I was carrying in my chest.

“He didn’t say anything, did he?” she asked casually, not turning around.

I shook my head. “Just said sorry. That’s all.”

She paused for a second, her knife hovering over the cutting board. Then she nodded slowly, as if that answer was both expected and not enough.

“I’ll keep dinner ready soon. Go out if you want. You’ve been quiet since morning.”

I forced a smile. “Yeah. Maybe I will.”

I stepped outside.

I was scared. What I had seen today—Nanu’s face, his voice, his strange smile—I couldn’t understand any of it. It didn’t feel like him anymore. Something was wrong. Deeply wrong. And in that moment, only one thought kept coming back to me.

Only Roma can help me make sense of this. Only she can help me heal.

I had promised Roma that we'd meet, and after dropping Nanu home, I went to find her.

We walked together through the village, just the two of us. The sun was low, painting everything in warm orange light.

I used to come here as a kid," she said suddenly, pointing ahead to the old neem tree. Her voice was soft but steady. "With my mom. She'd sit right there and hum songs while I made castles in the dirt."

I smiled. "What kind of songs?"

"Old Lata Mangeshkar tunes. Sometimes bhajans. She didn't have a loud voice, but it... stayed with you. Like a comfort you didn't realize you needed."

I looked at her, seeing something both strong and fragile. "You sound like her."

She turned to me, surprised. "Really?"

"You do. There's a calm in you. A kind of quiet that feels like home."

She didn't answer for a while. Just looked ahead, toward the fields. "She died when I was twelve," she said finally. "Since then, it's just been me."

I didn't say anything. I just listened. That felt like the only right thing to do.

We reached the tree. She sat down beneath it, brushing off her kurta without much thought. I sat beside her.

The village lights were faint behind us, flickering like distant memories. We didn't need the world then. Just the sky above. The earth beneath us. And her hand, still gently holding mine, anchored in the moment. In me.

The Stillness Before the Shift

I walked slowly toward the old ruins. The air felt thicker here—heavier, like it remembered things we'd forgotten.

THWACK. A sharp crack rang out, like a tennis ball slamming against concrete.

Vinay groaned loud enough to spook a crow from a low branch. “Ugh! Missed again!” he barked, rubbing the back of his head. Then, without even looking, he flung the bat to the dirt—like it had betrayed him.

Nearby, Sumit and Ravi were catching their breath, sweat gluing their shirts to their backs—faces flushed, hearts thumping. They hadn't noticed me yet.

Vinay did.

He squinted, wiped his forehead with the bottom of his shirt, and shouted, “Abe oye! Where's Nanu? Weren't you bringing him?”

“No,” I said. The word slipped out too softly, like it didn't belong to me—like I was just the messenger for something darker.

My eyes drifted left. To the old stone steps carved into the ruins—where Nanu had stood last night. Unmoving. Unblinking. Like he'd been carved out of the same stone. The image clung to me—dry dust in the lungs, impossible to cough out.

Sumit stepped up beside me. Always careful with his movements, like approaching a scared animal.

“You okay?” he asked gently. Voice low, calm—but his eyes scanned me like a searchlight, cutting through lies.

I shook my head, barely. “Just... not feeling great.”

Ravi snorted. “Yeah, no kidding.” He chugged from his bottle, then stared at me over the rim. His dark eyes didn’t blink. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I inhaled slowly. “Nanu came here last night.”

Ravi’s hand froze mid-reach for the bat. His head lifted, slow and cautious. “Alone?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Kept insisting. Said he had to come.”

Sumit folded his arms, his brow knitting as if trying to balance logic and fear. “Did he say why?”

“No. I don’t think he even knew. It was like... something was pulling him here.”

Kapil had been lingering behind the group. Always quiet until necessary. He stepped forward now and placed a hand on my shoulder—steady, grounding.

“It’s not your fault, Naman,” he said. “He came to you because he trusts you. You’re the only one he really listens to.”

“I know,” I whispered. “I’ll keep him close now. I won’t let him wander again.”

But Ravi’s voice cut in—sharp as broken glass. “Then why the hell are you staring over there like he’s still standing there?”

I didn’t look away. I couldn’t. “That spot...” I murmured. “That’s where he stood. Last night. Just stood. Didn’t speak. Didn’t blink. He was just... watching me.”

Vinay’s tone shifted—quieter than usual. “And then?”

I turned to face them—my childhood friends—each of their faces more shadowed now. And I told them everything. About Nanu’s silence. His stillness.

How the wind didn’t touch him.

How his face showed nothing—not fear, not wonder. Not even recognition.

He had just... existed.

But I could *feel* his smile. Not see it. Not hear it. Just *feel* it—like winter breathing down the back of my neck.

We gathered behind the old temple. The lamp’s flickering light threw strange, twitching shadows across the walls. The wind whispered strange things. We lowered our voices instinctively, like we were trespassing.

Sumit leaned forward, elbows on knees. He was always composed, even when the world cracked around him.

“Naman... your brother isn’t normal anymore. You should send him back. Before it gets worse.”

I rubbed at my temple. Pressure started mounting behind my eyes. “He’s a kid, Sumit. Just a kid. Maybe we’re just... overthinking this. Maybe he’s disturbed. He’s been through things.”

Kapil finally spoke. His voice was calm, but there was a pulse underneath it. “We can’t keep putting it all on him. He didn’t ask for this. What happened... happened. We should forgive.”

Ravi barked a short laugh—mocking, edged. “Forgive what, exactly? Nobody’s told us *anything*. What the hell happened between you two?”

Silence.

I looked at Kapil. He avoided my gaze. His lips pressed tight, holding something back.

“It’s nothing,” he muttered. “Old. Stupid.”

“Cut the crap,” Ravi snapped. “You two have been off ever since we got here. Don’t lie to us.”

Then—“Kapil, Naman”—the voice cut through the night like silk across skin.

We turned.

Roma stood beneath the streetlamp. The light spilled around her like a halo. The wind stirred her hair gently. Her presence... quietened the world around her.

My breath caught. Everything—Nanu, the temple, even the others—faded. She was still Roma. Maybe more than before.

Her eyes met mine—and held.

Kapil stiffened beside me. He noticed the way I looked at her. He always did.

“I need to talk to both of you,” she said. Her voice was firm, but urgency flickered beneath. We followed her a few steps away.

Behind us, Sumit leaned toward Ravi. “What do you think this is about?”

Ravi smirked, tilting his bat like a sword. “Whatever happened yesterday... I’d bet my evening chai she’s right where the drama started.”

Roma turned to face us, arms crossed, tight—like she was holding herself together. “I know something happened between you two. And it’s about me.”

Kapil opened his mouth, but she raised a hand—graceful, commanding.

“Let me finish.” Her eyes were fierce. Kind, but fierce.

“I won’t be the reason you two stop being friends. You’re both important to me. And if this keeps going... I’ll walk away from both of you.”

Kapil’s voice was raw. “Roma, it’s not—”

“No, Kapil. I mean it.” Her voice sharpened. “Whatever this is—don’t let it rot everything. Promise me.”

He looked away, jaw clenched. Shoulders hard.

I didn’t speak.

I just stared at her.

That ache inside me was rising—love, guilt... something unnamed.

She didn’t wait. She turned and walked away.

And we stood there—two boys who had grown up side by side—now, strangers, miles apart.

The sun had barely dipped when we all ended up at the familiar spot behind Sumit’s café—an open shed with mismatched chairs, cracked tiles, and the ever-present smell of fried pakoras curling through the air like memory.

Sumit moved behind the counter like clockwork—efficient, focused, a quiet rhythm in motion. He called out orders to the cook without looking, wiped glasses without missing a beat, and still managed to throw us a smile every few minutes. The café wasn’t big—two tables inside, one bench outside, a bell above the door that always rang a half-second too late—

but it had roots. It belonged to him, and somehow, it belonged to all of us too.

Vinay burst in first, arms wide like he was returning to a stage. “God, I *missed* this smell. Someone marry me! Right here. Right now,” he boomed, sniffing dramatically.

Ravi snorted, sliding in beside him. “You’d ditch your own wedding for a *samosa*.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” Vinay grinned, grabbing a fistful of peanuts and tossing one into his mouth—and another straight at Ravi’s forehead.

Laughter rolled through the table. Easy. Familiar.

Sumit arrived with a tray, carefully lowering steaming *chai* cups and a bowl of *pakor*as, crisp and golden, the *chutney* already soaking into the paper lining. “Careful. These are hot,” he said, deadpan. “Unlike Vinay’s Tinder inbox.”

“That hurts,” Vinay clutched his chest like a tragic hero. “And it’s not *that* empty. There was someone last week.”

“A bot doesn’t count,” Sumit said without missing a beat.

I watched them. Listened. Roma sat beside me, her arm brushing mine once... twice... and then settling there. Neither of us moved away. A quiet weight lingered in the touch—soft, slow, patient. Like a conversation we hadn’t started but somehow understood.

Across from us, Ravi leaned forward, mouth half-full. “Okay, okay—next trip, hear me out. Rishikesh. Bungee jumping. River rafting. Full-on Bollywood montage. Wet clothes, flying hair, slow-motion screaming.”

Sumit arched an eyebrow. “You just want permission to scream like a child in public.”

“And what’s your excuse, philosopher? Planning to write poems about our bruises?”

“Someone has to record history while you lose your dignity,” Sumit replied coolly, sipping his *chai*.

Vinay clapped the table, cackling. “Only if Naman doesn’t elope with Roma and leave us all behind!”

My face flushed before I could stop it. I looked down, pretending to stir my *chai*. Idiot.

Roma didn’t laugh. She didn’t need to. Her hand brushed mine beneath the table. Intentional. Still. Her gaze met mine—soft, unreadable, and yet utterly direct. She didn’t tease. She didn’t flinch. Her eyes spoke quietly, but they said enough: *I see you*.

And then I caught it.

Kapil.

He was watching—no, not watching. Measuring. For a second, he smiled. Not with his mouth, but the kind of twitch at the edge of the lips that almost looked real. And then it was gone. His fingers tightened around his cup just slightly, the porcelain straining under his grip. His jaw shifted, once, like he was swallowing something bitter.

He looked away—pretended to be engrossed in his tea.

No one else noticed. But I did. Because I knew him. Kapil’s silences weren’t empty. They were heavy. He didn’t glance at Roma once after that. Didn’t speak for minutes. Just sat there—breathing too quietly. Existing too loudly.

Vinay was cracking another joke. Ravi was already arguing about who'd scream louder from a bungee cord.

But the air near Kapil was different. Still. Too still. Something was building there. He hadn't told me. Not yet. But he would. And when that day came, when the silence between us finally broke, it wouldn't be with words. It would be with the shift—because nothing stays still when love festers in the quiet.

The Eyes in the Shadows

The café's back alley wasn't meant for customers—just a crooked plastic table, a few chairs with missing screws, and the kind of silence that carried more weight than words. The morning sun slid lazily across broken tiles, not quite sure if it wanted to shine or hide.

Ravi leaned back on two legs of his chair, balancing like he always did—on edges, on impulse, on the brink of tipping over. He blew softly into his *chai*, eyes half-lost in the curl of steam, as if listening to something only he could hear.

Sumit sat stiffly, arms crossed over his chest, shoulders tense. He hadn't touched his tea. His eyes were fixed on a yellowed film poster peeling at the corners, but his focus was somewhere far beyond it. When he finally spoke, it was low. Controlled.

“Do you ever think... it started that night?”

He wasn't asking us. He was asking the room, the memory, the version of himself still stuck there.

Vinay lifted a brow, leaning back with his usual casual warmth, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. “Which night? The one where you puked on your own shoes, or when I tried to break into the temple and *actually* succeeded?”

He grinned faintly at his own joke. But it didn't land.

Sumit didn't smile. “The Ruins.”

The word landed sharp. The air shifted.

Ravi's chair thudded back onto four legs. "Kapil didn't suggest it," he said, tone clipped. "He *dared* us. Big difference."

I traced my finger around the rim of my glass. The condensation made it slick. "He'd been sitting on it for weeks. You could see it—he was waiting. Watching us. Looking for the right moment to push."

Sumit turned to me then. His stare was direct, searching. "But why that moment? Why *then*?"

Vinay tapped his spoon against his knee, slower this time. Thoughtful. "Maybe... maybe he believed something was in there. Something worth... waking."

He didn't say it like a joke this time. Not even close.

I watched the steam from my glass rise in lazy swirls—like ghosts without shape. "Or maybe it started before that night."

Sumit sat back. His hands now rested on his thighs, fingers splayed like he was grounding himself. "Because of Roma?"

"I don't know." The words came out rusted, like they'd lived in me too long. "She was part of it. But it wasn't just her. It was all of us. What we brought with us."

Vinay yawned and folded his arms behind his head, not dismissive, just... sifting. "So what happened right after? That same night?"

I looked up, blinking slowly. "Nanu came to my room. Said sorry like a child who'd knocked something off the shelf and couldn't explain how. For a moment, I believed him. But... something was already broken. You could feel it."

Sumit's voice dropped, softer now. "Something was off long before that. In all of us."

No one corrected him. The silence agreed for us.

Ravi, who had been drumming a restless rhythm against the table's edge, stilled. "What if it wasn't about the Ruins at all?" he asked, voice quieter than usual. "What if it was about what *it* knew?"

Sumit turned toward him sharply. A flicker of tension passed through his eyes. "What do you mean... what *it* knew?"

No one answered. Because the question wasn't absurd. It was already true.

Sumit let out a slow breath, as though releasing something he didn't want to name. "This didn't begin that night," he said finally. "It started before we even realized. Long before."

Vinay gave me a glance, brow creased—not in confusion, but a dawning memory. "You mean the Ruins—or that whole summer?"

"Both," Sumit murmured. "Especially the summer. Nanu's change. Kapil's silence. Roma showing up again. It was all... braided together."

Vinay leaned forward, elbows on his knees, eyes sharp now. "Wait. Was that the same evening Kapil first mentioned the Ruins?"

I nodded. "He brought it up like a joke. But it *wasn't*."

Ravi clicked his tongue. "So he knew. Or suspected. Or... needed something."

Sumit began tapping his thumb gently against his glass, a steady beat like a clock counting down to a thought he couldn't quite reach. "Why though? Why *then*? What changed?"

Nobody answered at first. The silence this time wasn't thick or haunted—it was just... honest. Like something sitting patiently between us, waiting its turn.

I looked at the table. My voice came low, quieter than I meant. “Maybe it wasn't what changed. Maybe it was who did it.”

That sentence hit different. Even Ravi—always leaning, always shifting—went still, head tilting slightly as if trying to hear something buried deeper beneath my words.

And for a moment, we all sat there, five people and a shared shadow, caught in the space where something had already begun long before we dared name it.

And with that, the morning slipped backward—into the slow, golden ache of that one summer none of us had really left.

Fifteen Years Ago

The laughter had just begun to fade, slipping into that warm silence only old friends could share. Sunlight filtered through the neem branches above, dappling the table with lazy patches of gold.

Sumit leaned forward, elbows pressed into the thin, slightly bowed plastic of the roadside table. He stirred his chai in lazy circles, but there was purpose behind the rhythm—like he needed movement to steady his thoughts. His eyes, always lit with that mischievous glint, danced over the group.

“So... what's the plan for the rest of the vacation?” he asked, grinning. “One idea each. No repeats, no vetoes.”

Ravi slapped both palms on the table, making the cups clink. “Camping by the river!” he declared. “We'll cook maggi on firewood, tell ghost stories, and maybe—just maybe—not get mauled by leopards this time.”

He grinned at Vinay with a mock warning. “But no running off like last time, okay?”

Vinay chuckled, leaning back with the easy calm of someone who had nothing to prove. He folded his arms behind his head, his voice smooth. “I didn’t run. I *guided* you away from falling face-first into the river.”

Then he tilted his head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “But here’s one—let’s bike to that creepy old guesthouse near the orchard road. You know the one. We always skip it. One night. No phones. No lights. Just stories and shadows.”

Roma, who’d been quietly watching the steam rise from her glass, gave a soft laugh. She tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, her smile gentle and distant.

“Honestly?” she said, her voice like slow water over stone. “Just one night under the stars. No madness. No noise. Just... quiet.”

The group stilled for a second, like her wish had cast a calm spell. Then they all turned to me. I opened my mouth—but didn’t speak. Kapil beat me to it. “We should go to the Ruins,” he said. His voice wasn’t loud. It didn’t need to be.

Everything paused. The leaves above us stopped rustling. The plastic spoon Vinay had been flicking was now still. Even Ravi’s grin faltered like a candle in the wind.

I turned toward him slowly. My fingers tightened around my glass without meaning to.

Kapil wasn’t smiling. His gaze wasn’t on any of us. It was aimed somewhere else—somewhere distant and dark. Like he was already walking through those crumbling halls in his mind.

Sumit gave a short, awkward laugh. “Wait... what? *That* Ruins? Near the old banyan trees? You’re serious?”

He scratched behind his ear and glanced around the table, looking for someone to join the laugh. No one did.

Ravi squinted at Kapil, leaning in. “*Bhai*, we swore we weren’t going back there. Remember? Weird scratches on the gate? Creepy humming sounds? You *freaked out*, man.”

Vinay added with a lopsided grin, “Wasn’t he the one who screamed when that owl flew out the broken window?” He nudged Kapil with his elbow—light, playful. Trying to soften the air. Kapil didn’t move. His face stayed still. He was calm in the wrong way.

“I remember,” he said. His voice didn’t waver. It didn’t smile. It didn’t ask.

Roma looked at him then. Her expression didn’t change much, but something in her eyes sharpened—like she was trying to read a language beneath his silence.

And I knew—she saw it too—there was something off in Kapil’s stillness. Like a mask worn too well. No cracks, no flickers—just clean emptiness, and behind that... pressure.

Sumit tried to course-correct, his voice rising with forced cheer. “Right, right. So we’ve got riverside madness, haunted guesthouses, peaceful stargazing, and... the Ruins. Good mix. After *chai*, let’s vote; winner plans the snacks.” He raised his glass in mock celebration.

Ravi grinned and shouted, “Cheers, *yaara*!” His glass clinked hard with Sumit’s. Vinay followed with a gentle clink of his own, glancing at Kapil before drinking. Roma didn’t lift her glass. Her fingers stayed wrapped around it.

And me? I couldn't stop watching Kapil.

His jaw was tight, like he was biting down on something he couldn't say. His eyes flicked to Roma for the briefest second—but not like he was seeking her approval. More like... checking her place in the story he had already written.

Then he looked away. "I think we should go," he said again. Softer. Final.

It wasn't a suggestion. It was a path already chosen. A match already lit. And suddenly, I wasn't wondering if we'd go to the Ruins. I was wondering if we ever had a choice.

That evening, as the sun melted into the horizon like a golden flame sinking into the earth, we found ourselves on the rooftop of Sumit's café. The old place stood above the sleepy hum of the village, its tiled roof weathered but familiar—like an elder who had seen too many summers and never complained.

The breeze moved slowly, brushing past the fields below, bringing with it the scent of wet earth and the faint sweetness of marigolds from the temple nearby. Somewhere in the distance, a cow bell clinked. The sky above us bled into orange, pink, and the softest shade of lavender—like someone had dipped a brush in memory and let it spill across the clouds.

Roma sat beside me on a thin, worn blanket we'd laid over the dusty rooftop floor. Her legs were tucked to one side, her hair untied and wild in the wind, catching light like it had its own story to tell. Between us sat a cone of roasted peanuts, wrapped in torn newspaper. Simple. Familiar. The kind of snack that didn't just fill time—it carried it.

We shelled them slowly, lazily. Sometimes her fingers brushed mine, sometimes the wind stole a peanut before we could eat it. She laughed when that happened. Not the kind of laugh meant for company. But the kind that spills out—unguarded and whole—as if even she had forgotten how light she could sound.

“You remember that day in Haridwar?” she asked suddenly, nudging me with her shoulder, her eyes lit with mischief. “When did we all get lost in the market?”

I smirked. “Lost? Or possessed by the smell of *jalebis* hot from the oil?”

She tossed a peanut shell at me, grinning wide. “You literally vanished for twenty minutes. Sumit was ready to announce an amber alert.”

I laughed. “That vendor made the best ones. The kind that sticks to your fingers and your soul.”

Her laughter grew again—open, rich, full of a girl who once stood on crowded *ghats*, who had shouted across streets lined with bangles and brass.

And for a moment, that version of us—the ones from Haridwar, unscarred and loud—felt like they were still close by. Maybe not lost. Maybe just sitting at the edge of the wind.

As twilight deepened and the village lights flickered on below, she turned toward me, her voice gentler now. “Thank you,” she said.

I looked at her, puzzled. “For what?”

“For making me feel... seen,” she said. “Even back then. When I didn’t know how to be.”

I didn't answer right away. I just looked at her—really looked. Not like someone noticing a friend, but like someone imprinting the moment into memory. Her eyes held something open and unguarded, like she had finally stopped hiding.

"You've always been seen, Roma," I said softly. "Even when you didn't know. Especially then."

She didn't reply. But her hand moved—closer, then brushing gently against mine.

We stayed like that, saying nothing more, as the last of the sun disappeared behind the trees and the stars quietly took their place

Later, as we walked back through narrow lanes lit by flickering bulbs and fireflies, silence walked beside us. Not an awkward silence—but one so full, it didn't need words.

We stood in front of her gate, moonlight soft between us. I could've walked away. But I didn't.

"Roma," I said, gently reaching out and touching her arm.

She looked up, her face aglow with the silver hush of moonlight.

"If you ever want to talk," I said, my voice barely holding the weight it carried, "or not talk... I'll be here."

There was a long pause.

She smiled—soft, almost shy. But it reached her eyes and lingered like the last warmth of a fire before sleep.

"I know," she whispered.

Then she slipped behind the gate, closed it softly behind her.

And I stood there, alone under the stars, the night holding its breath around me, wondering how something so quiet could feel so much like love.

When I reached home, I didn't speak to anyone. I walked straight to my room, my thoughts too full, too tangled to share. As I opened the door, I stopped.

Nanu was already there, sitting on the edge of my bed, swinging his legs slowly like a child waiting to be scolded. The light from the small lamp cast a soft glow on his face—he looked younger, softer. Not like the version I had seen in the ruins. Not like the boy twisted by shadows. Just... Nanu.

He looked up as I entered. I didn't say anything. Just turned away and began removing my jacket, hanging it neatly on the hook behind the door. My silence was loud.

His voice broke it gently. "Still upset, *bhaiya*?"

I paused. That voice—it was the old Nanu. The one I'd grown up with. Hesitant. Sweet. A little scared. I turned around and looked at him.

He was trying to hide it, but I saw the sadness in his eyes.

"You're not talking to me," he added, quieter now. "Why?"

"You know why," I replied, my voice low, edged.

He lowered his gaze.

"I'm sorry..."

I sighed, rubbing the back of my neck. "You said that before."

He looked up sharply.

“But what you did—” I stopped, shaking my head. “You can’t just keep doing things and expect sorry to fix them.”

There was a beat of silence. Then his voice, steady but pleading— “This time... it’s the last. I won’t go there again. I promise, bhaiya. I won’t do anything like that again.”

I looked at him for a long moment. He looked so small just then. So desperate to be believed.

Something inside me softened.

“Okay,” I said finally. “But make sure—next time, no more of those silly things. No more lies.”

His face lit up.

“*Pakka!*” he said, brightening instantly. “*Toh... kya main ab aapke saath chal sakta hoon?*”

The excitement in his voice reminded me of when we were kids and he’d beg to join me and the older boys. Before I could answer, he lunged forward and wrapped his arms around me in a hug.

I hugged him back—tightly.

For a moment, everything felt okay. But only for a moment.

The sun hadn’t fully warmed the village yet. A thin layer of fog still lingered above the fields as I walked to our usual tea stall. The smell of boiling chai and roasted peanuts drifted through the air like a quiet welcome.

Sumit was already there, hunched over his glass of tea, sleeves pushed up like he didn’t care about the cold. His eyes were

puffy, blinking slowly—like he hadn’t slept—or hadn’t wanted to. His knee bounced beneath the table, but he said nothing.

Vinay and Ravi arrived next, blowing into their palms, wrapped in clashing layers of sweaters and scarves like a couple of mismatched mountaineers.

“Cold like this should be illegal,” Ravi muttered, steam curling from his mouth like he was part train.

Vinay stomped his boots clean and rolled his shoulders. His helmet swung from his elbow like a forgotten limb. “Who said mornings were a good idea? I vote we go full nocturnal till March. Hibernate, emerge, chai, repeat.”

They slid into chairs across from Sumit and me, their usual orders barked at the sleepy stall vendor without missing a beat. Chai came, strong and fragrant. They warmed their hands on the glasses like they were clinging to life itself.

Then Kapil arrived.

And the warmth began to bleed out.

He looked... normal. In that way someone only does it when they’ve practiced it.

His jacket was unzipped just enough to look casual. Hands buried deep in his pockets. His hair looked like it had been slept on, then half-heartedly fixed in the mirror.

He gave the group a small smile, a polite upturn of lips—but his eyes didn’t follow. They weren’t with us. They scanned the area like he was checking for exits. Or watching for something the rest of us couldn’t see.

He didn’t look at Roma. Not once. And me? Not even a flicker of recognition.

Sumit stretched, trying to shake the chill from his shoulders, his voice light but strained. “Fair near the temple today, yeah? I heard there’s a giant wheel and a guy juggling fire while riding a cycle.”

“I’m in,” Ravi said through a yawn, already gulping his tea. “But only after food. Fire tricks require a fortified stomach.”

“*Chhole Kulche?*” Vinay offered with a grin. “Or do we go full *paratha* mode? Butter on butter, cholesterol be damned.”

Laughter bubbled up—easy and familiar.

Then Kapil spoke. And the air changed. “We should go to the *khandar* today,” he said. “And explore.”

The laughter died mid-breath.

Sumit’s hand froze, fingers wrapped halfway around his glass. “What?”

Kapil didn’t blink. “The same *khandar*. Near the banyan trees. Where we already meet. Morning, sometimes evening.”

Vinay shifted in his seat, frowning. His leg began its usual bounce—a nervous tell I’d seen since school. “We go to hang out. Joke around. Sit in the courtyard. No one goes *in*, Kapil. You know what’s said about that place.”

Kapil shrugged. It was too slow; too smooth. “We already go.”

“Yes,” I said quietly, but there was steel in my voice, “but we never go past the arch. Not inside. Not ever.”

He turned to me then. Just for a second. His eyes brushed mine like ice skimming skin. “Nanu did.”

