

BENEATH THE SILENCE

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B o o k T w o

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Author's Disclaimer

This novel is a work of fiction.

All characters, events, places, rituals, belief systems, and entities depicted in this book are either imaginary or used in a fictionalised manner. Any resemblance to real persons—living or dead—or to actual events is purely coincidental and unintended.

This story contains references to child abuse, trauma, violence, and psychological distress. These elements are included not for shock, titillation, or endorsement, but to explore the devastating impact of silence, neglect, and societal complicity on vulnerable individuals. The novel unequivocally condemns child abuse in all forms and portrays it as a grave violation with lasting consequences.

The cultural, spiritual, and religious motifs appearing in the narrative are symbolic and fictional, created solely for storytelling purposes. They are not intended to represent, criticise, promote, or misinterpret any real religion, deity, tradition, community, or belief system. Any perceived parallels are narrative devices, not statements of fact or belief.

This book does not suggest that trauma, abuse, or violence are justified, sacred, or necessary. Rather, it examines how unaddressed harm and collective silence can allow suffering to persist across generations.

Dedication

To those who learned silence before they learned safety.
And to every child who carried fear that was never theirs to
bear.

Content Warning

This novel includes depictions and discussions of child abuse, trauma, violence, and psychological horror. These themes are handled with seriousness and care, but may be distressing to some readers.

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Prologue

Nanu stood outside his house, very still.

He wasn't playing.

He was just watching.

The lane was full of noise.

Children were everywhere—running, shouting, laughing.

Girls jumped and clapped in poshampa, their voices rising together.

Boys chased each other in pakdam pakdai, feet slapping the warm road.

“Pakad liya!” someone yelled.

“Arre, iron! Iron!” another shouted, touching a gate, laughing.

Everyone knew the rule.

If you touched iron, you were safe.

A gate. A railing. Even an old bucket.

Iron broke the game. Iron broke the chase.

And there was another rule too—one the adults never said out loud:

Do not trust mirrors.

Not when the light is low.

Not when a child starts staring too long.

Nanu watched them.

He had stopped looking into mirrors lately.

He said they remembered things before he could.

He didn't smile.

Didn't move.

And his eyes stayed open... too long.

The evening sun sat low, painting him in dull gold. His shadow stretched behind him—long, thin, and bent.

More children ran into the lane—three of them, breathless, laughing too loudly, too freely.

For a second, something shifted in Nanu's face.

Just for a moment, his mouth moved.

Almost a smile.

Near the step, a small rubber ball lay forgotten.

Nanu bent down and picked it up.

Thup.

Thup.

The sound was normal.

Still, something about it felt... hollow. As if the lane had turned into a room.

Another ball rolled toward him from across the street. Slow. Soft. It stopped right at his feet.

Nanu picked it up.

"Here," he said.

His voice was quiet. Careful.

Hopeful.

"Take it."

He threw the ball.

But it didn't go anywhere.

It never left his hand.

For one second, it felt like the world forgot what came next.

The children waited.

Watching.

Then someone giggled.

Another laugh followed.

Then more.

The laughter grew louder—but it wasn't playful now.
It had edges.

Nanu stared at the ball.

Then, at the children.

His almost-smile dropped like a curtain.

His fingers tightened around the rubber.

The sunlight didn't feel warm anymore.
Breath scraped on the way in. Wrong.

Then one boy fell.

No warning.
No scream.

His body hit the ground hard. He jerked and shook. White foam
spilled from his mouth.

Everything froze.

No one laughed now.

They stared at the boy.

Then at Nanu.

At his hand that still hadn't moved.

Nanu lifted his head.

Slowly.

His eyes looked empty—like someone had wiped him clean.

That's when the screaming started.

Doors flew open.
Parents ran into the lane.
Someone dragged the boy away. Someone shouted for water. For
a doctor.

Fingers pointed.

“It was Nanu,” a child said, voice shaking.

“He looked at him... and he fell.”

Nanu’s father pushed through the crowd.

“What nonsense is this?” he shouted, but fear broke his voice from inside.

He ran into the house.

“Nanu!” he called, taking the stairs two at a time.

“Nanu, come down!”

On the terrace, Nanu stood near the edge.

Bare feet.

Swaying slightly in the wind.

“Please,” his father begged.

“Get down. Beta, please.”

Nanu turned his head.