The name hit the table like a dropped stone.

“And he’s fine,” Kapil said. “So, what’s the problem?”

He looked at each of us in turn, calm as someone reading lines from a book. There was no challenge in his tone—but something in his gaze scraped at the edges. He wasn't waiting for permission. He was waiting for *cracks*.

Roma, beside me, went still. Her hands folded in her lap. Her body leaned slightly away from Kapil without seeming to. A quiet pull of instinct. Her lips parted, but no words came. Her silence wasn't fear.

It was recognition.

Sumit leaned forward now, his fingers knitted tightly together on the table. His brow creased, concern clear in his voice. "Kapil... are you sure about this?"

Kapil offered a smile. But it was the wrong kind. The kind you give when there's nothing left to argue. "Don't you think the lies deserve to be tested? All the stories. All the warnings. Maybe it's just fear passed down like lullabies. Nanu is proof."

His words were measured, careful. But underneath, there was strain. Like a wall too smooth to be real.

And I realized—he wasn't really talking to us. He was *convincing* himself.

"I've never been more sure of anything," he added.

Ravi scratched his head, mouth twisting. "This is giving serious main character energy, bro. You know—first guy to say 'Let's split up' in a horror movie."

No one laughed. Even the stray dog barking near the gate had gone silent.

Vinay was watching Kapil now—not scared, but sensing something. Something deeper. His eyes narrowed like he

could hear a sound beneath the silence, a chord no one else picked up.

The temperature dropped. Or maybe it just felt that way. And though no one nodded, and no one gave a word of agreement—we all felt it. Not just in Kapil. But between all of us. The shift.

The *khandar* wasn't just a location anymore. It had become a question. A mirror. And Kapil had placed it between us like a map only he could read.

By the time our tea went cold in the glasses, no one had said yes. But no one said no either.

What We Woke Up

We met again in the afternoon. Backpacks slung over our shoulders like we were heading out for a picnic.

Kapil tried to joke. “Are we going on a picnic?”

Nobody laughed. But everyone understood what he meant. The tension rode just beneath the surface—like something we were all pretending not to feel.

Roma lingered near the back, eyes on the dirt path. She looked unsure. Her boots scuffed the gravel like she was stalling. But she came. Maybe because I did.

Sumit walked with short, hesitant steps, constantly glancing back at the road like he expected someone to call us back. His hands were jammed deep in his pockets, head tilted low like he was thinking too much.

Ravi tried to keep the mood light. “Hope the ghosts offer snacks,” he muttered. His grin was thin, performative. A layer of fear stitched behind the sarcasm.

Vinay carried a stick, his knuckles white around the grip. “For wild dogs,” he claimed earlier—but we knew better. He swung it at nothing once, just to feel less helpless.

Nanu had shown up too—quieter than I’d ever seen him. He walked beside me, steps even, but slower than usual. His mouth stayed shut, his eyes scanning the trees like he expected something to reach out.

Kapil didn’t ask. He just started walking. He led like he had something to finish.

The path twisted past the mango orchard. The tall grass brushed against our jeans, dry and whispering. Sunlight filtered through the canopy in golden shafts, but the light felt borrowed—like the sun was holding back.

The *khandar* waited just beyond the ridge.

It was no longer just a ruin from childhood; it was now something older, hungrier.

Roma hadn't said a word since we left the tea stall. But her fingers brushed mine once. Then again. And finally, they curled around my hand like vines growing slow but certain.

I held on. Not just to her—but to the last piece of calm I had left.

Kapil was ahead, his pace faster than ours. His back is straight. Like something was pulling him.

“Are we really doing this?” Sumit asked, voice barely above a whisper.

“Too late to turn back now,” Ravi muttered, his bravado slowly cracking.

“I hate this place,” Vinay said, quieter this time, his stick dragging through the dry earth.

Nanu's pace faltered when we passed the old stone where we used to bowl. His eyes lingered. Then he slowed. Like something inside him had turned cold.

We rounded the final bend.

And there it was.

The gate. Crooked and rusted. The pillars cracked like fractured bones. Vines twisted up the walls, not like they were growing—but like they were *clinging*. Desperate. Possessive.

We stopped.

All of us—except Kapil.

He walked ahead and pushed the gate open. It groaned like something alive—like something waking up.

“Come on,” he said. Calm. Too calm. His voice didn’t sound like it belonged to him anymore. It echoed—wooden and hollow.

Just left of the gate, something caught Sumit’s eye. “Wait—what is that?” he crouched.

A symbol. Carved into the stone. A spiral around an eye.

“This wasn’t here before,” he said.

Vinay leaned over, blinking. “I swear. I would’ve remembered that.”

Roma stepped closer, her fingers still laced with mine. Her brow furrowed. “It feels... wrong.”

Kapil dismissed it with a glance. “It’s just a mark. Stones crack. People carve things. Don’t get superstitious.”

But his eyes lingered. Just a second too long.

Ravi jabbed it with his stick. “Looks like something from those *tantrik* books. Curses. Dead goats. That kind of vibe.”

Vinay elbowed him. “Shut up.”

Roma's posture stiffened—not from fear, but from a quiet knowing. Like her body recognized something her brain hadn't caught up with.

Then Nanu spoke—soft, almost inaudible. “It's calling us.”

We all turned.

“What did you say?” I asked.

He blinked. “Huh? Nothing. I just... nothing.”

But the look in his eyes said otherwise. That far-off stare. The same one from years ago.

Kapil stepped through the gate. And like gravity, we followed. The air inside was colder. Heavier.

The Ruins breathed.

Wooden floors creaked beneath our weight. Cobwebs danced in the dim light. A broken chandelier turned slowly above us like it had never stopped.

Roma gripped my hand tighter.

Then came a knock. Soft. Measured. Once. Twice. Then nothing.

“Is someone else here?” Sumit whispered.

“Let's check the back room,” Kapil said.

No one wanted to—but none of us wanted to stay behind either.

The hallway narrowed. Walls sagged with moisture. Shadows twisted along the ceiling like they had lives of their own.

We reached the door. Its faded red paint looked like dried blood. The latch screeched as Kapil pushed it open.

Inside: A forgotten sitting room.

There stood chairs draped in yellowed sheets, a cracked fireplace, and dust so thick it seemed to float in chunks.

At the center was a table—dust-covered—except for one circle—clean—surrounded by faint nail marks—scratched deep into the wood.

Roma's breath caught. "I don't like this," she whispered.

Sumit crouched. "Wait... look at this."

Nanu stood by the door, ghost-pale, eyes hollow.

"Who's been here?" Vinay asked.

"No one," Kapil said. But his voice cracked halfway.

Then it happened.

Footsteps.

From above.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Silence.

"Please tell me that was a pigeon," Ravi whispered.

Then, there was the sound of—a giggle—a child's giggle. High-pitched. Hollow. Wrong.

Kapil looked at me. "We should go up."

I wanted to say no. But I nodded.

The stairs groaned with each step. Dust bloomed in the air. The hallway stretched into darkness.

"Stop," Nanu said suddenly. He was frozen in front of a door.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’ve been here,” he said. His voice trembled—not from memory. From fear.

We entered.

It was a child’s room—with torn wallpaper, toys snapped in half, and a rusted cot. The air smelled of mold and wet dreams.

The mirror was cracked down the center.

“I’ve dreamt of this room for years,” Nanu whispered. “But now... it feels like the dreams remember me too.”

Then came the humming. Low. Like a lullaby sung through teeth.

Kapil stepped out. Down the hallway—a door creaked open on its own.

Inside: Darkness.

But on the wall—a drawing. Stick figures.

One circled in red. Two X’s for eyes.

Below it: “He took her.”

“I think that’s enough for today,” Sumit said, backing away.

“Yes,” I agreed.

Everyone nodded.

Except Kapil.

And Nanu.

“Don’t you want to know what’s next?” Kapil asked.

Nanu said nothing.

Then came the wind—cold—slithering through the cracks. It carried the smell of something... ancient.

And then came—that laugh—again. It was clearer now—closer.

And a sound. *Thump... thump... thump...*

A ball rolled across the floorboards. Red. Familiar.

The ball.

The one we buried.

The one that shouldn't be here.

Nanu didn't blink. He walked to it. Picked it up. "This wasn't meant to come back," he said softly.

In his hand, it pulsed—like a living thing.

"Let's go," I said. My voice was firm.

No one argued.

We left in a hurry, our hearts racing.

The Ruins groaned behind us. Not angry. Just... awake.

Outside, the light had shifted. The sun had sunk. The air was colder. And even the village, usually buzzing, seemed to hold its breath—as if the day itself was afraid to stay any longer.

And then we saw him. Standing still at the edge of the narrow path, just past the old banyan tree—the priest. He shouldn't have been there.

We hadn't told anyone where we were going. Nobody could've known.

But he was waiting. Like he *knew*.

His face was serious. Not angry—something else. Maybe... disappointed. Maybe afraid. His voice was low, but strong. “*Yeh theek nahi hua,*” he said. “*Tum logon ne accha nahi kiya. Tumhe wahan nahi jaana chahiye tha.*”

None of us said a word.

Even Kapil, usually the first to talk back, just stood still, jaw tight.

Roma stayed close to me, her breath slow and heavy. She didn’t look up, just watched the dirt under her feet.

Sumit’s eyes darted between the priest and the ball in Nanu’s hand. He looked like he wanted to speak, but couldn’t find words.

Vinay shifted on his feet, arms crossed tightly, like trying to hug the fear away.

Ravi chewed on his lower lip, hands in his pockets, but he wasn’t joking anymore.

Nanu was frozen. Still holding the red ball. Fingers clenched around it like it might float away.

The priest stepped forward once, slow and steady. His eyes dropped to the ball—and something in his face changed. Like he recognized it. He whispered something, barely audible. Maybe a prayer. Maybe not.

Then he looked at me.

“*Woh jagah khamosh thi... band thi,*” he said.

“*Tumne usse jagaya hai.*”

“*Ab jo hoga, uske liye tayyar rehna.*”

He didn't wait. He turned and walked away. Not toward the temple. Not toward the village. He went down the old forest path. The path that nobody used anymore.

Somehow... *that* was the part that scared me the most.

His orange robes disappeared into the trees like a flame going out.

Silence pressed down on us.

Kapil was the first to speak. His voice was sharp—but there was a tremble in it. “What the hell was that?” he asked. “How did he know we were inside?”

No one answered.

Sumit hugged his own arms, rubbing them like he was cold. “He was waiting,” he said quietly. “Like... like he *knew* when we'd come out.”

Roma took a step closer to me, her voice a whisper. “Did you see his eyes?” she said. “It was like he was *seeing through* us.”

Kapil shook his head hard. “No. He's just trying to scare us. That's what priests do, right? Talk in riddles. Act like they know everything.”

But no one laughed. Not even Ravi.

Nanu still hadn't moved. The red ball sat in his hand, unmoving—but his knuckles were white around it. His lips moved. He was whispering something.

I walked to him slowly.

“Nanu?” I asked.

He looked up—slowly—like someone waking from a long, strange dream.

“We shouldn’t have gone in,” he said softly.

Kapil frowned. “But I was the one who said we should go—”

“I know,” I said, cutting him off.

But before I could say more, Nanu turned around. He was standing a little apart from us, near the edge of the clearing, looking toward the trees.

His shoulders were stiff.

And when he finally looked back at us—

—I felt my chest tighten.

Something in his eyes was... wrong.

Empty.

Like they were looking through us, not at us.

Like whatever made Nanu *Nanu* had been hollowed out.

Kapil stepped back without realizing it.

Sumit whispered, “Naman... what’s wrong with him?”

I didn’t answer.

Because the longer I looked at Nanu, the more I realized—

He hadn’t just seen something.

He had *brought something back* with him.

Whisper in the Ruins

The room had been quiet for a long time.

Outside, the wind rattled the half-shut window. Inside, we sat like statues, each trapped in our own corner of thought, haunted not just by what had happened—but what it *meant*.

It was Vinay who finally spoke. “We never should’ve gone back,” he said, staring at the floor like he saw something there we didn’t. His voice was low, dry like old leaves. “We were just kids when it happened. We didn’t get it then... and we still don’t.”

Sumit stood by the kitchen counter, arms locked across his chest like he was bracing for impact. His jaw clenched, but his eyes—his eyes were far off, pinned to a crack in the plaster like he was chasing a memory he didn’t want to catch.

“But we did see it,” he muttered. “That symbol. That... feeling.” He shifted his weight like he couldn’t stand still anymore. “It wasn’t just shadow or fear or some shared hallucination. It was *real*.”

By the window, Ravi sat sideways in the chair, arms slung over the backrest. He was the only one who hadn’t moved much. His foot tapped the floor, nervous energy bottled under sarcasm.

“It’s not just the symbol,” he said, voice softer than usual. “It’s that *presence*—like something’s still here. Right now. Like it’s... watching. From behind the door. Or the mirror. Or the dark.”

The sunlight slipping in through the window caught his face just right—and for a second, he looked older. Drawn. Like sleep had been a stranger for days.

Vinay leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands woven together. His voice dropped into something steady, which was calmer than the rest of us, but heavy.

“What if it never left?” he said. “What if it was always there—just waiting for us to come back?”

Sumit turned, suddenly. Fast. “No,” he snapped. “No. We *moved on*. We buried it. We forgot. We made new lives.”

Vinay looked up at him, kind but unshaken. His tone was gentle, but it hit like truth. “Forgetting doesn’t mean it’s gone,” he said. “Maybe it just means we gave it time to grow.

The silence that followed didn’t feel empty. It felt *watched*.

Ravi broke it with a quick breath, scratching the back of his head. “You guys remember how Nanu used to talk about the ruins?” His voice was almost too casual, like he didn’t want to spook himself. “Like it wasn’t just a broken-down house. But a *door*?”

I nodded slowly. My voice came out low. “And now it feels like that door never really closed.”

Vinay’s eyes darkened. “Maybe the priest was right...”

That pulled all eyes to him.

Sumit’s brows drew tight. “You *still* believe that guy?”

Vinay paused, looking at each of us, searching for something. “I don’t know what I believe anymore,” he said finally. “But he wasn’t just some crazy old man. He *knew* things. About the symbol. About the curse. About how...”

His voice dipped lower. “How one of us might be different.”

Ravi snorted—but it wasn’t real amusement. “Yeah, I remember. Said it all started when one of us touched that altar.” He rubbed his temple. “Said whatever was there... it got inside someone.”

I swallowed hard. “And that the worst part had already started.”

Sumit’s voice followed—not angry now, but tired. Scared. “We laughed at all that back then. Said that he was nuts—that we were just scared kids.”

Vinay’s gaze drifted toward the window, like he could see through the glass and into the past. “But now...” he said. “After today...”

The wind howled louder, pushing at the shutters until they groaned. Shadows moved across the floor like they were shifting with purpose.

Ravi sat up straighter. His voice dropped to almost a whisper. “He said if we didn’t stop it, it wouldn’t stop with us. That it’d spread.”

I looked at the door. It felt like something was just beyond it, *waiting*.

“Maybe it already has,” I said, and the words felt foreign in my own mouth. Like someone else had spoken through me.

There was silence again. But it wasn’t still. It *breathed*.

Sumit exhaled hard, rubbing his arms like he couldn’t get warm. “I don’t know if we can fix it,” he said. “But I know we can’t pretend it’s not real anymore.”

A long groan echoed from the walls as if the house itself had listened in—and agreed.

Vinay, almost too softly, whispered again, “We never should’ve gone back.”

This time, no one argued.

Fifteen years ago

Later that evening, after we came back from the ruins, we gathered in the back room of Sumit’s café. The lights were low—just one old lantern glowing weakly in the corner, its flame twitching like it was nervous too. The shadows it cast stretched tall and thin across the wooden walls, shivering with every gust of wind outside.

No one spoke.

Even the walk back had been wordless. Just the crunch of gravel, and Nanu’s silence dragging behind us like a second shadow.

Kapil sat slouched deep into the couch, elbows on his knees, arms crossed tight. The cocky edge that usually danced around his mouth was gone. His foot tapped the floor in quick, restless bursts—impatient, like he wanted to speak but didn’t trust himself to.

Sumit stood near the counter, back slightly hunched. He poured chai into chipped cups like he wasn’t aware he was doing it. His hands moved on autopilot—he just needed something to *do*. Anything to stop the thoughts from spinning.

“I still can’t believe that ball...” he said quietly, not looking at anyone. “It rolled uphill. Like it *chose* him.”

Roma sat beside me on the edge of the couch, her hands cradling a cup she hadn't touched. Her fingers were wrapped tight around it, like she was hoping the heat would calm something inside her. Her eyes were on the table, unmoving.

Then she turned slightly—toward me. “You saw Nanu, didn’t you?” she said, her voice soft, but sharp around the edges. “His face... his eyes?”

I didn’t answer right away. Just kept staring into the *chai* in my own cup. The lantern’s reflection danced in the tea, flickering like it was trying to warn me.

Kapil let out a short, forced laugh. It didn’t match the room.

“So what now? We triggered some ghost story?” He straightened slightly, tone a little louder, like he was trying to fill the silence with bravado. “The priest, Nanu zoning out—it’s nerves. That’s all.”

No one agreed.

Vinay, who had been quiet near the window, turned slightly toward Kapil. His expression was calm, but his eyes were searching—for what, I couldn’t tell. “Sometimes nerves know something the rest of us don’t,” he said. “Sometimes fear’s just your body remembering what your mind wants to forget.”

That shut Kapil up.

Roma leaned closer to me. Her voice lowered, but it didn’t shake. “He wasn’t himself. Something *changed* when that ball rolled toward him.”

I nodded. Just barely.

From across the room, Ravi paced. Arms folded, head down, like he was trying to shake something off. His usual jokes were nowhere to be found.

“This isn’t just a weird vibe anymore,” he said, finally stopping and facing us. “I’ve done dares, stayed in graveyards, climbed rooftops during storms—but that... back there? That was *wrong*. That wasn’t a thrill. That was something *else*.”

No one disagreed with him either.

The room settled into silence again—but it was a different kind now. Heavier. Like something had settled into the air and didn’t plan on leaving.

Roma shifted closer to me. Her knee brushed mine, and without thinking, I reached out. My fingers found hers—cold, tense—but she didn’t pull away.

She let them stay.

That quiet contact held more weight than any of us were ready to admit. It was a shared moment in the eye of something we didn’t understand. Something old. Watching.

I glanced at Kapil. Just for a second. He was staring at our hands.

He looked away fast, but not fast enough. His jaw clenched—subtle, but tight. His fingers drummed faster on his knee. Something flickered across his face—not fear, not confusion. Something else.

Jealousy? Or something darker?

Sumit’s voice broke the silence again. “We all felt it,” he said, his back still to us, shoulders stiff. “In that place. When the

wind stopped. When Nanu froze. It was like time *paused* for a second.”

Vinay stepped forward, picking up a cup but not drinking. “There are things that don’t care if we believe in them,” he said softly. “Things that wait.”

Kapil stood up suddenly. Too fast. “I need air,” he muttered, already heading toward the door.

Ravi raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, just don’t let the haunted playground bite you.”

But there was no humor in it.

The door creaked shut behind Kapil. The wind howled.

Inside, the silence returned. This time, it didn’t feel like it was ours.

The Next Morning

The sun rose slowly, hidden behind a pale curtain of fog that clung to the village like cobwebs.

Birds chirped—but even they sounded unsure, like they knew something was wrong.

I woke up with a start. The dream was already fading: cold fingers around my throat, a voice whispering my name... eyes, familiar but empty.

Roma was already awake. She sat outside the café on a wooden bench, her hair loose, her eyes fixed on the forest.

“I didn’t sleep much,” she said without turning.

“Me neither,” I replied, rubbing the sleep from my eyes.

We headed around to the back of the café.

Sumit was already there, crouched by the storeroom door, his hands fumbling with the lock. His fingers trembled slightly, but he wasn't shivering. His face looked tight, drawn, like he'd been carrying this weight alone for too long.

"You need to see this," he said without looking up.

The rear wall of the café was scorched. The symbol stretched across the brick, jagged and uneven—like it had been scrawled in desperation. The black marks weren't painted. They were *burned* into the surface, the edges curling like something had clawed at it.

Beneath it, a string of characters ran in a crooked line.

Not Hindi.

Not English.

Something else.

The letters curved and twisted, each shape leaking into the next, warping, shifting—almost *breathing*. The longer I looked, the less sense they made.

Kapil came around the corner, rubbing his eyes. "Why are we standing in the—"

Then he saw it.

His footsteps stopped cold. The grogginess in his face vanished, his posture tightening like a wire pulled too hard.

"What the hell is that?" he asked. His voice was flat, empty.

Sumit exhaled through his nose. "It wasn't here last night."

We stood there, silent. Watching.

The air was heavier now, pressing down, thick with something unsaid. The sunlight dimmed—not like a cloud had passed over, but like the light itself was being *drained*. The cold wasn't natural. It felt *wet*, like it had breath.

Roma stepped forward slowly, eyes scanning the symbol. She was the only one who wasn't rigid, but there was no curiosity in her face. Only quiet understanding.

"We need to go back to that priest," she said. Her voice was quiet, but it left no room for doubt.

"I agree," I said. My throat felt dry, like something had lodged itself there overnight. "We need answers."

Sumit gave a short nod.

Ravi and Vinay, who had just arrived, exchanged looks. Ravi's usual smirk was gone. His hands were stuffed into his pockets, fingers curled into fists. Vinay just sighed, rubbing the back of his neck—like he'd already accepted this was bigger than any of us.

Kapil folded his arms, shifting his weight. "What's he gonna do?" he muttered. "Chant a few *mantras* and send the monster back to sleep?"

Sumit's head snapped toward him. His voice came low and sharp. "Come if you want. Otherwise, shut up and get out of the way."

Kapil didn't answer.

But he didn't move either.

He just stood there, arms still locked across his chest, eyes fixed on the symbol.

He wasn't scared.

He was *watching*.

Like he was waiting for it to do something.

We left the café together.

The village should have been waking up by now. Sounds of sweeping, people calling to each other, scooters passing by.

But there was nothing.

No chatter.

No barking dogs.

Not even the temple bell.

The air felt *held*—like everything was waiting for something to pass.

The mist sat low, hugging the ground, barely moving. Even the sunlight, what little there was, felt weak, like it was *fighting* to break through.

Something about the morning was wrong.

And deep down, we all knew it hadn't even *begun* yet.

The village was strangely quiet. No people walking around. No voices. Even the dogs we passed stayed away from us, their ears low, tails tucked between their legs. One of them growled softly when we got too close, but it didn't bark—it just backed away and disappeared into the mist.

The trees seemed darker than usual. The wind was barely there, but we kept hearing faint sounds—like someone whispering just out of reach. Every now and then, I looked

behind me. I couldn't help it. It felt like something was following us.

No one talked as we walked. The silence between us grew heavier with every step.

And through it all, that symbol stayed in my mind—black and sharp, almost alive, like it had burned into the wall... and into us.

The walk to the priest's small hut felt longer than it should have. With every step, the air grew colder, the mist thicker, and the unease gnawing at my stomach only deepened.

When we finally reached the priest's hut, it was hidden at the edge of the village, surrounded by overgrown plants and tangled vines. The once-white walls were now streaked with age and grime, and a heavy silence hung in the air. The door creaked as we pushed it open, and a faint, musty smell of incense and old wood hit us.

The priest was sitting cross-legged on the floor, his back to the door. The room was dim, lit only by the flickering light of candles scattered around the room. His face was hidden in shadow, but I could feel his eyes on us, as if he knew we were coming.

He didn't move when we entered. Just sat there, still. Waiting.

Roma took a step forward, her voice trembling. "Priest... we need your help."

The priest didn't respond at first. Instead, he slowly reached for a small bowl in front of him, filled with some sort of powder, and began drawing something in the air with his fingers. As he did, a soft chant escaped his lips, too quiet for us to understand.

When he was done, he finally turned to us, his face still hidden by the shadows. His eyes were wide, unblinking, and full of something ancient—something old and terrifying.

“You’ve seen it,” he said, his voice a rasp. “The symbol. You’ve seen the mark.”

We nodded, a chill running down my spine.

“Then you understand,” he continued, standing up slowly. “You’ve disturbed something that should have stayed buried.”

He moved closer to us, and the air in the room seemed to grow heavier with each step. “The symbol you saw on the wall is not just a marking. It’s a warning. A mark of the cursed ones. Those who sought power in exchange for their souls.”

“What does that mean?” Sumit asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

The priest’s face twisted into a grimace. “It means you are not alone. It means what you’ve disturbed will not leave you in peace. And the worst part is—it’s already begun.”

We all froze. Kapil took a step back, his face pale. “What the hell does that mean?”

The priest reached into his robes and pulled out a small, tattered book. The pages were yellowed and fragile, but his hands moved with care as he opened it.

“The one who brought you here—the one who led you to the symbol—is already lost. It’s inside him now,” the priest said, looking at each of us in turn. Then his gaze landed on me, cold and unwavering. “And soon, it will be inside you.”

A heavy silence filled the room. My heart was pounding in my chest.

“Who... who is it?” I managed to ask. “Who’s behind this?”

The priest didn’t answer right away. He just stared at the book in his hands, tracing the words with his finger. Finally, he looked up, his eyes filled with sorrow.

I felt my blood run cold. The name that followed was the name I feared most.

“Nanu.”

I blinked hard, trying to anchor myself in the hum of Sumit’s café—the smell of coffee beans, the lazy spin of the ceiling fan, the faint clink of cups stacking somewhere behind the counter. It all looked normal. But inside, the priest’s words spun around my mind like a dark current I couldn’t get free of.

“I don’t trust that priest,” I said—too loud.

Kapil raised an eyebrow. He was sprawled in his chair, legs stretched out, arms draped carelessly over the armrests like he didn’t care. But his eyes? His eyes were locked onto me, sharp and alert.

“Oh?” he said. “And why’s that?”

I leaned in, trying to keep my voice even. “It’s Nanu, Kapil. He’s a kid. He’s lived here what—four years. Five? How can he be *connected* to something this old... this deep?”

Sumit didn’t look up. He was hunched over his *chai* like it was the only thing keeping him together. “He went to the Ruins, Naman. That day. Alone.”

“I know,” I said, shrugging too quickly. “But just a few days ago, he was sitting right here; laughing at Ravi’s dumb jokes; asking Roma about her sketchbook. He felt... normal.”

Sumit finally looked at me. His eyes were tired, distant, but clear. “He didn’t feel normal to me. That day, something about him was... hollow. Like the shell was here, but the soul wasn’t.”

There was silence. Even the ceiling fan seemed to slow. The cozy warmth of the café vanished. Shadows pooled in the corners. The kind that doesn't come from the light.

And in that hush, the priest’s words whispered again:

The one who is still here... with you.”

Kapil sat forward, slowly, eyes narrowing like something had just clicked. “I think we should go back.”

The table froze.

Vinay straightened in his seat. Calm, quiet Vinay, always listening more than he spoke. “You mean... the Ruins?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

Kapil nodded once. “Yeah. We need to know what we’re dealing with.”

His voice was low, serious—none of the usual edge or lazy sarcasm. The under-eyes told a story too. He hadn’t slept. He’d *been* thinking about this. Probably all night.

I studied with him. “What exactly do you expect to find? Nanu’s gone... or he’s not. Are we chasing him? Or something that *used* to be him?”

Kapil met my eyes. Unblinking. “We owe him that much. He was our brother. If there’s *even a chance* something of him’s still in there—we don’t leave him behind.”

Across the table, Ravi curled tighter on the bench, knees pulled up, hoodie half over his face. “Or we find something we’re not ready for.”

Kapil didn’t hesitate. “Then at least we *know*. Instead of sitting around pretending we’re safe.”

Sumit looked up again. There was something painful behind his eyes—like he hated what he was about to do. Still, he reached into his bag, pulled out a small flashlight, and placed it in the middle of the table.

He didn’t say a word.

That was his ‘yes’.

Ravi groaned, dragging both hands down his face. “I swear, I woke up sweating. I *dream* about that place. I feel like something’s watching me whenever I think about it.”

Vinay stood slowly. His movements were calm, deliberate—like a teacher standing to quiet a rowdy class. “That’s the point,” he said. “We can’t keep pretending it’s behind us. It isn’t.”

His fists were clenched at his sides. Quiet fear. But firm.

I swallowed, the air in my lungs feeling thin. I kept seeing flashes—

Nanu’s grin.

That blood-red ball.

The whisper that hadn’t come from anyone’s mouth.

The priest's voice: *Still here... with you.*

I stood, slowly, my chair scraping the floor like a warning bell.

"Alright," I said. "We'll go."

They all looked at me. Waiting for the catch.

"But we stay together. No wandering off. No dares. No brave solo missions."

I glanced toward Ravi when I said that. He raised his hands like *hey, not this time.*

"Agreed?" I asked.

Kapil gave a single nod. His face was unreadable—but his knuckles were white where his hands gripped the chair.

Sumit clipped the flashlight to his bag, silent.

Ravi got up, muttering, "God, I *hate* this," but didn't sit back down.

Vinay was already by the door.

We stepped out into the cold morning air.

The world outside still felt wrong. Too quiet. Too still.

We were going back.

Not to look for answers.

But to face whatever was waiting.

The sun was dipping low behind the trees. The light was gold—but cold. The village was quiet. Too quiet. Not even the usual crows were present on the temple roof.

Our shadows stretched long across the dusty street, thin and strange, like something else was walking just a step ahead of us.

I looked at each of them—Kapil’s clenched jaw, Sumit’s quiet hands, Ravi’s twitchy glance behind him, Vinay’s stiff shoulders.

These weren’t just my childhood friends anymore.

We were part of something older. Something darker.

Something that had never really let us go.

And if Nanu *was* still in there somewhere...

Maybe we were already too late.

Threads of Fire and Fate

Fifteen years ago

The next morning, the sky was soft—painted in shades of blue and pink. The village was still quiet, most people still asleep. A gentle breeze moved through the trees, carrying the smell of fresh soil and flowers.

I stepped outside the house, my heart feeling lighter, and went to meet Roma.

We didn't say much.

We walked together, down a small path that led away from the village—towards the old lake at the edge of Khara Khara. No one knew we had left. It felt like we had slipped into a small, peaceful world of our own.

Tall grass grew along the path. Drops of dew sparkled on the tips. The morning light touched Roma's face, and for a moment, I just watched her walk. She looked calm, quiet... and beautiful.

When we reached the lake, the water was still—like a mirror. It reflected the trees, the sky, and the two of us sitting there.

We found a flat rock near the edge and sat down.

I took a deep breath. "I used to come here with Nanu," I said. "Before everything changed."

Roma kept looking at the water. "I used to come here with my mom. She liked quiet places like this."

Then, she took a small folded piece of paper from her pocket and gave it to me.

It was an old photo—

A little girl smiling by the lake, her mother beside her.

“That’s you?” I asked.

She nodded. “That was the last picture we took... before she got sick.”

Her eyes were soft. A little sad, but not broken.

“You’re strong,” I said.

She looked at me and said, “I don’t want to be strong all the time.”

I gently placed my hand over hers. She didn’t pull away.

“You don’t have to be,” I whispered. “Not with me.”

A single tear rolled down her cheek. I wiped it with my thumb, slowly.

And then, she leaned in.

Not a kiss. Just her forehead resting gently against mine.

It was enough.

There, in the soft morning light, by the quiet lake—

We didn’t need to speak.

We didn’t need promises.

Just being there, together, was everything.

But then...

A small ripple disturbed the water.

Roma opened her eyes. “Did you see that?”

I turned to look. The lake was still again. Too still. No bird had flown past. No stone had been thrown.

But the reflection in the water—

For a brief second—

It wasn’t just ours.

Something else... had been standing behind us.

When I blinked, it was gone.

Roma gripped my hand a little tighter.

Neither of us said a word.

We just stared at the lake, unsure if it was the wind... or something waiting beneath.

A faint ripple broke the surface, and both of us stepped back.

She looked at me—but I didn’t meet her eyes.

I was still listening—to the silence, to the way the trees around us weren’t moving, to the way the air felt... off.

We didn’t stay long after that.

The afternoon sun poured through the wide windows of Sumit’s café, casting long golden beams across the wooden floor. The scent of freshly brewed coffee mixed with something sweet—maybe cinnamon or vanilla—and soft old music played from the speaker in the corner.

We all sat around the large table by the window—me, Sumit, Kapil, Vinay, Ravi... and even Nanu.

For the first time in days, Nanu looked *still*. No twitching hands. No darting glances toward unseen corners. He sat with

both feet on the floor, chai cradled in his palms, staring into the steam like it carried answers only he could read.

It felt like we'd clawed our way through something unspeakable and were now being granted a fragile sliver of peace.

Sumit was mid-story, eyes wide with mock horror.

"—and I swear to god, I *saw* something move past the bathroom door. So I panicked, ran to the toaster... and burned my toast. Black as coal."

We all laughed.

Even Nanu gave a dry little chuckle. The sound was thin, but real.

Sumit's smile lingered for a second longer than the rest of us, as if watching Nanu for signs that it had been genuine.

Vinay leaned back, arms stretching overhead with a satisfying pop of joints. He groaned. "Okay, enough ghost talk. You'll give Ravi nightmares."

"Please, I've been sleeping like a baby," Ravi said, grinning as he tipped his chair dangerously back. "A baby on caffeine, sure, but still." He swung his bat—a little too close to the hanging lamp—then caught it on the rebound. "I say we stop sulking and do something fun. It's been days."

Kapil, who'd been tapping his knuckles against the table in an idle rhythm, finally looked up. He wore a crooked smirk. "Let's play cricket. Evening game. At the ruins."

My head snapped toward him.

"The ruins?" I said, cautious.

“Yeah,” Kapil said casually, as if he hadn’t just dropped a weight in the room. “One last match there. Just like old times. Before everything went... weird.”

Ravi was immediately on board. “Yes! I’ve literally been waiting for someone to say that. I even brought my old bat back from home. The *beast*.” He patted it like a loyal dog.

Sumit let out a slow breath, smile returning—nostalgic, wistful. “We *used* to love that spot. Before the stories, before the shadows.” His gaze met mine for a beat. “Maybe it’s time to reclaim it.”

I hesitated. Something in my gut twisted, but I didn’t want to be the only voice saying no. Not today.

All eyes turned to Vinay. He hadn’t said a word. He was staring at the center of the table, where a ring of moisture from someone’s glass soaked slowly into the wood.

He stirred his tea without drinking.

“Vinay?” I asked.

He looked up slowly. His eyes were calm but distant, like they were already halfway to the ruins. His voice was quiet.

“Sure,” he said. “Let’s go.”

But something in the way he said it made my chest tighten. Like he wasn’t agreeing... just *accepting*.

The sun was beginning to set, casting long, slanted shadows over the cracked stones and moss-covered walls of the old *khandar*. We were all laughing, shouting, and chasing after the ball like kids again. The haunted memories of the place had, for a while, been pushed to the back of our minds. Dust

kicked up under our feet as we ran, the echoes of our footsteps bouncing off the hollow ruins.

Nanu was fielding near the broken archway. Ravi was behind the stumps—a few stacked bricks. I was bowling to Sumit, who adjusted his grip like a pro, eyes sharp with playful determination.

"Last over!" Vinay shouted. "Hit it out of the ruins if you can!"

Sumit grinned. "Challenge accepted."

I took a short run-up and bowled. The ball flew with a satisfying spin, but Sumit stepped forward and swung hard with all his strength.

CRACK!

The sound of the bat hitting the ball echoed like a gunshot in the empty ruin.

We all watched as the ball soared high, almost in slow motion... and then landed on the roof of the central hall—the very part of the Ruins we used to fear as kids.

The laughter stopped.

For a moment, no one moved. The ruins, which had felt playful a moment ago, suddenly seemed... still. Too still. The kind of silence that makes your ears ring.

"Well..." Ravi said, trying to sound casual. "I guess we lost the ball."

Sumit looked up at the crumbling rooftop. "We can climb up. We used to do it all the time."

But no one responded. Because we all remembered what *else* had happened there.

The fading sunlight cast strange shapes through the broken windows. Somewhere in the wind, it felt like a whisper moved—low, like a breath not quite heard, yet not imagined either.

“I’ll go,” I said finally, trying to shake off the unease tightening in my chest.

Ravi grabbed my arm. “No,” he said quickly. Too quickly.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“There’s something wrong with that part of the Ruins,” he said in a hushed voice. “It’s not just what happened. I’ve been having dreams... of the roof... of someone *waiting* up there.”

The air grew colder.

We looked back up at the rooftop. The ball was barely visible, lodged near the edge.

It hadn’t just landed randomly. It had landed right above the room with the statue. The same room where everything began.

“Go get it,” Kapil said, crossing his arms with a smirk.

“Why me?” I shot back, glancing nervously at the stairs. “Sumit hit the shot.”

“You were batting with Sumit. It’s your turn,” Kapil argued, as if that logic was undeniable.

I hesitated. “But you were bowling! You should go!”

Their playful argument was cut short when Nanu, my cousin, stepped forward. “I’ll get it,” Nanu said confidently, already moving toward the stairs.

“No, Nanu! Don’t go!” I called out, a strange unease settling in his chest.

“Relax! Nothing’s going to happen,” Nanu replied, his voice filled with certainty.

Unlike the others, Nanu didn’t live in the village. He wasn’t burdened by the whispered stories, the warnings passed down by elders. He hadn’t grown up fearing the mansion. Maybe that’s why it was easy for him to go where none of them ever had.

The rest of them stood at the bottom of the stairs, watching as Nanu climbed. At first, they waited patiently, expecting him to reappear any moment with the ball. But five minutes passed. Then ten.

A cold dread crept into my bones.

“Nanu!” I called out. my voice echoed against the cracked walls.

Silence.

A sinking feeling settled in my stomach. If Nanu didn’t come back, what would I tell my aunt? What if something had happened?

Panic set in.

“Nanu! Nanu!” I shouted again, my voice breaking.

But no reply came from above.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Fear gripped my heart. It felt as if I had already lost Nanu. My friends stood frozen, trying to calm me, but their own faces were pale with fear.

“This is my fault... I shouldn’t have let him go up there...” I whispered, my voice shaking.

“Relax, He’ll come back,” Kapil tried to assure me, though his own voice lacked confidence.

But I couldn’t relax. I couldn’t just stand there and wait. “I’m going up,” I declared, wiping my tears.

Kapil grabbed my arm. “No! Let me go. You stay here. I sent him up there, it’s my responsibility.”

Sumit, the bravest among them, stepped forward. “No. I hit the shot. It’s my fault. I’ll go.” His voice was firm, determined. Unlike the others, Sumit never showed fear. I always felt safe when he was around.

Just then, a sound echoed through the mansion—the soft thud of something falling. They all turned toward the stairs. Their breaths caught in their throats.

A faint thud echoed through the mansion. The sound was too soft, too deliberate.

The ball didn’t roll—it *descended*. One bounce. Two. Each jump eerily controlled, as if something unseen guided it. When it finally stopped at my feet, the silence became deafening.

My blood ran cold. I looked up, my heart pounding. The staircase was empty.

Nanu was nowhere to be seen.

Panic took over, and before I knew it, I was running toward the stairs, my voice shaking as I shouted, “Nanu! Nanu!”

My friends grabbed me, stopping me from going up.

“Don’t go,” Kapil said firmly, his grip tight.

But I struggled. “If something happens to Nanu, I’ll never forgive myself!”

Before anyone could react, a voice echoed from above.

“Namo...”

I froze.

My breath caught in my throat as I slowly looked up.

Nanu stood at the top of the stairs. At first, he seemed normal—relieved, even. But something was... off. His smile didn’t fade. In fact, the longer I looked at it, the more it seemed... wrong. Too wide. Too still.

Relief washed over me for a second. “Nanu! You scared me, idiot!” I laughed nervously.

“I’m fine, Namo...” Nanu called out. His voice was calm, but that smile remained.

The others cheered, their tension breaking. They ran to hug him as he descended the stairs. But as Nanu got closer, my relief faded.

Nanu hugged me tightly, but as soon as his arms wrapped around me, I felt something unusual—something was wrong with Nanu’s back. A strange chill pricked my skin. The warmth of Nanu’s hug felt... hollow, like an empty shell of the cousin I once knew.

I pulled away slightly, his eyes filled with confusion. I looked into Nanu’s face—those eyes. They were different. Something dark lurked behind them.

Kapil clapped his hands. “Alright, we should get going now.”

Sumit and the others nodded, relieved to have Nanu back.

“Nanu, let’s go,” I said, forcing a smile.

Nanu didn’t respond. He just kept smiling.

“Nanu?” I called again, stepping back slightly.

There was still no response.

A chill ran down my spine. I reached out and grabbed Nanu’s wrist. It was ice-cold.

Then, something caught my eye. My heart nearly stopped.

Nanu’s foot. There was a deep wound on his ankle—flesh torn away, exposing something dark beneath. But as I blinked, the wound... disappeared. It was as if it had never been there.

I looked up at Nanu’s face. That eerie, unbroken smile remained.

His blood turned to ice.

The Price of Forever

Later that day, I sat in Sumit's café. Sunlight spilled through the windows in golden streaks, but inside, it felt like winter. It was the kind of cold that doesn't touch your skin—only curls up in your lungs and stays there.

We were all there—Ravi, Vinay, Sumit, Kapil. Each one was in their usual seat. Each one was pretending that nothing had changed—but something had. And it sat at the center of the table like a ghost.

We sipped our tea in silence. The clink of metal on glass, the hum of a ceiling fan—everything else felt louder in comparison.

Then, Kapil broke the stillness. His voice was thin, almost too quiet. "What do you think happened to Nanu?"

He didn't look up—just stared at the floor, arms folded tight like he was holding himself together.

Ravi exhaled sharply through his nose. He rubbed his hands together like he was cold, even though sweat lined his temples.

"I... I saw his face yesterday. By the lake. He wasn't just quiet. His eyes—"

He paused.

"—his eyes looked like they belonged to someone else."

We all turned toward him. Ravi wasn't the type to confess fear. Even he looked startled by what he'd said.

Sumit leaned forward, elbows on the table, his fingers tenting around his cup. His voice was steady, low. "We brought something back," he said. "Or maybe... Nanu left something behind. In that place." His words hung in the air like fog.

I stared into my tea. "He's not himself. He feels... wrong. Like he's wearing Nanu's skin, but it doesn't fit anymore."

Vinay shifted uncomfortably, legs crossing under the table. His hand reached instinctively for the tea kettle, refilling everyone's cup like he was trying to reset something.

"We shouldn't have gone back to those ruins," he murmured. "Some things are meant to stay buried."

Sumit looked up, eyes suddenly sharp. "We need to talk to the priest. Maybe he's seen something. Maybe he knows."

I straightened. "Or maybe we're just scared. Jumping in the shadows. Maybe we should wait. Think this through."

Sumit didn't blink. "We can't wait. If we wait, we lose him."

My jaw clenched. "He's my cousin. He's my responsibility. I won't let anything happen to him."

Sumit's voice cracked, rising. "And what if something already has?"

I stood. "You're just scared."

Sumit stood too fast. His chair scraped against the wooden floor. "I don't get scared, Naman."

I stepped toward him. "Then why are you shaking?"

His hand clenched at his side. "Tch—tu—" he began, but Ravi jumped up, slipping between us.

“Guys!” Ravi’s tone was a mix of panic and force. “Not now. Not like this.”

Vinay stood too, moving slower, gentler. He put a hand on Sumit’s arm. “Let it go, bhai. Please. You both need to breathe.”

But Kapil hadn’t moved. He sat still, hunched forward, eyes fixed on the glass in front of him. His finger slowly traced the rim in circles—over and over—like he didn’t even hear us.

His silence pulled at me harder than any argument.

I couldn’t do this.

Not here. Not with them. Not now.

I pushed my chair back. Didn’t speak. Didn’t look at them. I just walked out, the door creaking shut behind me with a dull thud.

The street outside was too quiet. Even the birds had gone still.

The air felt thick—like the whole village was holding its breath.

But inside my head, everything screamed. I needed answers. But more than that, I needed her. Roma. Not just her voice. Her calm. Her steadiness. I needed Roma because I was scared. And I didn’t want to be alone anymore.

I was standing by the river, waiting for Roma. I was thinking... When will that day come when we’ll get married and start our life together? I felt like Roma completed my life, and I couldn’t wait anymore.

Suddenly, someone covered my eyes from behind with both hands—and kissed my cheek.

“Sorry... I made you wait,” Roma said cutely, holding her ears like a little child. She looked beautiful. I hugged her tightly and didn’t let go for two minutes.

“What happened? Did I make you wait too long?” she asked.

“Yes, a lot,” I said, showing a little fake anger.

“I said sorry...” she replied sweetly.

“If you made a mistake, you should be punished,” I said in a teasing voice.

“Oh really? You’re going to punish me?” Roma asked, playing along.

“Yes. Otherwise, no forgiveness,” I said with a smile.

Roma was still in my arms. We held each other close, so close I could feel her breath on my skin, the soft rhythm of her heartbeat matching mine.

Our foreheads touched.

For a long second, we just stayed like that—eyes closed, like the world outside didn’t exist.

Then, slowly, our lips met.

A gentle kiss.

Tender. Warm. Familiar.

Like we had both been holding our breath for years and finally exhaled into each other.

We kissed again. And again.

Not out of passion alone, but out of something deeper—something we didn’t have words for.

It was quiet. Honest.

The kind of moment you never plan for, but never forget.

Neither of us spoke. We didn't need to.

That silence between us said everything.

Then we lay down on the soft grass beneath the open sky. Roma rested her head on my shoulder, her fingers tracing slow, soothing circles on my chest.

"So... is your punishment over now?" she asked with a playful smile, her voice barely above a whisper.

I looked at her, my breath catching for a second.

"Not yet," I said softly.

Gently, I eased her down onto the soft grass, my hand steady near her waist as I leaned closer.

The world around us had fallen quiet—just the rustle of leaves and the quiet hum of something we couldn't name.

As I shifted, my hand slipped slightly, brushing against her chest. It wasn't planned.

But when it happened, I froze.

She didn't.

Roma met my eyes, calm and unshaken. There was no fear in her gaze—only trust, quiet and steady.

Her fingers came up and touched my cheek, soft and reassuring. Like she was telling me it was okay to be close.

The space between us held a different kind of weight now—something fragile, honest, and full of possibility.

But then, gently, she whispered, "No... not now. Let's wait. After marriage... then we can be fully ours."

Her voice didn't scold—it held warmth, resolve, and a promise.

And in that moment, I loved her even more—not just for the closeness, but for her strength in holding back.

I respected her words. I gently kissed her chest and stopped.

“Okay,” I said and rolled away to lie flat on the ground.

“What happened? Are you upset?” Roma asked.

Roma looked at me gently and said, “I know you’re worried... but don’t stress too much. Everything will be okay.”

I nodded.

“I know. Because... you’re with me.”

She smiled—that soft, peaceful smile of hers.

“Roma,” I said after a moment.

She turned her head slightly, looking at me.

“I don’t want this to end. Us... being together like this. It feels—”

“I know,” she whispered, before I could finish. “Me too.”

“Let’s not name it yet,” she said softly. “Let’s just live it.”

And I understood.

Some feelings are too delicate to be spoken out loud. Some kinds of love grow slowly, like the first light of morning—gentle, steady, and full of quiet warmth.

She put her head back on my shoulder and placed her hand on my chest again. “You know what can happen if someone finds out in this village.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, kissing her forehead. “I just can’t wait anymore. I really want to marry you.”

“Really?” she said, her eyes filled with happiness.

“Yes,” I replied.

Roma kissed my lips again—this time, with deep passion. She was really happy after hearing that.

Suddenly, we heard a sound—like dry leaves crunching under someone’s feet.

Roma quickly pulled away from me, her body stiff with fear. I sat up at once, my heart beating fast.

“Did you hear that?” she whispered.

“Yes,” I said, looking around. The trees stood still, but the silence felt strange. Heavy. Like someone was watching us.

We both scanned the area, our eyes moving from bush to tree to shadow—but we couldn’t see anyone. The path was empty. The wind had stopped. Even the usual night sounds—the crickets, the rustling—had gone quiet.

“It’s probably just an animal,” I said, trying to sound calm. But deep down, I wasn’t sure.

Roma looked around nervously, clutching her *dupatta* closer. “Okay, Namu... I should go now,” she said softly.

That sound—that strange rustling behind us—it wasn’t just the wind.

Someone... or something... was there.

I tried to shake off the feeling, but as I walked past the old banyan tree near the edge of the field, I heard it again—*crunch... crunch...* like dry leaves being stepped on.

I turned around quickly.

There was nothing. The path was empty. The shadows stretched long and thin in the moonlight.

“I’ll walk you home,” I offered, still uneasy.

“No, Namu,” she said quickly, her voice still shaking. “I came alone. I’ll go alone. Don’t worry.”

Before I could say anything else, she turned and walked away, her footsteps quick and light, disappearing into the trees.

I stood there for a moment, looking at the spot where she had vanished. Then I turned and started walking back.

As I walked back, the air felt different. The night was unusually silent—no sound of insects, no wind through the trees. Just silence and, I kept thinking— Was someone really there? Or was it just our fear?

I kept thinking about Roma. About how happy she looked. About her kiss. Her smile.

That sparkle in her eyes when I said I wanted to marry her.

When I reached home, the house felt too quiet—like something had slipped out of it while I was gone.

The door to his room stood wide open. Empty. Cold.

I checked every corner of the house—under the bed, in the kitchen, even the backyard. Nothing.

Panic clutched my throat. My legs moved on their own, and before I knew it, I was running back toward the ruins. That cursed place was calling again.

The path ended, and so did my breath. I stood frozen.

There he was. Nanu.

He was sitting in the middle of the cracked courtyard, the red ball beside him. Talking. Laughing. His head tilted slightly as if listening to someone right beside him—but there was no one. Nothing but the night and the echoes of the wind.

My stomach twisted.

He threw the ball. It bounced once, twice—then stopped, unnaturally still.

“Nanu!” I called, my voice shaking.

No reaction.

“Nanu!” I shouted louder, heart thudding in my chest.

He slowly turned.

His eyes locked on mine—and something in them wasn’t human. Fury. Emptiness. A cold fire. His mouth curled in a snarl for just a second, and I instinctively took a step back, my breath caught in my throat.

I was scared. Truly scared.

Then, just like that, it was gone. He smiled.

“*Bhaiya*.”

It was back to that soft voice again—that innocent tone—like nothing had happened.

I couldn’t make sense of it. My heartbeat was still racing.

“Let’s go home,” I said cautiously, still trembling.

“But I’m playing with my friend.”

There was no one there. Just the ball. The crumbling ruins. And shadows.

I swallowed hard. “Say goodbye, then. You can play tomorrow.”

He stared at the air in front of him for a long moment, then finally said, “Okay. Bye,” and stood up to come with me.

We walked in silence.

I couldn’t bring myself to ask who he was playing with. Or why his eyes had changed like that. Or why I could still hear faint whispers in the wind behind us.

What if they were right?

What if bringing him back was the biggest mistake I ever made?

Just as we reached the main road, Nanu spoke. “*Bhaiya*... did you know Roma *didi*’s uncle and aunt shouted at her?”

I froze.

“She was with me,” I said carefully. “That can’t be right.”

He smiled a little, walking ahead. “You don’t know everything. But don’t worry, *bhaiya*. Everything will be fine tonight.”

That made me stop.

“What do you mean, everything will be fine?”

He turned to look at me, eyes unreadable.

“You love Roma *didi*, right?”

I didn’t know how to answer that.

He smiled again—too calm, too knowing. “I’ll make it all better, *bhaiya*. She’ll be yours. Forever.”

I stopped walking.

He kept going.

My hands felt cold. My mind tried to understand what he just said. But after everything I saw tonight... I was terrified to even guess what he meant.

When we got home, he quietly went to the guest room.

"Good night, *bhaiya*," he said cheerfully, like a child who had no shadows in his mind.

I just stood there. Watching. Thinking. Drowning in unease.

When Roma reached home, her uncle and aunt were waiting for her at the door. Their faces were twisted with anger. Without giving her a chance to speak, they started shouting at her—harsh, bitter words that cut deeper than any wound.

"You've brought shame to this family!" her aunt yelled.

Her uncle slammed the table with his fist. "Do you know what people are saying about you?"

Roma stood frozen for a moment, her eyes wide and glassy. Then, without saying a word, she turned and walked quietly to her room.

As soon as the door closed behind her, she collapsed onto the bed and buried her face in the pillow. Tears streamed down her cheeks, hot and unstoppable. Her chest shook with silent sobs as the weight of everything crashed down on her.

The room was dim. Outside, the wind whispered through the trees. Roma hugged her knees to her chest, trying to breathe through the pain.

Then... she heard it—a faint sound.

It didn't come from the hallway. It came from inside the room. A soft, creaking noise. Like footsteps on an old wooden floor.

Roma lifted her head, her tear-streaked face pale with fear.

Roma was still crying when the sound came.

A sharp thud. Followed by another.

She rushed out of her room, wiping her face.

"Chacha ji?"

No response.

"Chachi?"

She ran into the hallway—and stopped.

Her uncle stood facing the wall, slamming his forehead into it again and again. A dark smear of blood already streaked the paint.

"Chacha ji!" she screamed, running forward.

But he didn't stop.

At first, she thought it was guilt—shame for what he had said.

But then he turned, slowly.

His eyes were blank.

He reached for a knife on the kitchen counter.

"NO!" she screamed, but it was too late.

He plunged it into his own eye.

Roma shrieked.

Her aunt fainted right where she stood, crumpling to the floor.

Roma tried to grab the phone, but her hands were shaking too much.

Her uncle pulled the knife out, blood pouring down his face, and sliced his leg open—deep, raw, from ankle to thigh. His skin peeled back as if something inside was trying to crawl out.

He kept chanting something.

That something was in a voice that didn't sound like his.

Roma screamed until her voice broke. The neighbors started to gather, but before anyone could reach the door—

He drove the knife into his neck.

Dragged it sideways.

And kept dragging.

His neck opened like torn paper. Blood sprayed the walls, the floor, his lifeless wife. His head hung to one side, barely attached.

And still—his body didn't fall right away.

It took three full seconds before he finally collapsed—covered in blood, his eyes wide.

Ravi's voice was shaking on the other end. "Naman... come. Now. Something's wrong with Roma."

My chest tightened. "What happened?"

"I don't know—she's screaming. Locked herself in. Something's not right."

I didn't wait to hear more. I ran.

The streets blurred around me. My feet hit the ground hard, fast. Every breath burned in my lungs. All I could think about was her.

When I reached, the gate was wide open. A small crowd had gathered outside her house—neighbors murmuring, frightened, some already dialing numbers, others frozen, unsure what to do.

Then someone pushed the door open, and we rushed in.

The neighbors burst in first, gasping, screaming.

No one could understand what they were seeing.

They were all frozen in place—in disbelief.

I saw her.

Roma.

Her face pale, eyes wide with terror. She was backed into a corner like she didn't recognize anyone—like she wasn't even in this world anymore.

And then...

I remembered Nanu's words:

"She'll be yours. Forever."

My blood ran cold.

My heart dropped.

Was this Nanu?

Was this what he meant by fixing everything?

I didn't say a word.

I couldn't.

Because deep down...

I already knew.

The Smiling Curse

The air felt heavier now—as if the village itself had seen too much.

I stood among the crowd, unmoving, numb, watching the blood pool beneath Roma's uncle's body. His eyes stayed locked on Roma—her face pale, soaked in crimson, her screams frozen in her throat, lips parted mid-horror, no sound emerging.

Something inside me cracked.

I felt it—a splintering.

The memory of Nanu's voice floated through his mind, clearer than anything around him: "Roma *didi* will be yours. Forever."

I staggered back a step. Sumit turned to me.
"Naman...?"

But I couldn't speak. My mouth had gone dry. My skin was clammy. My pulse had slowed, or stopped—I couldn't tell.

I kept replaying what he'd seen just hours before—Nanu's violent glare, the eerie switch to an innocent smile, the invisible companion, the red ball that rolled back on its own. The voice in the ruins. The silence that followed.

And now this.

This wasn't a coincidence.

This was my intention.

Kapil, barely able to breathe, muttered, “What the hell just happened? Why would someone... do this to themselves?”

Vinay and Ravi stood frozen, faces bloodless, eyes flickering between the soaked floor and Roma—who was now curled up in the corner, her body trembling violently, whispering, “No no no no no...” like a broken chant.

But then something shifted.

Auntie.

Roma’s aunt, who had till now sat in stunned silence beside her husband’s mangled body, suddenly snapped her head up. Her bloodshot eyes locked onto Roma.

“You did this!” she shrieked, her voice shrill, inhuman. “You killed him! You killed my husband!”

And before anyone could react, she lunged toward Roma with both hands outstretched—like a creature possessed.

“It was you! Murderer! Witch!” she screamed, fury dripping from every word.

I turned in horror.

Beside me, Nanu was standing silently, watching everything unfold.

Still smiling.

That soft, unnatural smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

Suddenly, Nanu’s gaze hardened. His smile twitched. Something dark flickered behind his eyes.

Roma’s aunt stopped mid-charge. Her hands flew to her throat. She began gasping—choking. She was clawing at her neck, digging her nails in.

Everyone stepped forward—shouting, panicking—but then she screamed, a high-pitched, guttural sound as she began hurling utensils and plates around the room. The glasses in the room were shattered—and a spoon whizzed past Sumit’s face.

“Help her!” Roma cried, running forward. “*Chachi!* Stop! Please!”

But the woman’s body moved like it wasn’t hers anymore.

She smashed her head once—twice—against the kitchen cylinder, denting the metal. Then staggered sideways and rammed her skull into an iron rod by the stove. Blood sprayed against the wall.

Roma tried to hold her, to stop her—but her aunt flung her across the room.

Then came a moment of silence.

She dropped to her knees, breathing raggedly.

“Roma... help me...” she whispered, her voice softening. “Please... please save me...”

Tears spilled down Roma’s face as she crawled forward again—“*Chachi...* I’m here...”

But as she reached for her, the woman’s eyes snapped wide open. The softness vanished. Her lips stretched into a monstrous grin. She let out a loud, maniacal laugh that echoed through the blood-soaked room, sending a chill through everyone.

Then, without warning, she slammed her hand onto the iron rod—crushing it so hard it bent—and in a horrifying twist, she turned her head violently, unnaturally—only her head, the body remaining stiff.

A grotesque crack sounded as her neck broke entirely. She dropped like a rag doll.

Dead.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Not just Roma, but everyone—Me, Sumit, Kapil, Vinay, Ravi—all stood frozen, mouths agape, the horror too vast to comprehend.

Two deaths.

Within minutes.

Both self-inflicted.

And both utterly... unnatural.

My gaze slid back to Nanu.

He was still there.

Still watching.

Still smiling.

Minutes Later...

We managed to pull Roma away—Sumit wrapping a shawl around her, shielding her from the curious, whispering villagers who had gathered like moths to a flame. Her body was limp, her hands smeared with blood, her eyes wide open but blank—like something had been ripped from her soul.

I walked beside her silently, her legs moving on their own.

Every step felt heavier, like gravity itself was trying to pull him into the earth.

The guilt pressed deeper now. Not just guilt. Something worse.

Dread.

We took Roma to Sumit's café—shut the doors, pulled the curtains. Ravi brought her water. Kapil paced the room, his breathing rapid, muttering, “We need to call someone... the police... this is insane...”

But I didn't hear him.

His eyes were fixed to the floor.

Blood.

He kept seeing it.

In my mind, I saw Roma's uncle smashing his head.

Then her aunt twisting her neck, that awful smile still lingering in his thoughts.

And behind it all...

Nanu.

Smiling.

Sumit finally sat beside me. “You okay?”

No response.

“Naman... do you think... it's Nanu?”

I whispered, as if afraid the walls might hear. “Yes, It's Nanu.”

Sumit's face turned white. “That thing...” I continued, barely audible, “It's getting stronger.”

We sat there in silence, the air around us thick and heavy, as if the room itself knew something terrible was unfolding.

But the worst part was—I couldn't shake the feeling that whatever was inside Nanu... wasn't done yet.

I couldn't sit still. I kept pacing. Back and forth. Back and forth.

My mind returned to Nanu's face—his fury in the ruins... and then that smile.

That sentence kept ringing like a curse:

"Roma *didi* will be yours forever."

I stormed into his room.

He was sitting on the floor, legs folded, back straight. Smiling.

"Did you do this?" I asked, my voice shaking.

He looked at me, wide-eyed, innocent. "Do what, *bhaiya*?"

I clenched my fists. "Roma's uncle and aunty are both dead. They... both killed himself. Horribly. And you... you said last night everything would be fine."

Nanu tilted his head. "That's good, isn't it? Now no one will stop you and Roma *didi* from being together."

My breath caught. He said it like it was a gift, like he had fixed something broken.

"You think this is fine?" I shouted. "You think someone dying is—"

He stood up slowly. "I didn't kill them, *bhaiya*," he said softly. "I just told them the truth. I told the voices I didn't like them."

My blood turned cold. "Voices?" I whispered.

He pointed to the corner of the room. "They talk to me. All the time. They don't like lies. They don't like anger. They told me they'll help me protect you."

"There's no one there, Nanu." My voice cracked.

He looked at the empty corner and smiled. “Just because you can’t see them... doesn’t mean they’re not real.”

I stood frozen. That smile, those words—they didn’t belong to a child.

I backed away slowly, my pulse thudding in my ears.

Whatever had taken hold of Nanu... it wasn’t letting go.

Next Day

The priest had come.

Purification rituals, holy water, *mantras*—none of it helped. The air in the house still felt wrong.

Roma sat quietly, wrapped in a shawl, staring at the sky.

I sat beside her, finally finding the courage to speak. “Roma,” I said softly. “I think something’s happening to Nanu. Something we don’t understand.”

She didn’t look at me. But her hand found mine.

“I saw something that night,” she whispered. “Just before it happened. A shadow... not his... standing behind my uncle.”

“A shadow?” I asked.

“It moved when he didn’t. And when he picked up the knife... it leaned in close to his ear... like it told him what to do.”

My heart sank.

We were in the middle of something dark. Something deeper than we’d ever imagined.

And it had already started to take from us.

The Door has Opened

Even with every light on, the café felt dim. The corners seemed darker than they should be—shadows clinging stubbornly to the walls like old stains. The air was thick and heavy—the kind that made your chest tighten just from breathing.

Roma sat curled on the tattered couch in the corner, wrapped tightly in a shawl that once belonged to her mother.

Her eyes weren't on us. They were locked on the far corner of the room.

Nothing moved there—nothing visible.

And yet... something in her expression said she saw something, something she wasn't ready to name.

No one spoke. No one dared.

Ravi shuffled near the entrance, a half-broken incense stick trembling between his fingers. He muttered something under his breath—half joke, half prayer—and lit it. “It might help,” he said, trying to sound casual, but his voice cracked on the last word.

Kapil paced like a caged animal, His phone was in his hand. But there was no signal. He kept checking anyway, swiping furiously, as if wanting it hard enough might change reality.

He didn't look at Roma.

Vinay stood near the window. His back was to the room, but his eyes reflected in the glass. Quiet. Watchful. His fingers

tapped lightly on the sill—like he was counting seconds... or heartbeats.

He didn't say much, but every now and then his head tilted, just slightly—like he was listening for something we couldn't hear.

And me?

I stood near the kitchen doorway, not even realizing I was staring at my own reflection in the glass pane, at the face of a boy who no longer recognized himself.

The memories came in flashes—sharp, fast, blinding.

The ball.

The laughter.

The shadow among the ruins.

The ritual.

The voice.

The deaths.

Each thread of this unraveling nightmare led back to one name.

“Nanu,” I whispered.

Not for them. For me.

To make it real. To make him real again.

Sumit appeared beside me, his voice low, but clear. “What are you thinking?”

I turned to him. Slowly.

My voice felt distant. Detached. “I need to talk to him.”

His brow furrowed. “What?”

“I need to talk to Nanu.”

Sumit took a step back. “Are you crazy?” His voice rose, loud enough that Kapil flinched. “After everything we’ve seen? You think he’ll just... sit down and explain?”

“He already has,” I said, my eyes locked onto his. “We just didn’t listen.”

The room fell into silence.

Outside, the wind picked up. The wooden panels groaned, almost like the café itself was holding its breath.

Then, a low howl came from somewhere beyond the street—too long, too warped. It might have been a dog... or something trying to sound like one.

Roma stirred. She blinked—twice—then looked up, as if surfacing from something dark and deep.

Her lips trembled, but she said nothing.

Kapil stopped pacing. He sank into a chair, fingers digging into his scalp. “We should’ve stopped him. Long ago.” His voice was muffled, thick with regret—and something he didn’t want to name.

Ravi cracked his knuckles, hard—too hard. He walked toward the window, then stopped mid-step. “We still can,” he said. “We’re not dead yet.” But his fists stayed clenched. His whole body was tight, like a spring ready to snap.

Sumit shook his head, not in disagreement but in quiet disbelief. “You saw him too,” he said, looking directly at me. “That’s not just Nanu anymore...”

“I don’t care,” I replied, voice low, even. “He’s still my brother.”

Then—

CREEEAK.

A sharp groan from above.

We all froze.

Footsteps.

Slow. Heavy.

Dragging.

Ravi’s eyes darted upward. “We’re all down here... right?”

No one answered.

The upstairs had been locked since Diwali. It was the storage room. No one was allowed up there. And yet something moved.

Another sound.

THUD.

Roma gasped and pulled her shawl tight around her, like it might protect her from something far bigger than cold.

Her eyes flicked toward the ceiling.

Kapil’s hands fell from his face. He looked around, disoriented. His gaze flicked briefly to Roma—then quickly away.

Vinay turned from the window. His voice was soft, but clear. “That... wasn’t furniture shifting.”

Sumit moved fast. He grabbed a torchlight from the shelf and shoved it into my chest. His hands were trembling. “You really want to face that thing?”

I looked at him.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t answer.

Just flicked the light on and started up the stairs.

Each wooden step groaned under my weight, creaking like a warning I refused to hear.

At the top, the air hit me—thick with the smell of damp earth, rusted metal... and something sour, like spoiled meat. The stench of rot spread everywhere.

I raised the flashlight and swept it slowly across the storage room.

Dust.

Cobwebs.

Boxes stacked like forgotten memories.

Nothing moved.

But it didn’t feel empty.

Then—a red ball rolled out from behind a trunk.

I froze.

The flashlight flickered.

A cold breath swept across the back of my neck.

And then—I heard it.

A whisper.

“Bhaiya...”

The whisper had weight.

"Bhaiya..."

It wasn't just a sound—it crawled into my ears, like cold fingers brushing the inside of his skull.

My heart thundered.

The flashlight trembled in my grip as I turned slowly toward the sound.

Nothing.

Just empty shadows stretching long and strange across the wooden floor.

But then—

Tap. Tap. Tap.

The red ball rolled again, this time stopping right at my feet.

I crouched slowly, breath shallow, eyes locked on the strange mark burned into the floorboards.

It pulsed faintly—like a heartbeat trapped in the wood. Alive. Watching.

My hands hovered above it.

I didn't dare touch it. Couldn't.

Even from inches away, my fingertips buzzed with static, like the air was charged—heavy with something ancient and wrong.

Then—there was a flicker. Something darted past behind me. I whipped around, heart pounding, the flashlight beam slicing through the dusty air.

Nothing.

Only crates, cobwebs, and the suffocating silence of a room holding its breath.

But then—I saw him.

A figure in the farthest corner.

Small.

Still.

Smiling.

“Nanu...” My voice cracked, raw with fear.

He didn’t move. Didn’t blink. Just stood there—eyes wide, mouth curled into a grin that didn’t belong on a child’s face.

Then he spoke.

His voice was soft. Calm. Too calm.

“I told you I’d fix everything.”

But it wasn’t just Nanu speaking.

The voice... it had layers. Echoes. As if something else was speaking through him.

Something far older.

Downstairs – Café

Roma bolted upright, her spine rigid like she’d been shocked awake. “There’s something here,” she whispered, her eyes darting around.

Ravi leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

“Not upstairs,” Roma murmured, sharper now. “Here. Around us. It’s watching.”

Sumit and Kapil exchanged tense glances.

“Roma,” Kapil said gently, “you’re just scared, you’re not—”

The lights flickered.

For a breathless second, the room dimmed.

And in that half-second of darkness—they all saw it.

A silhouette—tall, spindly, its limbs too long to be human—slithered across the wall behind Roma.

She screamed.

Ravi lunged for the door and yanked it open—only to be met with a thick, unnatural fog swirling outside.

The path, the village—was gone. Swallowed whole.

Sumit grabbed a broken stick from under the counter, knuckles white. “This place isn’t safe anymore.”

Kapil’s voice broke into a shout. “We need to get Naman. NOW.”

Upstairs – The Confrontation

I took a hesitant step forward, breath catching in my throat.
“Nanu... what are you doing?”

He turned toward me, stepping fully into the flickering light.

And my stomach dropped.

It looked like Nanu.

But something in me knew—this wasn’t him. Not really.

His features were twisted ever so slightly, like someone had tried to rebuild him from memory and gotten it just a little... off.

The skin around his mouth was stretched unnaturally, as if forced into a smile.

And his eyes—too dark. Too still. Bottomless.

Not blank... but waiting.

Like a puppet trying to remember how to be human.

He tilted his head slowly, and that strange smile twitched.

"You came," he said. His voice was soft, almost tender. But it wasn't Nanu's voice anymore; not the one I knew.

The air shifted.

A cold draft slithered between us, and I felt it—pressure—like the house was holding its breath.

He stepped closer, and with every inch, the temperature seemed to drop.

"You never loved me, *bhaiya*. Not like you loved her."

His voice cracked on the last word, something childlike and cruel beneath the calm.

"That's not true," I whispered, trying to keep my voice steady. But I wasn't sure if I believed myself anymore.

He tilted his head, eyes shining strangely in the half-dark. "It doesn't matter."

A beat.

"She's yours now. Just like I promised."

My heart stumbled.

"What did you do?" I asked, voice barely above a breath.

His smile grew. Wider. Inhuman.

"I opened the door."

The flashlight flickered.

Then went out.

Darkness slammed into me—sudden, absolute. And in that choking black, the house came alive. Whispers erupted from every wall. Not one voice—but dozens. Layered. Hungry.

"Take.

Bind.

Break.

Feed.

Stay forever..."

The wood groaned beneath my feet. The air turned thick. Alive. Watching.

Then—from below—a scream.

Roma.

The flashlight flickered once... then died.

The room plunged into a blackness thicker than night—so dark it felt alive.

I froze.

Somewhere in front of me, I could hear Nanu's breath—ragged, shallow, too close.

The air itself seemed to inhale. The shadows breathed.

Then came the whispers. Soft at first. Almost imagined. But they grew—layered voices crawling beneath the skin of silence. Words I couldn't understand. But I felt them. Sharp. Hungry.

Something shifted on the floorboards.
A scrape.
Like bare feet dragging across broken glass.
I fumbled for my phone. Hands shaking.
I tried to turn on the flashlight—
It slipped from my grip.
Clattered to the ground. The screen lit for a second—
And that's when I saw it.
Not clearly. Not with my eyes.
But with some deeper, darker part of me.
It wasn't just behind Nanu.
It was inside him.
A towering shape.
Gaunt limbs.
Skin like burnt parchment stretched over bone.
Its head hung low, but its eyes—two hollow sockets—dripped
with smoke.
It didn't move.
It just was.
Like a shadow that had worn a boy's skin for too long.
And then, from that hollow puppet shell, came a voice—
Dry. Icy. Final.
"There is no Nanu."

Then he lunged—not to strike—but to laugh.

A shrill, childlike giggle burst from his mouth—twisted, too loud, too high—a laugh no child should ever make. And buried beneath it—was something ancient, rotten.

BOOM.

A door downstairs exploded open.

Glass were shattered.

Screams tore through the house.

There was no time to think. No time to ask who—or what—he really was.

I turned and ran.

Downstairs – All Hell Breaks Loose

Roma was on the floor, curled beside the overturned table, her body shaking with silent sobs. Blood slicked her hands—too much to be hers. The room looked like a battlefield.

Chairs lay shattered.

Ravi leaned against the wall, his face twisted in pain, clutching his shoulder where three ragged gashes seeped blood into his shirt.

Sumit stood guard by the kitchen door, knuckles white around a kitchen knife, his face the color of paper.

Kapil huddled near the wall, eyes glassy, whispering the same thing over and over like a mantra of dread:

“It came in through the window... it wasn’t supposed to get in.”

The wind screamed through the house—furious, unnatural. Curtains lashed like desperate arms. The lights flickered violently above, then—click. A snap of power. The bulbs flared back to life. Everything went still.

A thick smear of blood trailed across the floor—starting at the shattered window, snaking toward the staircase.

Everyone turned at once, gazes climbing the stairs just as I stumbled down.

My shirt was torn, my skin streaked with scratches. I gripped the railing, my chest rising in short, panicked breaths. “It’s not just Nanu,” I said hoarsely. “Something’s inside him. It’s controlling him.”

Roma slowly pushed herself upright, eyes dazed, voice barely a whisper. “What does it want?”

I didn’t hesitate. “It wants us.”

The silence that followed was total.

Then—

The faint crunch of broken glass under Ravi’s boot.

A chair groaned on its side.

Even our breathing felt too loud.

Outside, a low chant drifted in from the village—cyclical, hypnotic, like a forgotten lullaby sung to the dead.

Inside, time stood frozen.

Sumit inched toward the curtain, peeked out, then turned sharply. “We can’t stay here,” he said.

He looked at Roma—her face smeared with blood and tears, her eyes empty. “She can’t take any more. We have to move. Now.”

I nodded and crouched beside her.

Roma didn’t flinch. She just stared at her stained palms, the blood now drying in cracked lines.

“Roma,” I said softly. “We need to go. Please.”

She blinked slowly. Her voice cracked. “It touched me.”

“I know,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “But it’s gone. You’re safe. I’m here.”

The wind had softened, but the chill still clung to the air.

We moved quickly, staying low through crumbling lanes and abandoned alleys. No one said a word. But behind the cracked shutters and closed doors, eyes watched—silent, hidden.

We reached the peepal tree behind the old temple. Its roots were gnarled like ancient veins, clutching the earth as if holding back something deep beneath it.

The shrine loomed nearby—walls cracked with age, its rusted bells swaying gently in wind that hadn’t touched them.

Ravi collapsed at the base of the tree, wiping sweat and blood from his brow, his hands still shaking.

Vinay knelt nearby, whispering fragmented prayers, his lips moving faster than his breath.

Sumit kept looking over his shoulder, gripping the knife tighter with each gust of wind—as if expecting the darkness to chase them down.

Roma sat on the cold temple steps, knees pulled to her chest, arms wrapped tightly around them. She hadn't spoken since the café.

I sat beside her, careful not to startle her. Slowly, I reached for her hand—still stained, still trembling. “You’re okay now,” I whispered. “It’s over. We’re here. You’re not alone.”

She turned to me, eyes glassy, lower lip quivering.

And then she broke.

The dam inside her shattered and she collapsed into my arms, sobbing uncontrollably—not like someone crying, but like someone emptying—a child who had seen the end of the world and didn't know what was left to feel.

I held her tightly, burying my face in her hair.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered. “Nothing will touch you again. Not while I’m here.”

Above us, the peepal leaves stirred. The bells rang once—soft and solemn. And for a brief moment, the night didn't feel so heavy.

The Blood Moon and the Banyan

Later that night, with Roma curled beneath the banyan tree, her face half-hidden under Sumit's denim jacket, the rest of us sat in a tight circle, lit by the dim flicker of a dying flashlight. The air felt colder than usual. Heavy. Breathing was effort.

Sumit stood with his arms crossed, pacing tight, restless lines into the dirt. His shoulders were tense, his jaw clenched, and his voice—when it came—sounded like it was fighting its way out. “We can’t keep pretending this is just coincidence,” he muttered.

He stopped, turned to the tree line, staring at the pitch-black path that led to the ruins. “This isn’t random. It’s not some storybook ghost. This is evil. Real, deliberate evil.” He said the word evil like it tasted wrong in his mouth—like he didn’t want to believe it, but had no choice left.

Ravi crouched low, his back against a tree trunk, arms wrapped around his knees like a child hiding from thunder. He gave a dry laugh—too quick, too brittle—then leaned forward, his voice barely audible. “There’s... something in that ruin,” he said, eyes scanning the darkness like it might reach out and snatch him. “It’s in him now. Nanu. Like it chose him. Like it wants him.”

The wind stirred the leaves above. Ravi flinched.

Kapil had been silent for a while, leaning back against a moss-covered boulder, half-shrouded in shadow. He suddenly jerked upright, eyes alert, speaking fast, like thoughts had

been racing in circles inside his head. “The red ball,” he said. “His invisible friend. Those dead birds we found last year. And now people.”

He looked at me—then at Roma, asleep nearby, face serene. His gaze lingered too long. “It’s all connected, Naman. It’s been... building. Like a pattern. A ritual.”

His fingers tapped against his leg. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* Nervous rhythm. Not random. Compulsive.

Vinay sat cross-legged, a few feet from us, half-lit by the flickering flashlight at his side. He didn’t speak at first. Just looked up at the stars, then back down into the dirt like he was reading a story only he could see.

“I spoke to Dadu,” he said finally. His voice was calm, like the earth itself had asked him to speak. “He remembers a tale... before Partition. A man entered those ruins to bring back his dead wife. He found something. Not a ghost. Not a god. Something older.”

He took a breath. “It promised love without death. Immortality. But it came with a price.”

He looked at me now. Not accusing. Not afraid. Just... knowing. “It demanded blood.” His voice trembled—not with fear, but with truth.

I sat still.

The pieces had always been there, like jagged glass under the skin of our childhood. Now they bled into view.

“Sacrifice,” I whispered. “Just like now.”

I looked around.

Sumit's fists were clenched again. He looked like he wanted to hit something, anything—but there was nothing to hit.

Only shadows.

Only memory.

Ravi kept rubbing his hands together, muttering, “This is real, man. This is real,” like he was trying to convince himself. His bravado had slipped. What was left was raw, shaken, almost childlike.

Kapil had gone quiet again, but his eyes stayed locked on Roma.

She was curled on the old blanket we'd dragged from the café, face relaxed, lips parted in sleep. Peaceful. Untouched.

He watched her like a man both desperate and afraid—like he hated her for sleeping through this, or feared she wouldn't wake.

Vinay turned slightly toward her too, and then toward me. His voice was softer now. “Maybe she's part of it,” he said. Not accusing. Just... considering.

“She's the only one untouched.”

I didn't reply. But something in my chest tightened.

“It ends tomorrow,” I said.

No one spoke.

Not even the wind.

The next morning, fog blanketed the village. Not the gentle kind—but a suffocating, heavy veil that muffled sound and seemed to whisper things no one wanted to hear.

With makeshift torches, ropes, and prayer amulets from the temple, the group stood at the edge of the forest path.

No one spoke.

Even the birds had gone silent.

I blinked against the thick haze of sleep, the musty scent of mold and damp wood stinging my nose.

“Kapil?” I called out, my voice rough, uncertain.

There was complete silence. Not even the whisper of an echo answered back.

Ravi stirred. He sat up slowly, wrapping his arms around himself as if the cold had sunk into his bones. “Where’s Roma?” he asked, his voice thin, confused.

Sumit was already on his feet, rubbing his temples, eyes scanning the corner where Roma had curled up the night before. His lips parted as if trying to piece the memory together. “They were both right there,” he muttered, pointing at the empty space. “I saw them...”

Vinay stood stiffly, arms folded, but his foot tapped—restless, anxious. His brows knotted into a scowl. “You don’t think they—” he started, then stopped, his voice cracking. “No. No, they wouldn’t go there. They couldn’t.”

But we all knew what “there” meant.

The ruins.

The cursed remains of the *haveli* that still stank of death and shadow.

We didn’t speak. We just ran.

Leaves crunched beneath our feet, the morning air thick with fog and foreboding. The temple loomed ahead, cradled in gnarled trees, its stones dark with age and sorrow.

The old priest stood outside, barefoot on the cracked temple steps, his saffron robes fluttering in the windless air. He wasn't startled by our arrival. He looked like he had been waiting.

His eyes, cloudy but sharp with knowing, met ours. He raised one trembling hand and pointed into the dense forest.

"They've gone," he said, his voice low, almost a whisper, yet it cut through us like a blade. "To the black place... the one that still remembers blood."

The words hit like a cold slap.

Sumit stepped forward, fists clenched. "Why didn't you stop them?" he demanded, voice rising with panic and fury.

The priest's sigh was heavy, ancient. "I felt the disturbance in the chants, just before dawn," he said, his gaze distant. "The girl—she was called. Pulled by something older than desire, older than time. The boy... he followed her; but not with his heart. His steps were not his own."

I took a deep breath and stepped forward, heart pounding. "We're going after them."

Before I could turn, the priest's hand shot out, grabbing my wrist. The grip was firm, unnaturally strong for someone so frail. His fingers were cold and dry, like brittle roots.

"Wait," he said.

He reached beneath his robes, pulling out a small, rusted copper box wrapped tightly in saffron cloth. It looked

ancient—smelling of oil, ash, and something older, something sacred.

Carefully, he unfolded it.

Inside lay three things:

A talisman of black stone carved with strange symbols.

A folded parchment, yellowed with time, its surface crawling with handwritten runes.

And a tiny rope, soaked in thick, dark oil that glistened like blood in the morning light.

“This will seal the entity,” the priest said, voice grave. “But only when the blood moon peaks. That is when its power is vulnerable.”

We leaned closer, hanging on every word.

“You must lure him into the chamber,” he continued, “where the first chants were made... where the earth still echoes the original prayer. Trap him there. Speak the words exactly as written. Do not falter. If you fail—”

“We won’t,” Ravi said quietly, stepping up beside me.

His voice was steady. But his eyes... his eyes trembled.

The woods didn’t welcome us. They devoured us.

Branches arched overhead like clawed fingers, forming a canopy that blotted out the sun. Though it was barely past noon, the sky had darkened to a strange, bruised grey. The wind twisted around us in fevered whispers, speaking in a tongue no one should understand.

The deeper we went, the colder it grew—unnatural, bone-deep cold. Not a single bird called. Not a single leaf rustled unless it meant to.

We broke through a thick curtain of hanging vines and stepped into a clearing that bled dread from the soil.

There it was.

The red ball.

Just lying there, at the center.

Still.

Cold.

And watching.

My chest tightened.

And then—Nanu.

He stood by the old moss-covered altar, the one time had nearly swallowed whole.

His shirt was torn across the chest. Dirt streaked his face, dried blood clung to his hands like paint. His hair was wild. His lips curled into a smile too calm to belong here—too calm to belong to Nanu.

“Bhaiya,” he said softly, stepping forward like a child returning home. “You came.” His voice was too clean. Too practiced.

Sumit moved first, raising the trident the priest had pressed into our hands with trembling fingers. His knuckles were white. “Where’s Roma?” he growled. “Where’s Kapil?”

Nanu’s smile thinned.

For a moment, he said nothing. Then, without a word, he turned and stepped aside.

And there—behind him—was the altar.

Roma lay sprawled on the damp ground, her chest rising in short, ragged bursts. Blood soaked her yellow kurta, a slow crimson bloom spreading across her abdomen. Her lips quivered, gasping for breath. Her eyes fluttered—fighting to stay open.

And next to her—

Kapil.

Still.

His head was tilted at an angle no neck should bend. His eyes stared skyward, wide and empty, his face frozen in surprise and pain.

Vinay stumbled back, knees buckling. He whispered it like a *mantra*, as if denial could undo what he saw. “No... no, Kapil... not him...”

My legs felt heavy. My voice cracked as it left my throat. “Why?”

Nanu looked at me. Not like a brother. Not like family. But like something... hollow wearing his skin.

He looked almost hurt. Genuinely.

“He tried to stop it,” he said quietly. “He got scared. I didn’t want to hurt him, *Bhaiya*... but God—He demands sacrifice.”

He pointed to Roma, reverently. “She’s special. Chosen. She was meant to stay. With you. Forever.”

Sumit shouted and lunged forward, but before he could reach Roma, the earth cracked open like dry skin. Black tendrils burst from the soil, whipping through the air, screeching like tortured birds. They lashed out, striking the ground, coiling in front of Sumit to block his path.

“You think you can fight this?” Nanu’s voice warped—deepened—echoed. “This place chose me. I listened when none of you did. I believed when the world called me mad. It showed me how to bring peace...”

I yanked open the copper box. The parchment inside glowed faint gold, pulsing like a heartbeat. The talisman vibrated in my palm.

“Get him to the chamber!” Ravi shouted from behind, his voice full of fear—and fire. “Now!”

Nanu roared—a sound not meant for human throats—and the air seemed to buckle around him. Shadows exploded from the altar, slamming into us like fists of smoke.

We fought.

Sumit and I charged, driving the trident at him. It struck his shoulder. He screamed, staggering—but not down.

He whirled and slammed Sumit back into a tree. The impact cracked bark. Sumit crumpled.

Then he lunged at me—eyes wild, fingers curled like claws. I thrust the talisman forward, bracing myself.

It connected with his chest.

The skin there sizzled, hissed, cracked. The smell of burning flesh and oil filled the air. He shrieked in agony.

Ravi and Vinay used the moment to drag Roma away from the altar, her body limp but still breathing.

Together, with one last desperate push, Sumit and I drove him back—step by step—into the heart of the ruins. The chamber. The room the priest had warned us about. Carved in symbols. Echoing with old prayers.

As Nanu stumbled into the center, the ground quaked.

“Now, chant!” Vinay screamed from behind, clutching the parchment with shaking hands.

I snatched it, held it high. My voice broke at first, but I pushed through, forcing each syllable out, heart pounding against my ribs like a war drum.

The air turned blood red. Symbols across the stone walls flared to life, burning like angry stars. The rope around the chamber lit up—blue fire licking its length. The stone door began to close, grinding with a sound that scraped the soul.

Nanu’s eyes shifted—just for a moment—to that of a child again. Soft. Scared.

“No—don’t lock me in here,” he cried, slamming his fists against the closing stone. “*Bhaiya*—please—I didn’t mean to—”

“You already crossed the line,” I said, voice hollow.

Tears brimmed in his eyes. “Don’t leave me...”

“You left us first.”

The door slammed shut.

The talisman pulsed once—twice—and then fell still.

The air grew quiet, too quiet. The whispers stopped.

The trees—once hunched and writhing—grew still. Straight.

And the red ball—

—rolled gently to a stop.

It was over.

Or so we thought.

We turned to Roma.

She coughed—blood bubbling at the edge of her lips.

I dropped to my knees, cradling her hand, trying to stop the bleeding with trembling fingers. “We’re here,” I said, voice thick. “We got you. You’re safe now.”

She tried to smile. Her lips twitched, barely. Her eyes lingered on mine.

And then they closed. Just like that... she was gone.

Only Four of us returned from the ruins.

Vinay.

Ravi.

Sumit.

And me.

Kapil’s body was never found. It was as if the forest swallowed him whole.

Roma was buried under the old banyan tree she used to sit beneath, sketching dreams she never got to live.

Nanu?

Still sealed.

Or so we believed.

Letters in the Rain

Sumit slammed his palm on the café table. Cups rattled. A spoon clattered to the floor. His face was flushed, lips trembling. “If you had listened to us that day—maybe this wouldn’t have happened!”

I felt the heat rise from my stomach to my throat, tight and bitter. I stood slowly, fists clenched. “You think we had a choice?” I snapped. “You think we knew what we were walking into?”

Sumit’s jaw tightened. His nostrils flared. “That wasn’t your brother,” he said, voice cracking. “That was a devi—” He faltered. His chest rose and fell fast, as if saying it made it more real.

“Whatever that thing was... it used him. And you still call him Nanu like he’s just... lost somewhere.”

I stepped forward. “Say it,” I demanded. My voice shook. “Say the truth. A spirit—no. Something older. A *rakshas*. It took him.”

Sumit’s eyes burned. “As if you don’t know what really happened!” he shouted. “Why are you pretending?”

“I’m not pretending!” I yelled back. “But you’re not listening either!”

His voice cut through mine, louder, harsher—“Kapil is dead! Roma is dead!”

Each word slammed into me like a fist.

“Our best friends! Gone! And you show up now—what, to light candles? To feel something again?”

Something snapped inside me.

I slammed both fists on the table, making every head in the café turn.

“I loved her!”

The words tore out of me like broken glass. Jagged. Bare.

“I loved her and she died in my arms. And I couldn’t do a damn thing to stop it.”

My knees buckled. The weight of it—of all of it—hit at once. I collapsed to the floor. Sobs broke from me, wild and raw, as I covered my face with my hands. I didn’t care who saw. I didn’t care about pride anymore.

Vinay was the first to reach me. He knelt beside me without hesitation, his touch warm, grounding.

Ravi followed, crouching low, unsure at first—then wrapping one arm around my back, steady like steel beneath the chaos.

“It’s okay, man,” Vinay murmured, over and over. “It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t.

“That’s why I’m here,” I choked out between breaths. “Not just to mourn them. To free them. Their souls—Roma, Kapil—they’re trapped. I feel it every time I close my eyes. They’re stuck in that place.”

A long, heavy silence settled. Even the clinking of cutlery around us seemed to fall away.

I lifted my head, blinking back tears, and looked at each of them. “That’s why I came back to the village.”

My voice steadied, even as my hands trembled. “It’s not just guilt. Or love. Something is still there. Something didn’t die with Nanu. And Kapil’s body—he was right there... and then he wasn’t. Roma died in my arms, but even then, something pulled at her. I felt it. Like it was trying to claim her.”

Ravi blinked hard, his face pale now, the usual spark gone from his eyes. “You think... they’re still there?” he whispered.

“Not alive,” I said. “But not gone either. Caught. In something old. And angry.”

Sumit stared at the ground, his voice low now, almost lost. “You think Nanu... the real him... is still inside that thing?”

I nodded slowly. “I don’t know if I can save him. But I have to try.”

Sumit looked up, his eyes shining—not with rage this time, but grief. Doubt. “And after everything he did... after what he became?”

My voice softened, like I was speaking to the boy who used to sit with me on rooftops. “At the end... just before the chamber closed... I saw him. Just for a second. He cried. He begged. Not like the monster. Like himself. Like my brother. And then he was gone.”

Vinay looked away, wiping a sleeve across his face. “I still hear Kapil’s voice sometimes,” he said quietly. “In dreams. Laughing. Then screaming.”

Ravi nodded slowly. “I see Roma,” I said. “Not every night. But sometimes. In the corner of a dream. Just... standing. Smiling, like she used to. But she never speaks. Just watches me. Like she’s waiting.”

I looked at them again—my broken, scared, loyal brothers.

“So no. I didn’t come back for closure.”

I stood. My legs shook, but my voice didn’t. “I came back because it’s not over. Because whatever that was—it’s still down there. Waiting. And if I don’t face it now... it’ll never let any of us go.”

Sumit didn’t speak. He just stood, arms hanging by his sides, jaw unclenched. Something behind his eyes melted—anger turning to sorrow. And he gave the smallest nod.

And then, like the sky had been listening too, the clouds darkened. Thunder rumbled softly above. A storm was coming.

After a while, I wiped my face and stood up slowly. “I have to go.”

“Let us come with you,” Vinay offered gently, Ravi nodding beside him.

But I shook my head. “No. Not this time.”

I stepped outside, the wind cool against my face. My mind wandered back to Roma—to the rain we once stood under, her laughter, the softness in her eyes... and the letter she gave me—the one where she had written everything she never said out loud.

I had written back too—never gave it to her. But that night, in the rain, I had told her everything with my eyes. And she understood.

The rain had started now—soft at first, then stronger.

I didn’t run. I let it soak me. And as I walked through the empty village lanes, drenched and quiet, I thought only of her.

The air had changed.

After the day's strange silence and Nanu's sudden disappearance near the ruins, something unseen hung above the village. Even the sky seemed unsure of itself.

By evening, dark clouds had gathered, curling over the treetops like fingers. Thunder rolled low and long—not loud, but present, like a warning whispered from far away.

Sumit and Ravi tried to distract the mood with jokes. Vinay offered to cook Maggi and *chai* at the café.

Roma sat quietly, her gaze lost beyond the trees. “I think it’s going to rain,” Roma said, glancing out.

She was right.

Within minutes, a soft drizzle turned into a steady downpour. The others rushed home, waving goodbye with umbrellas and laughter.

But we didn’t leave.

We stood just outside the café, under the small tin shade, watching the rain fall over the village. The fields looked dreamy, like a painting made of water and light.

“I love the rain,” she said. “It’s the only time everything feels... honest.”

I looked at her. “Why?”

“Because it doesn’t hide anything. It washes everything clean. It makes you feel everything you’ve been holding back.”

She took something from her bag. It was an old letter. The paper was yellowed, soft at the corners.

“I wrote this years ago,” she said. “Never gave it to anyone.”

“Can I read it?” I asked, gently.
She hesitated, then handed it over.
The handwriting was hers—neat, flowing.
It read:
To someone I haven’t met yet—
If you’re reading this, it means I finally found you.
I don’t know if you’ll understand me right away.
But I hope you stay long enough to try.
I don’t want grand promises. Just someone to sit with in
silence.
Someone who won’t leave when I fall apart.
Someone who’ll see me, even when I try to disappear.
If you’re out there—please stay.
I looked up. Her eyes were shining—not with tears, but with
something deeper—something like hope.
I folded the letter, gave it back, but held her hand as I did.
“I found you,” I said quietly. “And I’m not going anywhere.”
She leaned into me, her head resting against my chest.
We stood there as the rain fell around us, steady and soft, like
time had stopped.
And for the first time in a long time...
We weren’t lost.
We were home.
That night, I couldn’t sleep.

The rain whispered gently against the window of my old room—soft and constant, like it hadn't stopped since she leaned into me... since I felt her heartbeat matching mine, since I read her letter—a letter to someone she hadn't met.

But maybe... she'd always meant it for me. .

I sat at the wooden desk by the window—the same one from childhood. It still had scratches from my school days, corners chewed by time. This was the place I once used to draw monsters, write silly poems, and dream of worlds beyond the village.

But tonight, I didn't draw.

I didn't dream.

I wrote.

Roma,

I don't know if I'll ever give this to you.

Maybe this is just for me.

But I needed to put this somewhere—the way I feel when you look at me like I'm not broken, even though I've been carrying pieces for years.

You sat beside me in the rain and didn't say a word.

You didn't need to.

Because that silence spoke louder than anything else ever could.

I've been afraid for so long.

Afraid of the past. Of pain.

Of forgetting what love is supposed to feel like.

But then you walked back into my life.

Soft.

Unshaken.

Real.

I don't know what this is between us.

But I know it matters.

If one day you read this...

I hope you'll stay.

Not because I need saving.

But because I want to save us—before we drift again.

I folded the letter carefully.

My hands trembled as I tucked it between the pages of my old diary—right where childhood dreams used to live.

I didn't sign it.

I didn't date it.

Some feelings don't need timelines.

They just need space to breathe.

The rain tapped lightly on the roof above, and outside, the world felt washed—clean, new.

But inside me, something still ached—not just grief—not just longing—but a deep, silent pull toward the Ruins, toward the truth.

Because no matter how warm her letter felt, or how soft her eyes were...

We were still living in a place haunted by unfinished stories.
And if I wanted to protect what was left, I had to return.
Not just to the ruins, but to the memory of everything we tried
to bury.

The God Still Hungers

The rain had stopped by dawn, but everything outside still shimmered with yesterday's tears.

I hadn't slept.

Roma's letter was still pressed inside my diary, but her voice echoed louder than any written word ever could.

I stepped out onto the verandah, the air damp, fresh, and yet... off.

Something had shifted in the night.

Even the birds were quieter than usual.

The village was still asleep—but I felt watched. Not by people. Not even by memories. I was quietly enjoying the view outside.

Then suddenly, my eyes fell on a letter lying on the table. I hadn't seen it before.

My breath caught. It was a different paper—not the one from my diary. It was old, crinkled. The edges were slightly burnt, like it had survived something it shouldn't have.

It wasn't Roma handwriting. And it definitely wasn't mine.

It simply said:

"The answers are still waiting.

She's still waiting.

And he... never left."

No name.

No explanation.

But I knew.

The ruins weren't done with me.

I clenched the note in my fist. My legs trembled slightly—not from fear, but from knowing what had to come next.

Roma's eyes flashed in my mind—the way she'd looked at me in the rain, as if she knew what was coming, but couldn't stop it.

"She's still waiting..."

Was it her spirit that left this note?

Was she trying to guide me?

Or warn me?

I got dressed slowly—boots, a jacket, flashlight. I wore my old chain that Roma once tied around my wrist during a village fair—it was rusted now, barely holding together. But I wore it anyway.

As I reached the door, the wind outside stirred sharply, slamming an open window shut. A distant sound echoed in the breeze—like someone humming, a tune from long ago.

Familiar.

Childlike.

Broken.

It was his.

Nanu.

I stepped out of the house.

Ravi and Vinay were already at the café, probably waiting for me with questions in their eyes.

But I didn't go there. Not yet. Not until I knew what that message meant. Not until I saw her again.

Because somewhere between grief and memory, between rain and silence... Roma was still calling me.

And I had to answer.

Even if it meant walking into the dark—alone.

The road to the Ruins felt longer today. The trees leaned closer. The air thickened with every step I took. Even the wind sounded different here—like it carried secrets it was tired of keeping.

As I neared the broken gates, a red ball rolled across the path.

My breath hitched.

I hadn't seen it in years—not since... not since Nanu disappeared that night.

I bent down slowly and picked it up.

It was cold.

Too cold.

Like it had just come out of water. Or fire.

The Ruins stood in front of me—silent, broken, and forgotten, like a wound that time had left to rot. Its once-beautiful arches now looked like broken bones. The wooden doors creaked on rusty hinges, whispering lost prayers. A strange smell filled the air—damp moss, burnt oil, and something rotten. It clung to my skin like wet cloth and made old memories rise.

I stepped inside.

The silence wasn't peaceful—it was heavy, suffocating, like something was watching. Dust floated in the golden light, unmoving like frozen ghosts. I didn't know why, but I whispered her name.

“Roma...”

The word disappeared before it could echo, like the walls had swallowed it.

Then—Thud.

A sound behind me. I turned.

A ball rolled out. Small. Faded. Red. Old and cracked.

My breath caught in my throat. My stomach twisted.

Nanu's ball.

I looked back at the Ruins' door. It was slightly open. Darkness poured out—not just shadows, but something thicker. Alive. Like ink in water, it swallowed the light.

I crouched and touched the ball. The moment my fingers brushed it, I heard a voice, soft like smoke.

“Naman...”

I spun around.

No one.

The road was empty. The trees were still. But the chill on my neck told me I wasn't alone.

I stood, ball in hand, eyes on the door. It looked like a mouth, waiting to swallow me. Another whisper came—closer this time.

“Naman...”

It wasn't just sound now. It had weight. Presence.

The ball slipped from my hands and rolled, hitting the wall with a soft echo that lasted too long.

The Ruins weren't dead.

It was waiting.

Then I saw it—something red moving on the floor. A ribbon. Like it had just fallen from someone's hair. It moved, slowly, like it wanted me to follow.

Roma.

The name echoed—not from my mind, but from something deeper, something that remembered before I did.

I reached for the ribbon. The light above flickered. And in the cracked mirror across the hallway—

She appeared—pale as snow, eyes hollow, lips still. But I heard her voice.

“Don't forget me.”

Then—there was total darkness.

I couldn't see, couldn't breathe.

The smell of *mogra* flowers filled the air—sweet and thick. Too close.

A breath touched my neck.

Then a new voice. Not hers. Deep. Twisted.

“Mine.”

It wasn't a warning. It was a claim.

The air felt heavy. The hall seemed to close in. The shadows moved like fingers.

“Mine...”

I turned.

Nothing.

But the room was breathing now. Slow. Hungry.

Something moved beneath the floorboards, waking up.

The ribbon was gone. In its place—were small footprints. Not mine. Leading deeper.

I followed—drawn by a soft lullaby—Roma’s lullaby.

At the end of the corridor, a door opened with a creak. Moonlight poured in through a cracked window.

In the center of the room—was a pendant—swinging gently.

I stepped forward. It fell. Clinked on the ground.

I picked it up. It was warm—recently worn.

The scent of *mogra* returned. It was softer now. Sad.

I closed my eyes.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Tears filled my eyes. My chest hurt. For a moment, the room felt peaceful. The shadows are lighter.

Something had been released.

But then—the pendant burned in my hand.

I gasped—and dropped it.

The floor shook. Paintings fell. A sound rose—laughter. Sharp. Wrong. Not human.

I turned—and saw it.

A man's figure, slim, hunched, slipping through the ruins. Was it the same man from last night? Or something else?

He didn't look back. Just vanished into the dark like he belonged there.

My body wanted to run. But something older inside me told me—I had to follow.

So, I did.

The wind picked up. Dust swirled like whispers. The air changed—cold and heavy, like water.

All sounds stopped.

I was inside.

My flashlight flickered. The ruins swallowed the light. Symbols on the walls—some I remembered from childhood, others I wished I hadn't seen.

The man was gone. There were no footprints—just silence—deep and ancient.

And then I saw the stairs. Old. Narrow. Leading down. Like a tunnel. They looked carved from the earth. Jagged. Swallowed by darkness.

The smell rose from below—wet stone, rot, and blood.

My body froze. Heart pounded. Every instinct screamed: Don't go down.

But I stepped forward.

One step. The stone groaned.

Another.

The light faded behind me.

I took a deep breath—and went down.

It got colder. Damp walls. The smell stronger. My flashlight barely worked. The silence pressed against me like something was watching.

Then—I heard it.

A low hum. A chant. Dark. Repeating.

I stopped breathing.

The stairs led to a large chamber. Stone columns, covered in strange symbols that moved if I stared too long. The room glowed red, like bleeding walls.

At the center—a statue. Huge. Terrifying. Not like any god I knew.

Its eyes were hollow. Its mouth wide open in a silent scream. Horns curled from its head. Hands stretched out, like it was begging—or demanding.

At its feet—bones, melted candles, dried blood.

This was *Mayashakti Dushriya*.

The demon god.

They said if you gave it a sacrifice, it gave you anything you wanted.

Someone was doing just that.

A man stood in front of it, arms raised.

“Shakti de mujhe!” he shouted. *“Main bali doonga! Mujhe mera beta wapas chahiye! Zinda chahiye! Main kuch bhi karne ko tayyar hoon!”*

His voice broke.

My heart stopped.

Banwari Uncle.

Thinner. Older. Grey. Eyes sunken.

The same man who gave us sweets. The same man who changed after his son died.

And now—he was here. Begging. Promising things he shouldn’t.

My hand shook.

I stepped back.

And then—something flew out. A black bat. Fast. It brushed past me.

I gasped.

Too loud.

Banwari Uncle stopped. Turned. Our eyes met.

He knew me.

Then—his face changed. Something darker appeared.

He stepped toward me.

I ran.

I didn’t think, didn’t stop.

Just ran.

Up the stairs. Through the silence. Through the dark.
My flashlight fell. I didn't care.
I ran till my lungs burned.
I saw light—the outside world.
I burst out, gasping, sweating, shaking.
But even outside—I could hear it—his voice, his chant, the
promise of sacrifice.
Whatever Banwari Uncle had called—It wasn't over.
A shadow stood behind me. Tall. With glowing eyes and a
wide smile.
It didn't move.
But I did.
I ran.
The Ruins groaned, like it was alive, angry.
The door slammed behind me.
I fell to the ground, gasping.
The smell of *mogra* still clung to me.
I looked back once.
The windows were no longer broken.
They watched.
And in one of them—where Roma's room used to be—
A figure.
Not Roma.
Nanu.

But not how I remembered him.

His eyes glowed red.

His mouth didn't move.

But I heard the words.

"You can't leave, *bhaiya*. Not yet."

I didn't stop running until the ruins were far behind me, swallowed again by the trees and shadows. The cold night air stabbed my lungs, but I didn't care—I just kept running. Over roots, through bushes, past broken fences. The forest thinned. A distant lamppost flickered like a lighthouse.

I was back near the village.

But something felt... off. The air was still. Too still.

The streets were empty. No dogs barking. No soft clinking of dishes. No radio crackling from the tea stall. There was only silence—heavy—like the whole village was holding its breath.

I slowed down, chest heaving, and stopped at the edge of the village square. My hands trembled on my knees. Sweat clung to my skin like ice.

Then I felt it.

Not a sound. Not a sight.

A feeling.

The same one I felt inside the ruins—like a cold breath on the back of my neck. Like unseen fingers curling around my spine.

I straightened slowly, skin crawling.

And then—I heard it.

A faint rustle.

Like something shifting behind me.

I turned sharply.

Nothing.

Just the path leading back into the woods. The same one I'd just run through. The trees swayed. The lamplight buzzed above, weak and tired.

But the feeling wouldn't leave. In fact—it got stronger.

I took a step back.

That's when I saw it.

A figure.

At the very edge of the path. Just where the shadows thickened.

At first, I thought it was nothing. My eyes might be playing tricks. A tree. A shadow.

But then it moved.

A slow glide.

Too smooth.

Too still.

No sound. No breath. No footsteps.

It was just... there. Watching.

I squinted, trying to make out the face—but the darkness wouldn't let me. It swallowed every detail.

But I could feel it.

That same choking energy from inside the underground chamber. The same suffocating cold that wrapped itself around me like a shroud.

This wasn't Banwari Uncle. It wasn't human.

My mouth went dry. My heart thudded like it would explode.

The figure didn't move. But then—its head tilted. Just slightly—like it recognized me—or remembered me.

And something deep inside me screamed.

I turned and ran again.

Didn't think. Didn't stop. Just ran through the narrow alleys and dim streets, past locked houses and shuttered shops, until I saw it—

Sumit's café.

The Betrayal Beneath the Silence

Across from me, Ravi and Vinay exchanged a look—tense, wordless. Ravi’s usual smirk was gone, replaced with a twitch at the corner of his mouth. Vinay’s hands were clasped tightly in his lap, his knuckles pale. Their eyes—both wide and uncertain—told me they had felt it too. Not just fear. Recognition.

I tried to speak. My throat burned. My ribs heaved like I had been running, though I hadn’t moved since I came in. I could still feel it on me. The ruin’s breath. Its weight. It’s a whisper.

“It’s Banwari Uncle...” I croaked. “He was in the Ruins. Praying to something. Not a god. A... thing. A black stone statue. He said he needed a *bali*. A sacrifice. To bring his son back.”

The room chilled. You could almost hear the breath leaving their lungs.

Sumit froze mid-step behind the counter, arms slack at his sides, mouth parted just slightly. His fingers flexed, like he couldn’t decide whether to clench a fist or clasp his head. A shadow passed over his expression—disbelief trying to outrun fear.

“No...” he murmured, barely audible.

“And that’s not all,” I added, voice fraying. “Something followed me back.”

Sumit stepped out slowly, movements taut and cautious, as if he feared something might crawl out of the floor. “You mean... a ghost?”

I shook my head once, stiff. “No. Not a ghost.”

I turned toward the café window. Outside, the street lights flickered. The shadows between them were thick, unmoving. Watching.

“It’s something worse.”

Sumit ran a hand through his hair, then began pacing. His eyes scanned the room—corners, shelves, the door—as though expecting something to leap out. The kettle behind him hissed. He flinched.

Then a softer voice broke through. It was Vinay. “You saw her, didn’t you?” he said, not as a question. There was a quiet understanding in his tone, a pain he had long suspected but never said aloud.

I met his gaze. I didn’t need to reply.

Vinay leaned forward slightly, elbows on knees, the way someone does at a funeral when they can’t cry anymore. “Roma,” he said, with a softness that cracked.

Sumit stopped pacing and spun to face me, his brow furrowed deep. “You weren’t supposed to go alone,” he said, voice sharp, but trembling. “You know what that place does to people. That’s how it started with Nanu.”

“I know,” I whispered, setting my cup down with a trembling hand. I hovered there, remembering the red ball. Roma’s ribbon. The mirror.

“Something’s changed,” I said. “It’s not just haunted now. It’s awake.”

Ravi, quiet until now, suddenly gripped the edge of the table so hard it creaked. “Then it’s starting again.” His voice was low but tense, like he was trying to push down the urge to act—to fight something.

Silence again. Heavier than before.

Sumit pulled a chair, sat, elbows on knees. His eyes met mine—stormy, exhausted. “Tell us everything. From the beginning.”

I nodded. A breath. Then:

“The red ball. Nanu’s old one. It rolled out from under the shelf. Out of nowhere. Then Roma’s ribbon... It led me. Back to the *Haveli*.”

Ravi scoffed softly under his breath but said nothing.

“I saw her in the mirror. Pale. Sad. Like she wanted to speak. Or... warn me.”

Vinay shifted, his brow creasing. His hand absently went to the chain around his neck. “She never says anything in my dreams either. Just looks at me.”

“But something else was there too,” I continued. “A voice. Low. Whispering. One word. Mine. Over and over. Possessive. Angry.”

My fingers dug into my thigh.

“It wasn’t Nanu.”

Sumit straightened, eyes narrowing.

“It was Kapil.”

The name struck the room like a bell. Ravi blinked hard. Vinay's breath caught. Sumit's shoulders tightened, like they'd been hit.

Vinay's voice was the first to break the fog—gentle, cautious. “What do you mean?”

I looked down at the floor, then up again. “He loved her. All of us knew. But no one knew how much. Obsessive. He hid it. Too well.”

Sumit shook his head. “We thought they were just friends.”

“We all did,” I said. “But toward the end... he changed. Or maybe the Ruins changed him. Twisted what he already felt.”

Ravi jumped up from his chair, restless, wild-eyed. “You’re saying he had something to do with Roma’s death? That this—this thing—fed off him too?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But there’s a force in those ruins. Ancient. Hungry. It feeds on obsession. On pain. Maybe Kapil gave into it.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out Roma’s pendant. Cold. Heavier than before. The air around it seemed to ripple.

Sumit shot up. “This is madness. You’re just spinning stories now. Kapil wouldn’t—he couldn’t—”

“We have to know the truth,” I said, louder now. “This isn’t over. We all tried to forget. But it never ended.”

Sumit’s face turned red, his voice rising in fury. “And because we forgot, people died! Because of you!”

“Because of Kapil!” I shouted back. “He told us to go there! He led us! And Banwari’s rituals? The whispering? You think I imagined that?!”

“Enough!” Sumit bellowed, slamming his hand down so hard the table shuddered. “You want to chase ghosts? Fine. But I won’t. Not anymore.”

He stood frozen, chest heaving, fists trembling at his sides. But behind the anger, I saw it—fear. Grief. The desperate need to believe something else.

Vinay rose slowly, walked over to the window. He gazed out, his voice soft. “Maybe... maybe we never saw Kapil clearly. Not really. Maybe we were all too scared to look too close.”

Ravi laughed once—hollow, nervous. “Or maybe we were too busy trying to be heroes.”

Sumit didn’t respond.

The café felt like a mausoleum now.

I looked at them all—these brothers of mine, broken in their own ways.

And I said, “It’s not over. And it won’t be... until we go back.”

Then he looked at me again. This time, not angry—just tired. Just human.

“Naman,” he said, softer now. “We never asked before. But we need to know.”

He glanced at Ravi and Vinay. They nodded.

“What really happened... between you, Roma, and Kapil?”

His voice broke at the end.

The question pierced through me like a blade.

I looked down at the pendant again. My fingers curled tightly around it.

“I don’t know where to start,” I whispered.

“Just start somewhere,” Sumit said. “We need to understand.”

Outside, the sky had turned a strange shade of grey. The air was heavy with unshed rain. But beneath that weight was something else. Something still.

Not peace. Not calm.

The stillness before the truth breaks the surface.

And the village—silent as a grave—waited.

Fifteen years ago

That evening, the village felt peaceful—like it had just let out a long, tired breath. The kind of peace that makes you want to pause and simply take it all in.

The sun had dipped behind the hills, casting golden light across the fields. A soft breeze carried the smell of earth and blooming flowers. For the first time in a long while, I felt okay... more than okay. Being with Roma made everything feel real again.

We were walking slowly, quietly. Her hand brushed against mine now and then. No words were needed—we just understood each other.

Then we saw him.

Kapil.

He stood near the bend in the lane, under the leaning neem tree. His eyes were fixed on us.

Roma stopped suddenly beside me.

Kapil took a step forward. But he wasn’t smiling like he used to.

“Roma...” His voice was low, full of pain.

Roma stepped a little away from me, unsure. “Kapil?”

“I need to talk to you,” he said, not even looking at me.

Roma hesitated, then turned to me. “Can you give us a moment?”

I stepped back, watching closely.

Kapil didn’t wait.

“I know, Roma,” he said, his voice shaking. “I know about you and Naman.”

Roma looked surprised. “Kapil, I—”

“Please,” he cut her off. “Just let me speak.”

She nodded, silent.

“I’ve loved you for a long time,” he said, his eyes red, voice cracking. “Since we were kids. You must have known.”

Roma shook her head gently. “No, Kapil. I didn’t. And I’m really sorry.”

He stepped closer, unsteady. “I see you with him. Laughing. Happy. Looking at him like he’s your world. And it hurts. It breaks me.”

“Kapil,” she said softly, “what Naman and I have... it’s real. I never meant to hurt you. But you and I—we were just friends. That’s all.”

Kapil’s voice grew louder. “But I can’t help how I feel! Watching you two together—it’s killing me!”

Roma’s face changed. She looked angry now. “You’ve been watching us?”

Kapil's expression tightened. "I didn't mean it like that—"

"You should be ashamed," she snapped. "That's not love, Kapil. That's obsession."

"Don't say that," he growled. "Don't make me the bad guy. I love you, Roma! I love you!"

He dropped to his knees, grabbing her hand. "Please. Just give me a chance. Leave him. He doesn't deserve you. I'll do anything—"

Roma yanked her hand away, furious. "This is not love. And you need to stop—right now."

Kapil broke down, tears falling. "Roma, please... just once..."

Slap.

The sound rang out loud in the stillness.

Roma slapped him, tears in her eyes.

"Don't ever touch me again," she said, her voice trembling.

Then she turned and walked away, fast, disappearing into the fading light. Kapil didn't follow. He stayed on the path, sitting in the dust, broken and crying.

But slowly, the sobs stopped. And something changed. He went still. His eyes opened—and now they were full of rage. He stood up, brushed off his shirt, breathing hard. And without saying a word, he started walking—straight to Roma's house.

Roma's House – Moments Later

Kapil banged on the door, again and again.

Roma's uncle opened it, confused. "Kapil?"

“I need to talk to you,” Kapil said, breathing fast. “It’s about Roma. And what she’s doing with Naman.”

“What?” her aunt came to the door, her voice sharp.

“They’re... seeing each other. Secretly. At night. In the fields, on the rooftops. They’re together,” Kapil said bitterly.

The words dropped like stones.

Her uncle’s face twisted in anger. “What are you saying? You think we raised her for this?”

“She’s ruined our name!” her aunt screamed. “Your parents are dead, and you should’ve died too!”

“After everything we’ve done for you,” her uncle shouted, “this is how you repay us? You shame us?”

At the stairs, Roma stood frozen. She had heard it all.

She didn’t say anything.

She couldn’t.

The pain was too deep.

Her hands shook. Her knees gave out.

She sank to the floor and cried—loud, painful sobs that came from her soul.

But no one came to comfort her.

No one.

What She Left Behind

After that... none of us—me, Sumit, Ravi, or Vinay—said a word—not that day, not even later. We were too tired to talk, too shaken to understand what we had just seen... or maybe, what we had remembered from fifteen years ago.

And deep down, each of us knew—

The worst wasn't over.

It was still out there... waiting.

But that night, none of us wanted to face it.

We just wanted a moment of peace; to breathe; to pretend that we were okay; to feel something close to normal again.

I tried to sleep, but my mind refused to quiet down.

One name kept echoing through every thought.

Roma.

She lingered in my chest like a forgotten melody, like a heartbeat I couldn't control.

So, I got up.

I walked to the river—the same old riverbank where Roma and I used to sit when we were young; where we laughed until our stomachs hurt; where silence between us had always felt safe, never empty; where moments felt like pieces of forever gently falling into place.

The closer I got, the heavier my chest became. A tightness curled around my ribs. A warmth stung behind my eyes.

Tears.

Uninvited, unstoppable.

Memories rose like waves—

The river shimmered under the moonlight, its dark surface rippling like a quiet sigh from the earth itself.

I sat at the old spot—flat rock, just near the bend—where she and I used to come all those years ago; where we laughed; talked; where silence had always felt like a language only we spoke.

The village had changed—the people, the stories. But this place... this place is still remembered.

And maybe tonight, it remembered her too.

Because suddenly, I felt her.

Roma.

Not a hallucination. Not just a memory.

But something softer.

Something deeper.

Like a presence stitched into the very air around me.

I didn't turn.

Didn't breathe too hard.

I just... let it happen.

And then I heard her voice.

Not like a whisper.

But like an echo that knew exactly where to land in my heart.

She looked at me—

and in her eyes, I saw it.

Fear.

But beneath it... something softer.

Something sorrowful.

Love.

“You remember this place?” she asked, her gaze resting on the water.

“We used to throw stones in and make wishes.”

A familiar ache tugged at my heart.

I nodded.

“I think I made a wish once,” she said quietly, her voice trembling.

“I wished nothing would ever change, that we’d all stay the same, together.”

“But things did change,” I whispered.

She gave a small, sad smile.

“They did.

And maybe... something didn’t like that.”

A chill passed between us.

The grass rustled, almost like it was listening.

She moved closer.

Our shoulders touched.

“You know... after my mother and father died, I thought that was it. That this life was just... bitter. Empty. A long walk through something I never chose.”

I closed my eyes.

The voice was so clear—so heartbreakingly hers.

“My uncle and aunt... they tried. But I never felt like I belonged anywhere after that. I used to think they’d marry me off to someone I barely knew. And then the rest of my life would just be... quiet misery.”

I saw her then—not beside me, not quite real—but across the water, wearing the same simple dress from that day—hair down, loose, catching the breeze, with eyes so full of pain that she never let me see back then.

She was looking at the water—just like she used to whenever she had something serious to say.

“But then you came into my life,” she said. “And for the first time, I felt something again. It wasn’t happiness, maybe... but a reason to stay. Just being around you made things feel... lighter.”

My throat burned.

I remembered that exact day.

Fifteen years ago.

She had said those very words—sitting right here—not knowing how little time we had left.

“I never told you,” her voice continued, softer now, fragile, like it came from beneath the river itself, “but every time I saw you, it felt like the world made sense again. And every time I

was afraid... I was just scared that maybe you'd leave me too.
Like everyone else did."

She hadn't finished the sentence that day.

She didn't finish it today either.

But her eyes did.

I looked at her—

I really *looked*.

And for the first time in years, I saw it again.

That quiet, glowing softness.

The warmth that used to live in her eyes.

And beneath it—

fear.

But love too.

So much love.

Because the vision—her—was fading—drawn back into the night, back into whatever place memory and spirit intertwined.

I reached out instinctively.

But there was only air.

Only the cold brush of a wind that carried the scent of the river and smoke.

My eyes stung.

Because love doesn't leave quietly.

And memories never really die.

And then I looked down.

The ribbon.

Her crimson ribbon—lying on the stone beside me.

Frayed. Faded.

Real.

I picked it up with shaking fingers and tied it gently around my wrist.

A knot. A memory.

A promise that even death hadn't erased.

"I never left you, Roma," I whispered into the dark.

"I still haven't."

And for just a breath... the river shimmered, the water stilled.

And I could've sworn I heard it—

Her laughter.

Somewhere between wind and moonlight.

The sun broke slowly over Khara Khara, like it was afraid to wake the village completely. Birdsong drifted through the mist, soft and cautious, as if the world was still remembering how to breathe.

I sat on the steps outside the Roma house, Roma's ribbon still tied around my wrist. It fluttered lightly in the breeze, and for a second, it didn't feel like cloth. It felt like a pulse, like a heartbeat I didn't know whether to trust or mourn.

Had I imagined it all?

Her voice. Her presence. The way the air had changed around me.

I wanted to believe it was just a memory—

but the ribbon... that was real.

And something else was too.

Because when I stood up to go back inside, I noticed something strange—

Footprints—small, made with bare feet—leading from the riverbank to the edge of the house.

But they weren't from today.

They were too faint, as if made in dew rather than dirt, like someone had walked there not quite in this world.

I followed them. Carefully. Slowly.

Each step felt like I was stepping into something sacred... or cursed.

The prints led to the back of the house, to the old storeroom no one used anymore.

I hesitated. The air felt wrong. Still.

But I opened the rusted door anyway.

Inside, it was dark—

until the light caught on something on the floor.

A small tin box—dusty, untouched for years.

My hands trembled as I picked it up.

On the lid was something scrawled in old blue ink:

"To Naman. In case I'm not there anymore."

Roma's handwriting.

I almost dropped it.

My chest clenched with a feeling I couldn't name—fear, grief, hope?

I opened the box. Inside it were folded pieces of paper—yellowed, aged.

Her letters. Her thoughts.

Some were addressed to me.

Some were just confessions.

Memories. Questions she never dared speak aloud.

And at the very bottom—a photo—of the two of us, taken the day before she died—smiling, unaware, frozen in a moment that had no idea how tragic the next day would be.

On the back of it, scribbled in red ink:

“Find the room beneath the ruins.”

I stood there for a long time.

My heart was racing.

Breath was shallow.

Roma wasn't just a memory.

She had left something behind.

A message. A trail.

And maybe... a way to finally understand what had really happened that night.

Where the Darkness Waits

It started with a knock—not loud, not hurried.

There were three slow taps, evenly spaced—like someone knew he was awake and waiting.

Sumit paused mid-step, halfway across the room. He stared at the door.

There was no breeze, no birds, no dogs barking.

Just the thick, syrupy silence of 3:17 AM.

He didn't move at first.

His pulse counted out seconds.

Then, with a dry throat and the sudden feeling that he was being watched, he unlatched the bolt and pulled the door open.

The street was empty.

No footsteps. No voices.

Just the rustle of dead leaves scratching across the concrete like fingernails.

And then—he saw it.

At his doorstep.

A statue—small, cracked, waiting—made of old black stone, no taller than a bottle of milk, with twisted horns curled backward like spirals.

A grin carved too wide for any mouth—mocking, impossible, obscene.

Its eyes hollow but deep, as if something peered back.
Sumit stood motionless. His breath caught in his chest.
His fingers touched the idol. It was warm, too warm, like it
had a pulse.
And the moment he made contact—his mind slipped.
He didn't remember grabbing his keys.
Didn't remember opening the gate.
But there he was, barefoot on the road.
Gravel cutting into his soles.
Each step drawn forward, not taken.
Limbs like marionette strings pulled by unseen hands.
The night opened around him. The wind was gone.
Only silence—and the ruins ahead.
Crumbled stones bathed in moonlight. Shadows pressed close
like watching figures.
Behind the ruins... was a staircase, one he didn't remember
ever seeing. It sloped downward, coiled in darkness, half-
consumed by vines.
The walls dripped with condensation that glistened like
blood.
Sumit descended.
The air changed—thick, metallic.
The kind of taste you feel on your tongue after a nosebleed.
The stone breathed. The ceiling pulsed. The ground
squelched.

Then he saw light.
A wooden door. Crooked. Half-open.
He leaned forward, peering through a crack.
Banwari knelt in the flickering glow of candlelight.
Shadows danced across his face—sharp and frantic.
His hands were raised.
His lips trembled.
But this wasn't prayer.
The idol stood in front of him—larger now—as if it had grown,
as if it fed. Its grin twisted wider, splitting up to its ears. Its
eyes... were endless voids, swallowing light.
Banwari's voice broke. "Give me power!"
His tone cracked with desperation. "Give me strength! Make
me more than them!"
Then his tongue unraveled into something else.
Sanskrit—ripped apart.
Guttural, ancient syllables that clawed at Sumit's ears.
"You want a sacrifice, don't you?" Banwari whispered. "You
want blood? I'll bring it. I'll bring him."
Sumit's breath hitched.
Banwari turned suddenly.
Eyes wet and wide, he looked up—through the crack—directly—
at Sumit.
A smile spread across Banwari's face. Slow. Certain.

Sumit's heart flipped.

He ran.

Didn't stop.

Didn't look back.

Didn't dare to.

At Ravi's House...

It was late. Ravi lay on his side, half-asleep, the blanket pulled to his chin. The ceiling fan groaned above.

From the street came the occasional hum of a passing scooter.

And then—

Her voice.

“Ravi... open the door, *beta*... come to me...”

His eyes opened wide.

Every muscle stiffened.

Ma?

His mother was in Patiala, over three hundred kilometers away.

But her voice was clear. Close. Behind the door.

He sat up slowly, feet touching the cool floor.

Tension crawled over his skin like ants.

He walked to the door.

“Ma?” he whispered.

“Open it, *beta*...”

The voice was sweet. Familiar.

But too perfect. Like a recording on repeat.

He turned the latch. Hinges creaked. Only darkness greeted him—deep and endless—the kind that swallows light.

And then the cold hit—wet and unnatural. It slid over him like something alive.

His breath turned to fog.

His skin broke out in goosebumps.

And the smell—

Burnt meat.

Rotting fat.

Charred human skin.

He slammed the door shut.

Locked it. Bolted it. Pushed a chair against it.

Didn't sleep that night.

He didn't even blink.

At Vinay's House...

He was brushing his teeth, eyes half-lidded, body on autopilot.

The buzz of his electric toothbrush was the only sound in the room.

He leaned toward the mirror, spit, and looked up.

And stopped.

His reflection hadn't moved.

Not even a twitch.

It stared back, toothbrush still in mouth.

Vinay blinked.
So did the reflection.
But it was too late.
A second off.
Wrong.
He stepped back, foam on his lips.
The reflection stayed still.
Then... it smiled.
A slow, deliberate curl of the lips.
Cruel. Intimate. Like it knew him.
Vinay didn't move.
But his reflection did. It raised its hand—waved slowly, fingers
twitching like spider legs.
Its eyes had changed.
No longer his own.
Pitch black.
Not empty—full.
Like a dark ocean with something vast and ancient waiting
beneath the surface.
Vinay dropped the toothbrush.
Backed away.
His foot caught the doormat.
The mirror laughed.
But only inside his head.

At Naman's House...

THOK-THOK-THOK!

A loud, violent knocking shook the house.

Nagendra rushed to open it.

“Arre, aa rahe hain! Kaun hai?”

The moment he opened the door—something slammed into him—not a man, not a force, but a presence.

It entered him like smoke forced down the throat.

Nagendra's body twitched.

Jerked.

His back arched, and his eyes rolled—then opened again. But they weren't his.

They were wrong.

Too dark. Too deep. Like tunnels to somewhere else.

He turned his head side to side, slowly, unnaturally—like a puppet testing its joints.

He walked into the kitchen.

Grabbed an iron rod.

Then chaos.

He destroyed everything—mirrors, shelves, furniture. He slammed the rod into walls, screeched like an animal, tore cushions with his teeth.

And then... he wrote on the walls.

Fast. Aggressively.

His hands bled as he carved symbols with his fingers.

Symbols no one recognized.

Then—another bang on the door.

He opened it.

Sumit.

He recoiled, horrified.

“*Nagendra... kya hua tumhe?*” Sumit stammered.

Nagendra raised the iron rod and swung.

Sumit jumped back, barely dodging.

Nagendra lunged—screaming, snarling.

Sumit ran.

He thought he was safe. But something followed.

On his bike, speeding through the forest road, Sumit felt the air behind him go still. Then cold. Then sharp.

The bike shuddered.

Pulled.

The tires slipped.

He crashed, skidding across gravel.

Before he could rise—the hands, invisible, cold, and heavy—dragged him through the woods. His fingers clawed at the dirt, screaming, but the earth offered no grip.

He was pulled to the ruins—down the steps—into the dark.

And there—

Banwari

Kneeling.

Murmuring in a voice that didn't sound like his. A voice older than language. Words older than time.

Before a grotesque idol that now throbbed with energy.

Sumit tried to move.

SLAM!

The wooden door behind him shut. No wind. No latch. But sealed.

He screamed.

“HELP! PLEASE! SOMEBODY!”

No echo.

Just... the sound vanishing into silence.

Banwari opened his eyes—red, fleeing, empty.

“Please, Banwari... I won't tell anyone. Just let me go... please...”

No answer. Just... staring.

Then Banwari reached for something.

A dagger.

Curved. Ancient. Too large. Too ceremonial.

He raised it toward the idol.

“You wanted blood, didn't you?”

“This one—he was going to tell the truth.”

“If I offer him... will I become immortal?”

“Tell me!”

Banwari looked at Sumit. Eyes wild. Tears mixed with blood.

This is my offering!”

Banwari stepped forward, the blade in his hand catching firelight.

Sumit screamed.

His hands scraped against the stone floor, trying to crawl backward. His body trembled uncontrollably.

“Why are you doing this?!”

His voice cracked—raw, terrified.

But Banwari didn’t stop.

His face was different now—eyes sunken, veins crawling like black worms beneath his skin. His lips twitched with feverish devotion.

The blade rose higher.

His breath came in ragged gasps.

Sumit sobbed, voice breaking.

“NAMAN....! PLEASE—”

And then—

Stillness.

Not silence—stillness.

Time seemed to freeze.

Banwari’s hand jerked, like it had struck something unseen.

He staggered.

His eyes widened.

Someone stood behind him.

A man—still, unmoving.

Shadows wrapped around his form, but his presence was solid, unmistakable.

He held Banwari's wrist—not with violence, but with authority.

Banwari growled, furious, trying to wrench free.

But the figure didn't let go.

He turned, slightly—enough for the firelight to catch the side of his face.

A calm expression. Sad eyes. Familiar.

Sumit's breath caught in his throat.

"Nanu...?" he whispered.

It was him.

Banwari twisted again, his face contorted with frustration.

But the blade dropped.

Clattered to the stone.

And Banwari stumbled backward, collapsing to his knees.

Sumit blinked.

The blade hovered above Sumit's chest—its jagged edge gleaming red from the firelight.

Banwari's eyes burned with something inhuman. His breath was ragged, lips moving silently. He wasn't fully here anymore.

Something had crawled into him—something old and ravenous.

Sumit choked on his sobs, hands pressed against the cold stone floor.

“Why are you doing this?!” he screamed, voice breaking.

Banwari didn’t answer.

He just smiled.

The blade rose higher.

Sumit shut his eyes.

“NAMAN! PLEASE!” he cried, the name ripped from his throat like a final prayer.

Then—

Silence.

The fire snapped out, swallowed by darkness. The heat vanished. The blade didn’t fall.

Sumit opened his eyes.

Banwari had stopped mid-motion.

Frozen.

His arms trembled. His mouth twitched.

And behind him—

someone stood.

A silhouette. Tall. Still. Watching.

Banwari turned. Slowly. Mechanically.

His lips curled back, half-growl, half-snarl. “No... you...”

The shadow stepped closer.

Its presence changed the air itself—thick, cold, charged. Even in the dark, Sumit could feel it: something protective, but ancient. Like a force that didn't belong in this world—but wasn't against it either.

Banwari growled again, shaking now. "You can't stop me! I made the pact! He gave me the right!"

But the figure raised one arm.

Banwari staggered.

His grip on the knife broke.

He fell to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

The idol behind him—twice as large now, eyes wide and starving—cracked down the middle with a sound like bone splitting.

And then... everything vanished.

The fire.

The idol.

Banwari.

Gone.

Just darkness.

And breath.

Sumit lay on the floor, shaking, drenched in sweat. The silence was suffocating. But the figure remained.

He rose slowly to his knees, whispering, "...Nanu?"

The shape didn't move. But something in Sumit's chest fluttered.

Recognition.

Warmth.

Then—without words—it was gone. Like mist dissolving into the night.

Behind him, the hidden staircase had returned. Winding upward, back toward the surface.

Sumit climbed.

Each step was agony—his feet were torn, his mind bruised—but he didn't stop. When he emerged, the ruins behind him were silent once more. The trees whispered. Crickets resumed their songs.

He stood at the edge of the stone clearing, eyes wide, chest heaving.

He was alive.

That night, Sumit didn't sleep.

He couldn't.

Every time he closed his eyes, he felt the grin of the idol behind his eyelids.

That smile wasn't just a memory anymore.

It was a shadow. A whisper.

It lived in the room with him now.

He left the lights on.

Clutched his knees to his chest.

Waited for the sun.

But the night had other plans.

A crash.

Glass. Breaking.

Then his mother's voice—

raw. Panicked.

“SUMIT! HELP! OPEN THE DOOR!”

He bolted upright.

Feet hit the floor.

Heart hammering.

Downstairs, both parents were banging against the inside of the front door, like they were trapped inside their own house.

He rushed down, yanked the handle—

It wouldn't move.

No bolt. No lock.

But something held it closed, as if the door itself had grown teeth.

“SUMIT!” his father's voice now.

Booming. Furious. Terrified.

Sumit cried out, slammed his shoulder into the wood again and again.

Nothing.

He panicked.

Sprinted out the back, around the side of the house.

Climbed through the open kitchen window—
—and stopped.
The room was hell.
Furniture overturned.
Air thick with the sound of wings.
Bats.
Black. Screeching. Endless.
Swarming the room, crashing into walls, diving at flesh.
His parents lay on the floor.
Motionless.
And the bats were feeding.
Tearing into their skin.
Ripping pieces away.
Chewing.
Sumit's mother—her body still twitching—had her face half
gone.
One eye is missing.
Mouth frozen mid-scream.
His father's chest was open—bats digging into it like they knew
where to go.
And then came the sound from below:
Chittering.
Cockroaches.
Thousands.

Pouring out from cracks, from the sink, from the ceiling fan.

They moved like liquid.

Onto the bodies.

Inside the bodies.

Crawling through open wounds, into mouths, behind eyes.

Devouring.

Sumit couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't breathe.

He stood there, frozen in horror, eyes locked on what remained of his parents—as the creatures feasted.

And then, beneath the noise—he heard it, a voice, whispering, behind him—or inside him.

A single word—soft, playful.

“Nanu.”

Nagendra walked back into the house.

He didn't eat.

Didn't speak.

Just stared at the walls, his fingers twitching.

The house had changed. Or maybe it was him.

Mirrors whispered in languages he didn't know. Photographs wept. The wind knocked, softly, like someone asking to come in.

And the name—*Nanu*—scratched itself into his mind like claws across stone.

At midnight, he lit no lamps.

He sat in the center of the living room, knees folded, spine straight. Around him, the shadows moved like breathing things.

Then—he reached for the knife.

It had been on the kitchen floor since morning. He didn't remember putting it there. But it waited for him. As if it always knew he'd come.

His hand closed around it, cold, and heavy.

Nagendra smiled faintly.

“He wants blood.”

He plunged the blade into his left thigh.

No hesitation.

Squelch.

The pain was volcanic—but he welcomed it.

He dragged the blade down slowly, slicing muscle, veins, sinew. Blood burst forth in hot spurts, pooling beneath him. His body began to twitch. But he didn't stop.

He stabbed again—this time into the right leg.

The flesh opened like overripe fruit.

Still—no screams.

Just humming.

He carved up both thighs until he couldn't feel them anymore. His feet twitched. He laughed.

And then—he leaned forward.

Bit.

His teeth tore into his own leg. Chewed. Swallowed.

Blood smeared across his face like war paint.

And then, with trembling fingers, he lifted the knife again—and began scratching into his chest. The blade cut deep, slow letters into his skin.

N. A. N. U.

Each letter dripped. Each stroke hurt more than the last.

By the time he finished, his torso was a ruin. His body was slicked in red.

He paused.

His breathing slowed.

His eyes... blinked.

Clear.

Human.

He looked down at himself.

His legs: ribbons.

His chest: torn.

His hands: covered in his own meat.

“Wh... what have I done?” he gasped, horror dawning in his eyes.

He tried to stand—but his legs crumpled beneath him.

“HELP! PLEASE! SOMEBODY!” he screamed, sobbing, voice raw with terror.

No one answered.

Only the house did. The walls creaked in response. The shadows shifted.

And something... came back into him.

His face went slack.

Then smiled again.

A wide, broken, unnatural smile.

He picked up the knife one last time—and drove it deep into his own neck.

The sound was wet and final.

He gurgled. Twitched.

Fell forward.

Blood painted the walls.

And his eyes—still open—stared straight ahead.

Or what was left of it.

Lying in a pool of dark, sticky blood, his skin was torn, his chest carved, and his neck slashed open.

His face twisted in a way no living thing should look.

Naman stumbled backward, falling hard onto the floor.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. His mind screamed—*this isn't real; this can't be real.*

But it was.

Tears filled his eyes. His body shook.

He wanted to scream, to run, to tear his eyes away—but he couldn't.

He just sat there, frozen, trapped in a nightmare.

People behind him were whispering.

Crying.

Praying.

Then he heard a voice—sharp, panicked.

"Sumit! Look at him!" someone cried. "Something's wrong—something's happened to him too!"

My head snapped up.

Sumit...?

Without thinking, I ran—out of the house, down the narrow lane.

My breath burned in my chest. My legs barely carried me.

I didn't stop until I reached Sumit's house.

The door was open.

Inside, he found Sumit curled up in a corner—face pale, body shaking, his clothes torn and bloody. His eyes were wild with fear. He didn't even notice me at first. He just kept whispering over and over, "Bats... they were everywhere... *maa... papa...*"

I knelt beside him and grabbed his shoulders.

"Sumit! What happened? Look at me! What happened!?" I shouted, voice breaking.

Sumit's eyes finally met me. Tears ran down his face. "They're dead," he whispered. "They both are dead..."

And then Sumit broke down completely, sobbing like a child. I held him, feeling helpless, feeling lost. Something evil had entered their lives—something that was not finished yet.

The Path of the Priests

We sat together on the broken temple steps.

The early morning light draped the ruins in a pale grey, like even the sun was afraid to rise.

Sumit huddled beneath the old banyan tree, knees drawn to his chest, arms locked tight around them. His fingers twitched every now and then—like echoes of something that hadn't quite let go of him. His eyes, wide and hollow, stared into the trees ahead. Not at them—through them. Like he was still stuck in that room. That scream-stained silence. That blood.

No one spoke. Even the wind held its breath.

I sat beside him, close but not touching. The closeness was meant to say I'm here, but I wasn't sure if he could feel it. His face was streaked with dried tears. His breathing was uneven, chest rising in shallow jerks. He hadn't really spoken since he told us what he saw inside the ruins. Not in full.

He just... cried.

Across the clearing, Ravi moved like a storm looking for ground. Pacing tight, fast circles, muttering under his breath, hoodie sleeves stretched where he kept wringing his fists inside them. He didn't like stillness. Stillness scared him more than shadows.

"We still don't know why this happened," he muttered suddenly, voice low like he didn't want the banyan to overhear. "Why Sumit? Why Roma? Why now?"

He stopped. Eyes flicking to each of us, then back to the dirt. His tongue darted over dry lips.

“What if tomorrow... it’s one of us?”

His laugh was sharp and bitter. “Shit. Shouldn’t’ve said that.”

No one replied. Because he wasn’t wrong.

Sumit let out a quiet exhale. His lips moved like they were rusted. When he finally spoke, his voice was thinned out, paper-fragile.

“He changed, Naman...”

His head didn’t lift. His knuckles had turned bone-white from gripping his knees too tight.

“Nagendra wasn’t himself. Something else took over him.”

I clenched my jaw. Didn’t look up. My pulse thudded in my throat.

Sumit turned slightly toward me.

“I saw Banwari,” he added, barely audible.

The silence snapped taut.

“When?” I asked. Too quickly.

His head dropped further. “That night. In the ruins. He was there. Doing... something. A ritual. Kneeling. Praying to that... thing. That idol.”

His voice caught. He blinked hard, as if trying to keep himself from drowning in memory. His next breath shuddered like it had thorns in it.

From where he sat cross-legged, Vinay finally moved—his body slow, like a calming tide. He leaned forward and rested a hand gently on Sumit's back.

"It's okay, *bhai*," he said, his voice warm and steady. "You don't have to spill all of it now."

Ravi scoffed, arms folded. "I still don't get it," he muttered. "You're saying Banwari planned this?"

Sumit didn't reply.

But I did.

"He didn't just plan it. He believed in it. He begged that thing, Ravi. Like it could answer. This isn't some grieving father gone mad. This is something else. An obsession."

Ravi grimaced. "We've all lost people. You don't start calling on demons because of it."

"Maybe you don't," Vinay said gently, "but grief can twist people. Especially if they think there's a chance... to undo it."

"We keep going on about Nanu and the ruins," I said. "But Banwari's name barely comes up. Why?"

"Because it's easier not to believe," Ravi muttered. His bravado was leaking now. Voice quieter. Almost scared.

"Is it really?" Sumit looked up, eyes red, voice dry with salt. "He wanted his son back. I saw him cry to that thing like it was God. And maybe... it answered."

Ravi stepped forward. "So what—you think Banwari's behind all of this?"

Vinay's gaze sharpened, his tone more resolute now. "Why not? We've seen enough to stop pretending it's a coincidence."

Ravi's arms dropped. He glanced around—the trees, the temple ruins, the forest that shimmered like it was holding its breath.

"It's not just him," he said. "I don't know who else. But Banwari's not the only one hiding something."

Vinay looked between us. "Then maybe we talk to someone who actually knows what this is."

We all turned toward him.

"Who?" I asked.

Ravi narrowed his eyes. "You mean the old priest, don't you? The one near the water shrine?"

Vinay nodded. "The baba who lives alone past the fields. Doesn't say much. But people say... he remembers the old things. The ones our parents pretend never existed."

Sumit's voice, still hoarse, joined in. "I heard he once warned a family. Told them never to go near the ruins. Said the land remembers everything."

I stood. My voice is steady now. "Then we go. Tonight. Before this swallows someone else."

Sumit looked up at me, his face pale and brittle. "And what if he tells us to leave?"

"Then we'll stay till he doesn't," Vinay said. "But we're done waiting in the dark. We need answers."

No one argued.

The wind shifted, rustling the dry leaves down the temple steps.

And from deep in the forest, far beyond where the light could touch, a bell began to toll—slow, heavy, and hollow.

As if something had already heard us coming.

We walked through the forest just before sunset.

The path was overgrown, the underbrush clawing at our ankles. It felt like we were trespassing—on a memory, or a grave. The trees above bent inward, their branches tangled like gnarled hands whispering secrets.

Not a bird sang. Not a leaf stirred.

It was the kind of silence that pressed into your ears until your own breath felt too loud.

The deeper we walked, the colder the air became. Not from the wind. Just... cold. Like the forest was swallowing light.

I couldn't stop thinking about what I'd seen beneath the ruins.

The shadows, shifting like they were alive.

The chanting, guttural and wrong.

That monstrous idol—towering, bloated, its skin slick like oil and eyes too many to count. Arms sprawled outward, not in welcome... but in hunger.

And Banwari—kneeling before it, whispering words in a language that didn't belong on any tongue—begging, trading—lives for one.

Sumit walked just ahead of me. His shoulders were hunched, jaw tight, as if each step was a choice. A punishment. His

voice, when it came, barely rose above the hush of our footfalls.

“He truly believed...”

He didn’t look at us. Just shook his head slowly, the tremble in his breath betraying the war inside.

“He’s insane...”

“No,” I said, almost too quietly to hear. “He’s cursed.”

Sumit flinched—just slightly—but didn’t argue.

“Touched by something worse than death.”

Beside me, Vinay walked with his arms folded, his pace steady, gaze drifting from tree to tree—not in fear, but like he was listening for something deeper. Something unspoken.

“Did that thing...” he asked gently, “have a name?”

I hesitated.

The name slithered in my mind like something alive, wrapping around the base of my skull.

I nodded.

“*Dusriya Devta.*”

The words felt like they didn’t belong in my mouth. Like saying them too loud would wake something up.

Vinay stopped for a beat. His expression didn’t change, but I saw something pass through his eyes. A ripple.

“The false god,” I added. “The god of second lives.”

The moment stretched. Even the trees felt like they were leaning in.

Sumit's hands gripped the red pouch slung across his chest. His thumbs rubbed over the fabric in frantic little circles—like trying to clean something that wouldn't wash away. Something rustled inside. A soft, papery whisper. He winced, but didn't loosen his grip.

Ravi, who had been behind us this whole time—quiet for once—finally spoke up, his voice edgy, laced with sarcasm to hide the tremor underneath.

"Second lives?" he muttered. "Great. Just what we need. A god for the dead who don't stay that way."

He picked up a twig, snapped it in half, and tossed the pieces into the undergrowth. His eyes scanned the path ahead like he expected something to step out any second.

"I swear, this whole village is a breeding ground for bad legends." His tone was brash, but his steps had quickened. He didn't want to be here any longer than necessary.

"There's something else," I said.

All three turned toward me.

My throat felt dry, my tongue thick.

"I think..." I paused, forcing the words out. "I think I brought something back. From that place. From under the Ruins."

My voice cracked on the last word.

"Something that shouldn't have followed."

Silence.

Sumit looked at me—not with doubt, but with a quiet, hollow fear—like he already knew.

Vinay took one slow breath, then said, “What does it feel like?”

That’s what made him different—Vinay. He didn’t ask what it was. He asked how it felt—like he already understood something we hadn’t even begun to.

“Wrong,” I whispered. “It feels wrong in my skin. Like I’m wearing someone else’s heartbeat.”

Ravi clicked his tongue. “Well. That’s not disturbing at all.”

He glanced at the trees, then back at me.

“Guess we better hope the baba’s in a talking mood tonight.”

The air grew heavier, and somewhere in the distance, the low clang of a bell echoed—soft, slow, like a warning.

And the forest watched us—breathing, waiting.

At dawn, we reached the temple hidden behind the ancient peepal tree. Its bells hung still in the wind, unmoving, as if the very air held its breath.

We followed a narrow trail to the edge of the forest, where the priest lived—alone.

His house looked like it had been forgotten by time—cracked mud walls, heavy black cloth over the windows, stitched with faded red symbols. The air stank of incense, burnt herbs... and something older. Like dried blood beneath centuries of dust.

Vinay stepped forward first—he always did. He knocked gently.

No answer.

He knocked again. Louder.

Still nothing—until the door creaked open, slow and reluctant, like the house itself sighed.

Inside, everything was swallowed by darkness. Only a dim oil lamp burned in a far corner, its light barely reaching the walls.

“That’s the place,” Vinay whispered. He stepped in, cautious but calm, his hand slightly brushing Sumit’s shoulder in reassurance.

Ravi hovered near the doorway, arms crossed, shifting from foot to foot. “We sure he’s in here?” he muttered, trying to sound tough—but his voice cracked just a little.

“He never leaves,” Vinay replied, stepping deeper. “They say he’s lived alone here for over thirty years.”

Sumit hesitated at the threshold. He glanced over his shoulder, nervous, as though the shadows behind us might follow.

I stepped past them all and entered. The ground beneath my feet felt... wrong. Like it didn’t want to hold me. The silence inside was too full, too listening.

In the center of the room, the priest sat cross-legged. Still. Unmoving. Like a figure carved from ash. His skin was paper-thin, stretched over bones. He looked brittle, like he would collapse if the wind blew too hard.

Yet when his eyes lifted—half-closed, ancient—they held force. Not strength like muscle. But pressure. Time. Memory.

He didn’t speak, not at first. He just watched us. One by one.

And behind him, near an old well, sat a tiny stone shrine. It looked like it was waiting.

When his gaze landed on me, something shifted. “You’ve come,” the priest said, voice dry as dust. “Looking for things that should have stayed buried.”

I stepped forward. “We need to know about Banwari.”

He didn’t answer.

Sumit stepped forward too, voice shaking but honest. “Please, *Baba*. We need help. I saw things... things I don’t understand.”

The old man’s head tilted slightly, as if listening beyond us, to something distant.

Only the oil lamp crackled.

Even Ravi had gone still now, his reckless energy swallowed by the room.

Then, without opening his eyes wider, the priest whispered, “I knew you would come.”

He took a breath like dragging smoke through dry lungs.

“It began again.”

We all sat down, legs folded on the cold floor. Even Ravi, now silent, sat slowly—his knuckles white on his knees.

Vinay lit another *diya* and placed it beside the first, the flames dancing together like frightened twins.

I looked toward the black-and-white photo of a god resting near the shrine. Even the image seemed faded, unsure of itself.

“Please,” I said. “Tell us what’s happening.”

The priest closed his eyes, tight, like he was reaching inward—or backward. And then, in a voice that rumbled like the earth

remembering an old wound, “Long ago,” the priest began, voice like wind through cracked stone, “before this village even had a name, the land belonged to something else.”

We leaned in.

Even the flames in the *diya* seemed to shrink back.

“A dark presence. A power older than time itself.”

He paused. Shadows flickered across his face. “The demon you saw—*Dusriya Devta*—is no mere statue.”

“It is a god of fear. Born from death, pain, and broken souls.”

“It feeds on sacrifice.”

Sumit’s hands clenched the front of his shirt, knuckles pale. His chest rose and fell faster, breath shaking.

Vinay, always composed, sat rigid—jaw tight, eyes clouded. Even his calm had limits.

Ravi, who usually cracked some foolish joke to break tension, stayed silent now. His lips pressed together in a hard line. His hands clenched into fists on his knees.

The priest’s voice grew raspier, as though the words cost him to speak. “Banwari was once a good man. A father. His son, Nilesch, was his whole world.”

“But when Nilesch died... Banwari’s soul shattered. His grief tore through him like a storm.” The old man’s hands trembled slightly in his lap.

“He begged every temple. Every priest. But death doesn’t bargain.”

He looked toward the flickering flame, as if watching some memory rise from it. “But Nilesch wasn’t just sick.”

“He heard... voices. Something whispered to him from the other side. And when he died, Banwari’s grief didn’t just break him.”

“It opened a door.”

Vinay whispered, “The demon...”

The priest flinched at the word.

“In his sorrow, Banwari wandered into the forbidden ruins. A place even sunlight fears. There, beneath the dust of centuries, he found a book.”

His eyes flicked toward me, hollow. “Old. Bound in cracked leather. Its pages stiff with dried blood. The words... they moved when reading. Crawled like insects across the page.”

Sumit let out a small gasp. He didn’t notice it, but he was rocking slightly—a childhood reflex—seeking safety.

“And Banwari... he read it,” the priest continued. “He listened. He obeyed.”

The old man’s voice sank deeper, filled with dread. “One ritual. Then another. The book wrapped around his soul like vines, like claws. The nights turned cold. Winds screamed. And silence covered this village like a veil.”

I swallowed, trying to breathe through the weight that had wrapped around the room.

“Then one night, I followed a sound.”

He paused.

“A strange, wet sound. Like whispers in water.”

“I saw him near the peepal tree. Hunched. Muttering. His hands trembled. His breath came in white clouds. But around him, the darkness... it breathed.”

The *diya* flickered violently.

Sumit pressed closer to me.

Even Ravi looked pale now, sweat lining his temples.

“And his shadow,” the priest said, voice barely audible, “didn’t touch the ground.”

Silence.

Then I asked, my voice hollow, “Was Nilesh really dead?”

The priest looked at me, truly looked, his milky-white eyes locking with mine.

“Maybe his body died. But his soul...” he exhaled slowly, “opened a doorway. And Banwari opened it wider.”

I couldn’t speak. Couldn’t think. My own memories of that place—the smell of rot, the shifting walls, the presence I felt but couldn’t see—all crashed back.

The priest’s tone darkened. “Banwari awakened the forbidden god. *Dusriya Devta* promised miracles. But every blessing demanded a sacrifice.”

He paused, voice cracking like old bark.

“He paid. Willingly. First animals. Then... people. Soul by soul. Until the man he once was... withered.”

Vinay’s voice cracked, raw with something deeper than fear — grief, maybe.

“But... Why us? Why Sumit? Why Roma?”

The priest didn't answer immediately. His head tilted downward, milky eyes catching the flicker of lamplight like dead pearls.

"Because you crossed its land," he said simply.

"You stepped into the place where the god waited."

"You heard its whispers. And now..." His breath caught. "It knows you."

He raised his face, not looking at us—but through us. "It hunts for you. It looks for you "

Sumit inhaled sharply. His hand flew to the red pouch near his chest—a motion so fast it was instinct, not thought. His lips moved in silence, mouthing a prayer he didn't seem to remember learning.

I told the priest what we saw beneath the ruins. The shadows. The thing that followed. The name that still felt alive in my skull.

At that, the priest opened his eyes—fully—clouded, pupil-less, like staring into a fog that had forgotten how to part. "You disturbed the land," he whispered. "You woke the *Dusriya Devta*."

A brittle silence stretched between us—long and splintering.

Ravi, leaning against the far wall, finally spoke. His voice was low, the usual swagger gone. What remained was bone-deep suspicion.

"Is it Banwari? The thing out there?"

The priest's mouth twisted, almost into a smile. But not the kind you'd want to see in candlelight. "No. Banwari was the only door."

He leaned forward. Shadows danced across his hollow cheeks like things trying to escape him. “The demon needed grief. Needed pain. Banwari... offered it.”

Vinay stepped forward—carefully, as if even his movements respected something sacred. Or dangerous.

His voice was softer now, but more desperate. “Can we stop it?”

The priest was still. So still, it felt like the entire hut leaned in to hear.

Then, with iron in his voice: “There is one way to trap it again.”

He paused.

“But it will cost blood.”

Sumit’s eyes widened, breath caught in his throat. His lips parted, voice breaking like thin glass. “Whose blood?”

The priest did not blink. “One of yours.”

Sumit’s shoulders curled inward, like the very air around him had struck him.

He looked at me, and for a second, I saw not the boy I’d grown up with—but a man unraveling under the weight of something unfair. He opened his mouth, closed it again. Then finally:

“How do we stop it?” His voice trembled like a string pulled too tight, ready to snap.

The priest reached slowly into a rusted box beside him. From it, he drew a bundle of herbs wrapped in red string. They smelled foul—scorched earth, wet bark, and something almost metallic.

He handed them to Vinay, not even glancing at anyone else.

Vinay received them with both hands. His fingers curled around the string with quiet reverence, like he feared it would vanish if he blinked.

“These,” the priest said, “were once used to sever the bond between spirit and stone. Burn them on the idol itself. Inside the temple.”

Vinay looked down at them, eyes wide. “What are they?”

“Black datura. Himalayan nettle. Root ash from the cremated dead. This mixture is older than your names.”

He turned to us, eyes suddenly sharp—the haze of age momentarily clearing. “It will not kill the *Devta*. But it will make it let go—just long enough.”

We stood, each of us in our own silence.

Ravi’s fists were clenched now, hard as iron. His jaw twitched — biting the inside of his cheek again, like he always did when something truly scared him. But his eyes burned with reckless fire.

“This is bullshit,” he muttered. “But we’re already halfway to hell, so what’s one more step?”

Vinay held the bundle like it pulsed with a heartbeat. His gaze drifted toward the dark window, thoughtful. Grave.

“It was always going to end there,” he said. “Where it began.”

I could feel my own heart now—pounding like war drums behind my ribs. “I don’t know if we can survive this,” I whispered, the words dry and useless in my mouth.

“You think we got a choice?” Ravi snapped. Not cruel. Not angry. Just afraid in the way Ravi was — by lashing out.

Sumit looked up again. His face was hollow, sunken from sleeplessness and something worse: knowing too much.

But his eyes—they were steady.

“I’ll go,” he said. “I have to.”

Vinay didn’t even pause.

“Then we all go,” he said, like it was a promise written long ago.

None of us spoke after that.

Because there was nothing left to say.

We turned toward the door.

The night outside had changed. It wasn’t just dark—it was waiting.

The air pressed in from all sides, heavy with dampness and something unseen—like a hand gently pressing against your mouth.

A shape moved in the trees—tall, inhuman—watching.

We didn’t speak—not because we didn’t want to—but because we were afraid something might answer.

Just as we reached the threshold, the priest behind us called out—voice like torn cloth in a storm:

“Remember!”

We froze.

“Inside the Ruins—don’t trust your eyes.

Don't trust your ears.

And if you hear your name..."

He paused.

"...Don't turn around."

No one replied.

We stepped into the storm.

The wind screamed like it remembered our names.

And as we walked into the dark, through leaves that cut like teeth and rain that bit like needles... my heart whispered something I didn't want to believe—not all of us will come back.

When All Hope Fades

At dawn, we set out for the last time.

The rain had stopped, but the earth still wept—soft mud sucking at our boots, the trees dripping like they mourned something already lost. Mist clung to the ground in heavy coils, coiling around our ankles like fingers trying to pull us back. The silence was not peace—it was warning.

Behind us, the village felt like a memory. Ahead, the forest stretched like a mouth waiting to close. Every gust of wind through the branches sounded like breath held too long.

No one spoke.

The night hadn't ended; it had only thinned. Darkness still hung above our heads, thicker now, heavier, like the sky itself didn't want to watch what was coming. Our torches flickered but didn't push the shadows back far enough. We were walking into them willingly.

Each step felt final. Like the ground didn't want to let us go forward, and we were fools for trying.

This wasn't just a battle anymore.

It was the end of something.

A line drawn in ash and blood.

Fight... or vanish like the others.

We didn't know if the village would be there when—or if—we returned. Deep down, we all felt it: if we didn't end this now,

Dusriya Devta wouldn't stop. Banwari wouldn't stop. And this place—our homes, our families—would rot from the inside out.

The priest stood at the edge of the village, silent, unmoving. His robes looked too thin for the cold, his face unreadable in the fog. We saw him for a moment longer—and then the mist swallowed him whole.

Even his hut, once a place of shelter, looked like a toy house now, too small, too fragile against the dark pressing in from the trees.

We reached the old path, barely visible under twisted roots and rotting leaves. The air shifted. Something in it had changed. Colder. Sharper. Watching.

And then, through the fog, we saw it.

Ruins.

Whatever waited inside—god or monster—we would face it now.

Together... or not at all.

The ruins had changed. The door groaned open on its own, hinges shrieking like something in pain. No birds. No crickets. No wind. Just silence—dense and unnatural, like the mansion was holding its breath.

We knew, deep in our bones, that something waited here. Something that I remembered. And it was listening.

Without a word, we stepped through the gate and crossed the threshold.

The corridor swallowed us whole. Torchlight barely pierced the thick dust, casting thin tunnels of visibility through air that hadn't moved in years. Every step echoed like a memory,

sharp and accusing. Floorboards buckled and wept beneath our weight. Dampness clung to our boots, as if the very ground wanted to pull us under.

Then, the first sound.

Not our footsteps. Not the wind.

A whisper.

Faint.

Indistinct.

Not spoken aloud—but pressed directly into the ear.

We froze, not because of what we heard, but because we all heard it at the same time.

It came from within the ruins, not beyond them.

The hall narrowed, pressing in. Symbols carved into the walls had rotted away, half-eaten by water and time. The air was thick with mildew and decay—like rot that had grown intelligent.

Somewhere ahead, a door creaked. Not sudden—deliberate—opened slowly, like it wanted to be heard.

As we moved on, the ceiling above groaned. Dust drifted down. Something massive had shifted directly overhead. We stood still, hearts pounding, as the noise passed like a beast crawling along the spine of the building.

The silence afterward was worse. It had changed—become aware.

Paintings lined the corridor—faces scratched out, frames shattered. One had been turned to the wall. None of us touched it. A mirror ahead showed only our lights—until the

reflection blinked, and we realized the frame was cracked from within.

We kept walking.

Then came the breathing.

Heavy. Labored. Wet.

It echoed ahead of us, though we saw no one.

I reached for my phone—which was dead. The battery was drained completely.

Whatever lived here didn't just want to scare us. It wanted to blind us. It wanted us unsure, exposed—not just vulnerable, but cracked open like old wood in the damp, every secret and fear laid bare.

That was when Sumit stopped me. "Wait," he hissed, hand iron-tight on my arm.

I turned to him. He didn't speak—but I knew what he was thinking. The priest's warning echoed in both our minds: "Inside the Ruins—don't trust your eyes. Don't trust your ears. And if you hear your name... don't turn around."

That's when the whisper came again.

Closer now.

So close it might have come from inside our own skulls.

But we didn't respond.

The hallway ended abruptly in a narrow stairwell, curling downward into the earth like the throat of some buried god. The stone was slick, steps worn shallow from centuries of use—or something worse.

The deeper we went, the more the air changed. It became heavier; sour; wet. It tasted like iron and old breath.

Moisture ran down the walls in slow black rivulets. The stone sweated. The deeper we went, the more the sound faded—not into quiet, but into something deeper. An absence. A pressure that filled the ears, the lungs, the bones.

And that's when Roma's words returned to me—her letter, folded and trembling in my pocket, burned into my memory with terrifying clarity—

“If you reach the ruins... find the room beneath.

It's not just a temple.

It's a gate.

We didn't understand then. We thought she meant it symbolically—some poetic warning scratched into parchment.

But now, with every step, every breath drawn in this rotting maze, her words took on weight. Meaning. Finality.

She hadn't sent us here to find answers.

She'd sent us here to end it.

This wasn't a journey.

This was a reckoning.

And the room below—the gate—was the reason we were still alive.

The stairs ended without warning.

Before us stretched a cavern—not carved, not natural.

Wrong.

The walls were not stone.

They pulsed—flesh-like. Veined. Breathing.

The ground underfoot was slick and warm. The ceiling pressed low, dripping dark fluid that hissed on contact with our lights. A low frequency buzzed just at the edge of hearing. Our eyes burned. Our teeth ached.

And at the center—

The idol.

Dusriya Devta.

It no longer resembled a statue. It throbbed, like a heart. It inhaled and exhaled slowly, rhythmically, a grotesque mimicry of life. Flesh wrapped around it, merging stone with something organic. Roots, or veins, twitched beneath its surface.

We moved closer, not because we wanted to, but because it drew us.

Dragged us.

Like gravity.

Ravi's voice trembled, "What is this place?" Even though we already knew—this was the room Roma spoke of.

But, this was no room.

This was a womb.

And something inside it was waking up.

We weren't just here to witness it.

We were here to stop it.

No matter the cost.

Because now—now—it was becoming clear what Roma had meant.

This was no idol.

This was a prison.

And the thing it held... was no longer fully asleep.

Its form was grotesque—a swollen mass from which dozens of arms writhed, each twisted, clawed, and blindly groping. Eyes blinked wetly across its surface, while mouths stretched open in soundless, eternal screams.

And kneeling before it—

Banwari.

Or, what remained of him.

His flesh sagged, patchy and discolored, his spine hunched as if it had forgotten the memory of standing. Black sinews tethered him to the idol, pulsing faintly, as if it had fed on more than blood.

He turned his head as we entered—

Not in surprise.

But in anticipation.

His body was a ruin, worn thin by years of worshiping something vile. Yet in his eyes, a terrible light burned—devotion so deep it bordered on madness.

The floor beneath us seemed to breathe, rising and falling in slow, monstrous rhythm, like the slumbering chest of something ancient.

The air pressed in, thick and crackling, smothering thought and fear until only raw instinct remained.

The *Dusriya Devta* stirred.

It reached—not with limbs, but with something worse—slipping into our minds, threading through old memories, feasting on our deepest wounds.

We stood at the brink, hearts hammering against the weight of everything already lost... and everything still to lose.

And then I saw him.

Banwari's gaze locked with mine.

He turned—slow, deliberate.

His desiccated skin cracked like old bark, revealing raw, pulsing flesh beneath. His lips peeled back—not in a smile, but in a grimace shaped by something ancient and cruel.

“You came,” he rasped. The words scraped out of him like broken glass dragged across bone.

His eyes—hollow yet gleaming with a light that didn't belong in the world of the living—fixed on Sumit. “But you cannot stop it.”

The air curdled around us. The stink of rot and iron was so thick it coated the back of our throats. The walls throbbed, slow and pulsing, as though we were inside something alive and watching.

Sumit stepped forward.

Each footfall was a whisper of hesitation, but his eyes stayed locked on Banwari. The weight of everything they'd lost was in his shoulders—the tension, the guilt. His voice broke the silence, soft, shaking.

“The dead... don't come back.”

It was meant as defiance. But there was pleading buried inside it—a need to believe what he said.

Banwari's head tilted, too slowly, too far—like a puppet whose strings had been frayed. Then he smiled—wide, splintered, too many teeth—too much knowing.

“Don't they?” he said, voice thick and oozing like oil spilled over broken mirrors.

Behind him, the dark moved.

Something stirred—massive and shapeless—and the air changed, sucking sound and hope out of the space.

Banwari's body trembled with ecstasy. His face twisted, veins writhing beneath skin stretched too tight. He threw his arms upward like a man grasping the heavens.

“I will bring my son back!” he shrieked.

The words erupted from his throat like blood from an old wound. They echoed not like sound—but like something alive, crawling through the walls, shrieking through the rock.

Vinay stepped beside me, voice quiet, eyes darting through the shifting dark.

“There's something behind him. Watching.”

Always the observer, always seeing the things we didn't. His hand gripped my shoulder—grounding me, steadying us both.

But Ravi—Ravi stepped forward—his fists clenched, voice cracking with fury and disbelief. “You killed Roma... Kapil... You killed them!” His body shook—not with fear—with rage. He was the only one who didn't take a step back.

Banwari... laughed.

It was a sound no living throat should make—wet, rattling, like the final cough of a drowned man. His body bent backward, spine bending far too much, as if he were breaking with joy.

Then... silence.

Banwari was still.

He raised a hand—not with threat. But pity.

“Fools,” he whispered, voice curling through the dark like smoke through cracks in a coffin lid. “You think it was me?”

Time hung in the air. We didn’t breathe. We couldn’t.

Then the idol behind him moved—not like a statue—but like flesh. Its surface bulged with mouths. They twitched. Opened.

One impossibly large eye rolled open and locked onto us.

We didn’t scream.

Because we couldn’t even think.

“It was him,” Banwari hissed. “Kapil. It was always Kapil.”

The words landed like blows. The cavern seemed to tilt.

Sumit swayed, whispering, “No...”

Banwari’s voice rose, cracked and bitter. “When Nanu first wandered into the ruins, it was Kapil who led him; Kapil who read the rites; Kapil who brought the book to me; not me.”

He turned his eyes on me—sharp, burning with something more than madness. “He twisted the rituals. Warped them. Used them to grow stronger. To take Roma for himself.”

I felt my breath tear from me—the memory crashing into place like jagged glass.

“You don’t remember, do you?” Banwari sneered.

“Haridwar. That little café. The riverbank. Wherever you went... he followed. Watching. Burning.”

Ravi’s jaw clenched. He took a step forward, but Vinay grabbed his arm—holding him back.

Banwari’s voice dropped, barely a whisper. “One night... Kapil came here. Sat there.”

He pointed to a black stone near the idol. It glistened—wet, almost pulsing—as if it remembered.

“He cried like a child,” Banwari murmured. “And I... I offered to help him. I tried.”

His lips trembled now. “But he didn’t want to be saved.”

Across the room, Kapil’s *atma* flickered—translucent, half-formed. And in his eyes, for the first time, there was guilt. Real. Human.

“He wanted Roma,” Banwari said. “And he wanted you... gone.”

The words hit like a hammer. The weight of everything—years of silence, fractured memories—crashed inward.

Sumit’s breath hitched beside me. “He loved her...” he whispered.

Vinay’s voice was calm. Too calm. “No. He wanted her. That’s not the same.”

Banwari lowered his head. His voice frayed, unraveling. “You think I killed her,” he said. “But she was already gone.”

He pointed to the idol—still pulsing, still alive. “She was taken that night. All of them were. Kapil. Roma. Even me.”

He raised his hand—bone-thin, trembling—and touched the ground. “Let me show you.”

The cavern shuddered, not with sound, but with time.

The dark folded inward—not like a shadow, but like a memory breaking open.

Fifteen Years Ago

The ruins hadn’t yet learned to whisper. No blood soaked the stones—not yet. Just age. Silence. Stillness.

Kapil dragged Roma by the wrist across the courtyard, knuckles white, face contorted—not with anger, but desperation—a boy trying to outrun the inevitable.

“You don’t understand, Roma,” he gasped, voice hoarse. “You were supposed to choose me...”

“Let go!” she shouted, jerking back.

Her hand rose. A slap cracked the air, cutting the silence like a blade.

But Kapil didn’t flinch.

He held on. Tighter.

Something was unraveling in him.

His voice dropped. He whispered words—low, rotted, not meant for human tongues.

The wind stilled. The earth tensed.

Banwari stood nearby, silent. Watching. Not intervening.

In his hand, a talisman swayed—bone and string, slick with something dark.

His lips moved, repeating words he didn’t understand.

A vessel now. Not a boy.

Nanu sat slumped beside him, dazed. Lips muttering verses
no child should know.

Drugged. Used. Lost.

Around them, the ritual circle was nearly complete.

Symbols etched in blood and salt. A twitching corpse of a dog
at the center, sacrifice still fresh.

And then—

It went wrong.

The chant faltered.

Twisted.

Bent sideways—like a scream folded inside out.

The soil split open.

A presence surged forth—cold, ravenous.

Kapil screamed—not in pain, but in rapture.

Roma's eyes went wide. She tried to run.

Banwari reached for her—but his fingers passed through.

She was already fading.

Not dead.

Taken.

Now

The memory ripped away like skin, we staggered, breathless.
The cavern swirled. Air heavy. Reality thinner.

Kapil's *atma* flickered—and then solidified. A ghost of a boy—hollowed, burned out, broken.

He stepped forward, slow, like the weight of years clung to his shoulders.

I found my voice, raw and shaking.

“Why, Kapil? Was it really all... just for Roma?”

His form shimmered—half-smoke, half-shadow. Eyes full of grief, not rage.

“I told you,” he said. His voice was hoarse, like dragged from the bottom of a well.

“Again and again. But you never listened.”

Sumit stepped forward, his jaw trembling.

“What did you even gain from all this, Kapil? What did she mean to you?”

Kapil's mask cracked.

“Gain?” he spat, broken laughter echoing.

“Did any of you ever think about me? About what it felt like?

To be invisible?

To watch the two of you—day after day—”

Ravi cut in, sharp. “It was her choice, Kapil. You don't get to rewrite that just because she didn't choose you.”

Kapil's body convulsed. His fury flared—then faltered.

“I stayed,” he whispered. “When Roma had no one else... I was there. Always.”

For a moment, he wasn't a monster. He was just a boy left behind by time.

Vinay stepped forward. Quiet. Steady. "But you never saw her. You only saw what you wanted her to be."

Kapil winced.

And then the memory—the truth—rose in full.

Roma was screaming.

Kapil's hands were slick with blood.

The broken circle.

The torn sky.

Sumit sank to his knees, choking on his breath.

Vinay stood still, tears in his eyes.

He looked at the idol.

"...It's been feeding," he whispered. "On everything we buried.

Our silence.

Our shame.

It grew on us."

And in the dark, I felt it too.

The *Devta* wasn't a god.

It was rot—given form.

A sudden, scorching heat filled my chest. Rage. "You destroyed her!" I screamed. "You ruined everything!"

I surged forward. "You won't survive this either, Kapil!"

And then—the idol moved.

A heartbeat—massive, ancient, cracked through the walls.

Kapil raised his hand.

The dark surged.

It struck us like a tidal wave.

I flew back—slammed into the stone, ribs cracking, air gone. I gasped. Ravi landed with a grunt, laughing bitterly even through the pain.

“Okay... maybe should’ve stayed outside...”

Sumit hit the floor and didn’t move. For a second, I thought—

Then he groaned, blood trickling from his lip.

“I... I’m okay,” he croaked, dragging himself upright.

Vinay knelt, one hand pressed to the stone. “It’s not over yet,” he said softly. “Something’s coming.”

And it was.

Figures walked out of the mist.

Roma.

But not our Roma.

She floated, hair fanned around her like ink in water, eyes wide—holding back oceans.

Behind her... Nanu—or something wearing his skin.

I choked on the scream that tried to escape.

“Roma—” Sumit whispered, crawling forward, broken but drawn to her like gravity.

She stood in front of the idol, hand raised.

“Don’t,” she said. Her voice didn’t shake.

Kapil shrieked and hurled another wave of dark magic—but she caught it. Mid-air. With nothing but will.

She moved forward. Touched him.

He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t speak.

Behind her, Nanu growled—a guttural sound I’d never heard from him in life. He lunged. Grabbed her. Dragged her back by the hair.

“No!” I cried. “Nanu, please!”

Banwari cackled, drunk on madness. “That’s not Nanu,” he hissed. “That’s Nilesh.”

I crawled forward, my hands bloodied. My vision spun. “Bhai... please,” I gasped. “It’s me. It’s Naman.”

He turned.

For a moment — a flicker.

Recognition.

Real pain.

He trembled.

Roma pulled herself to her feet.

Banwari’s laughter died.

She stood before us. Bruised. But brighter than anything else in that nightmare.

“You don’t have to fight alone anymore,” she said.

Her voice wrapped around us like a promise.

And Banwari let out a scream that belonged to no man—only monsters.

Behind him —

The *Dusriya Devta* stirred.

The *Devta* screamed.

It knew—its end was near.

We didn't speak.

We didn't need to.

We moved together—not as heroes, but as survivors bearing grief, memory, and a fragile thread of hope.

Sumit staggered forward first. His hands trembled not from fear, but from the impossible weight of what was right. He pulled the sacred herbs from the pouch, blinking through tears he didn't wipe away.

"This is the only way," he whispered—more to himself than us.

He struck the match. The flame caught. The herbs hissed. Silver smoke rose in the air like an offering of memory—and mourning.

I saw him clutch the pouch tighter, as if it were the last thing anchoring him.

"I don't want to lose him again," I muttered to him, eyes shining.

"You won't," he replied.

But we both knew that was a lie we needed to believe.

Vinay was already moving. Calm. Methodical. His presence is like a warm hand on a fevered brow.

He poured the black salt with slow precision, murmuring the chant.

“Watch the left gap,” he told me. “Energy leaks from there.”

Even now—even with the world collapsing—he noticed what we missed.

His voice cracked only once, on the last syllable of the prayer.

I caught his eyes. He nodded. It wasn’t reassurance. It wasn’t bravado. It just was quiet certainty.

“Whatever happens,” he said, “we hold the line.”

Ravi wiped blood from his cheek and grinned. “Hope you guys have a plan, because I’m running on panic and dumb courage right now.” He gripped the charm like it was a sword.

When the shadows twitched, he stepped forward—not back.

He glanced at Sumit, then Vinay, then me.

“And if I die, someone better carve ‘*Ravi was right*’ on the damn temple walls.” It was bravado. But it also was the truth. He was scared; and brave. That’s why we loved him.

And I...

I held Nanu’s hand.

It was warm. Alive.

But in his eyes—those not-quite-golden eyes—I saw both of them—my little brother, and the boy we had lost.

“Nilesh,” I whispered.

He nodded.

“You’re both here,” I said. “But you can’t both stay.”

Tears welled in his eyes.

“Then let him live,” Nilesh whispered.

“He’s your real brother. He has a future. I was already gone.”

Roma stepped closer, barefoot on ancient stone. She placed a gentle hand over Nanu’s chest. Her fingers trembled—not from fear, but from feeling.

The red ribbon unspooled from Nanu’s wrist like it had been waiting. It snaked through the air, glowing, wrapping around the cursed idol.

The final ritual had begun.

But—

Kapil exploded out of the shadows.

Bloodied. Screaming.

Fueled by hatred and delusion.

“You don’t understand!” he roared, bodying a storm of black fire.

He lunged into the circle, the very air warping around him.

Roma stepped in front of us—again—her arms outstretched, her body as thin as wind.

But, she didn’t move. “No, Kapil,” she said. Not loud. But steady.

He struck her with shadow and fury—but the power that had taken so much from us now protected her.

He howled. Tried again. Failed.

And then...

She looked into his eyes. And he saw what he had become.

“You’ve already lost, Kapil.” Her voice broke—not with fear.
With sorrow.

And then the shadows turned on him.

He screamed.

The *Devta* took back what it had lent.

And Kapil —

Vanished.

Just like that.

Banwari collapsed.

“No!” he howled.

The sickle dropped from his hand.

He rushed Sumit, madness in his eyes.

“We can fix it! We can still fix this!”

But Sumit stood firm.

His voice did not waver. “Let them go, Banwari. You can’t love a ghost back to life.”

And then—Nilesh stepped in. His voice cracked—but it was full. “You said you loved me. Then let me go.”

Banwari fell to his knees. His grief was real. Ugly. Human.

He clutched to the floor. “I just... I just wanted him back...”

No one spoke. Not even the temple.

The herbs are fully caught now.

The smoke turned from silver to white-gold.

The red ribbon tightened around the idol—a serpent of fire and grace.

Then—

The stone cracked.

A thunderclap echoed through the chamber.

Light—divine, pure —poured out.

The *Devta* screamed. Its limbs split. Its mouths fell open—not in hunger, but in surrender.

One final wail — and it was gone.

The curse was broken.

Nanu collapsed into my arms. He was warm. Breathing. Human.

“Nanu?” I whispered.

His eyelids fluttered open. Brown eyes. Real ones.

“Naman *bhaiya*...”

Tears fell—tears I hadn’t known I was holding.

I looked up.

Roma stood just outside the circle.

In the trees. In the light.

She smiled—a smile that said: *thank you*.

She faded. No sound. No spectacle.

Just light.

And peace.

I held Nanu closer.

The temple cracked above us—but this time, it felt like
release—not ruin.

And somewhere near the rubble —

Banwari wept for his son.

He wasn't a villain—just a father.

Outside...

Dawn touched the stones.

We had survived.

Not because we were chosen.

But because we chose love.

Over vengeance.

Over fear.

And in the village of Khara Khara—

For the first time in years—

There was peace.

What if it Isn't Over?

The room had been cleared. Most of the rubble was swept away, the door no longer caked in blood or ash. But the book was there again.

Lying open, my spine cracked, like it had waited—just as it had been the first time I stepped into Khara Khara.

I almost didn't go in. But something pulled me.

Dust swirled in slanted light. The air smelled of old paper, and something faintly metallic—like rust, or dried tears.

I crouched slowly. My fingers touched the cover.

Not the priest's notes.

Not Banwari's scriptures.

This one had a name scratched faintly on the inside cover.

Nanu.

It was his diary.

The pages were filled in a hurried hand, with some words crossed out as if he was afraid they meant too much. Entries dated long before the possession. Scrawled memories. Drawings. Descriptions of a presence he felt as a child.

"A shadow," he said, "followed me even in sunlight."

These were notes about nightmares, about guilt.

Before I could read more, a shadow crossed the threshold. Nanu stood in the doorway, his arm still in a sling, his gaze unreadable.

I shut the book without a sound.

He didn't ask what I was doing. He just said, "They're waiting. Come on."

I slipped the diary into my bag.

We met outside the café where it had all started, back before ruins and gods and graves, with the same *chai*-stained table, still chipped at the edges.

Vinay was already seated, stirring sugar into his tea with the same absent patience he showed when breaking up our fights.

Ravi was pacing in short circles, running a hand through his unwashed curls, still too full of restless energy.

Sumit sat quietly, watching me, eyes clouded. He pulled a folded letter from his jacket and handed it to me without a word. "You should read it," he said. "Roma gave it to me. Said... said to pass it on if anything happened."

My hands were cold as I unfolded the paper. The ink was smeared near the end, as if her hand had trembled.

"Sometimes I think this place was never meant to be found.

But I kept digging regardless.

If I die, it won't be because I stopped loving the world.

It'll be because I loved it too much—

And I thought I could save it."

"If I don't come back...

Please tell Naman I tried.

I wanted to be more than a shadow in his life.

I prayed. Once. Maybe to the wrong god."

The page shook in my hands.

No one spoke for a long time.

Later, over lukewarm *chai* and stale *samosas*, the conversation drifted.

“So,” Ravi said finally, breaking the silence, “Banwari... You think he really summoned something? Like, actually brought it through?”

Sumit leaned back, arms crossed. “He believed he did. That’s enough, sometimes.”

“But the *Rakshak* thing—” Vinay interrupted, voice soft. “That’s what’s strange. Nanu wasn’t just possessed. He became something. A protector, maybe? Or, was he meant to be the sacrifice?”

“He was both,” I said quietly. “That’s what made it work. He loved us enough to resist... but was broken enough to be used.”

Ravi leaned forward, brow furrowed. “So, he’s like... what? A corrupted soul? A demon-savior hybrid?”

Vinay smiled faintly. “Maybe there’s no clean answer. Maybe that’s the point.”

“I still think Banwari knew more than he let on,” Sumit added. “Why that temple? Why that gate? Why Nanu?”

We sat with it. Let the weight of those questions settle like dust on the table between us.

Then Vinay asked, “What if it isn’t over?”

His voice barely above a whisper. “What if... this was just one door?”

Ravi looked up sharply. Sumit's jaw clenched. Even Nanu, beside me, tensed ever so slightly.

No one answered.

Because we'd all thought about it.

Because in the silence that followed, something cold passed between us.

Not fear.

Not quite.

But knowing.

When we finally stood, I felt the weight of the diary in my bag again.

Roma's letter in my pocket.

Nanu at my side.

The others are just a step behind.

The sun was setting. The sky burning a deeper red.

Somewhere in the hills, far beyond—
the ruins still stood.

Waiting.

Watching.

A breeze stirred the dust from old pages.

The book hadn't closed—only paused.

Now, without warning, it had fallen open again.

And this time, we were there.

Awake.

Listening.

Epilogue

The river moved slowly today, not with the rage of monsoon rains or the weight of ritual ash. It moved like it had seen death—and chosen, deliberately, to keep flowing anyway.

I sat on the worn stone steps of *Har Ki Pauri*, the same spot where Roma and I had once sat, our knees touching, our laughter careless. That was before we knew what grief could take.

Back then, the river was just water. Now, it felt more like a memory.

Haridwar breathed in layers: the soft clang of temple bells, conch shells wailing like ghosts laid to rest, incense threading the air like fading dreams.

Beside me, Nanu sat quietly. His right arm still rested in a sling, a faded red thread looped around his wrist. It had dulled over time—nearly grey now—but neither of us had taken it off.

It wasn't just a thread. It was a scar in disguise.

I watched his face catch the riverlight—softer now. The tremble in his jaw was gone. The night terrors had grown quieter.

He was here.

He was healing.

“Do you remember any of it?” I asked.

My voice was almost lost beneath the hum of chanting behind us.

Nanu didn't speak for a long time. He just watched the water move.

"Only pieces," he said finally. "Shadows. Like I was walking through someone else's nightmare."

"I think you were."

Because now I know.

It wasn't Nanu who had screamed in the dark. It was Nilesh.

Banwari's rituals had cracked something open—something buried. Kapil, in his obsession, had brought the *Devata* to the threshold... but it was Banwari who opened the gate.

And Nanu, innocent and unguarded, had been the perfect vessel.

There was more.

Much more.

Things the ruins hadn't whispered to us yet.

Questions the darkness had whispered, but never answered.

Why that temple?

Why that room?

What lay beneath the stone when the water ran dry?

Vinay was the one who stayed closest to the questions without letting them consume him. He'd found balance—working with the temple trust, organizing *langars*, teaching kids that faith wasn't something to be feared, but protected.

That true belief didn't demand blood. It demanded courage.

Sumit had changed in quieter ways. He spoke less. But when he did, it landed like the truth. He still carried the priest's

pouch in his locker—tucked next to ration cards and spare keys.

He once told me, “It reminds me that belief itself isn’t evil. What people do with it... that’s the danger.”

Ravi changed the most. His fire didn’t dim. It just got more focused.

He collected old manuscripts, like diaries and even oral histories—trying to piece together who the *Dusriya Devta* was, and where did it come from; and how many more like it might still sleep under the skin of this country.

He told me once, “It’s not a horror story, bro. It’s a warning.”

I believe him.

As for me—I was learning how to live in a world where ghosts were real; but so was grace; where love didn’t mean safety—but it meant something, even if it didn’t save Roma. ‘*Did she love me back?*’ I don’t know. Maybe not like I hoped. Maybe she saw something in me that reminded her of an unfinished story. Maybe her soul was still wandering, still trying to speak.

Or maybe, in that last scream, she found her peace.

I pray for that. Every night.