Too slow. Not like a child.

His eyes were red—not crying.

Burning.

The father stepped closer... and stopped.

Something pressed against his chest.

Not air. Not fear.

A presence.

This was not his son.

This was something wearing him.

The father’s foot slipped.

His scream never fully came out.

The fall echoed through the stairwell like a drum.

When the neighbours finally entered the house, Nanu was still standing at the edge, looking down.

Below, three children stood near the gate.

Quiet.

Too quiet.

One bounced a ball.

Another tapped a stick on the ground.

Thup.

Tap.

Thup.

Tap.

Slow. Steady. Like a heartbeat.

They weren't playing with each other anymore.

They were waiting.

And in the wind, a voice moved—soft, almost polite.

Not a child's voice.

Older.

“Your master waits...
and I am here.”

Third Knock

The night pressed down on me.

I was running through corridors that refused to end.

Shallow water slapped under my feet—cold, ankle-deep, deliberate. As if the corridor had chosen to flood. The walls shone—slick and wet—reflecting my movement in broken pieces.

Drip.

Drip.

But beneath the dripping, something else breathed.

Ahead, fire burned in the middle of the corridor—
not spreading... collapsing inward.

It folded inward, resisting the eye. Shadows twisted inside it, trying to form shapes—and failing.

Two figures stood near the fire. A man. A woman.

Their bodies were bent wrong. As if someone had tried to fold them into human form—and stopped halfway

They spoke, but no meaning formed.

It was splintered noise that made my teeth ache.

Behind them rose the banyan tree.

Ancient. Groaning.

Roots bulged under the floor, thick and pulsing, as if the ground itself had a heartbeat. On the ground, a mark glowed.

A circle—cut through by three violent lines.

The fire trembled.

Two red eyes opened inside it—wide, flat, unblinking.

I couldn't move.

The fire surged forward in one rush, swallowing the corridor, the walls, the air.

Heat slammed into my chest. The smell of burnt metal and sweet rot filled my throat.

Then a voice touched my ear.

Not loud.

Not even angry.

Just close.

“Naman...”

I screamed—

and the mirror shattered.

Glass burst outward in bright flashes. In one shard, my face appeared a fraction too late.

That reflection smiled first.

And the shard bled.

I gasped and jolted awake.

My chest convulsed. I dragged in air like I had been underwater. Sweat stuck to my back.

Outside the window, an orange streetlight cut the room into thin, sharp lines—like someone had drawn wounds across the floor.

Just a dream.

My body disagreed.

My mirror stood in its corner, dusty, untouched. But the air around it... didn't sit still. It wavered slightly, like heat above a stove.

“What the hell...” I muttered. My throat felt raw.

Then—

Thak.

My whole body locked.

Thak. Thak.

Three knocks.

Slow. Heavy.

As if counting was the point. I grabbed my phone.

3:00 A.M.

My hand hovered on the latch.

I opened the door a little.

Nothing.

Empty corridor. Sleeping building.

But the air outside tasted metallic. Bitter.

Like blood on a blade.

On the floor, near my door, lay a rusted nail.

I bent and picked it up.

The cold went straight through my skin—too sharp for metal.

As if sunlight had never touched it. Then I heard it—right near my ear—

not a whisper, not a voice.

A soft sentence was breathed into the room.

“...it’s watching.”

I spun around.

Empty hallway.

My heart kicked once, hard.

I placed the nail on the table and walked toward the kitchen.

My mouth was burning. I needed water.

The kitchen felt wrong.

Not silent.

Just... held.

As if the room itself had tightened.

I switched on the light. It flickered twice, then stayed on, like it didn't want to help me.

I grabbed a glass and turned the tap.

Drip.

The sound stretched too long, like the drop was falling into something deep.

I frowned and shut it tight.

Stillness.

I reached for the wine bottle. I don't know why. I wasn't thinking straight.

I poured a little.

The liquid rippled.

Not from my hand.

On its own.

Slow circles opening... widening... like something breathing.

My stomach tightened.

The circles sped up.

A reflection formed on the surface.

Not mine.

A tall shadow leaned over me—body bent at the wrong angles.

I snapped around.

No one.

But the wine kept moving.

The circles tightened into a shape I already knew.

The same mark.

A circle with three cuts.

My fingers shook. The glass slipped into the sink with a dull clank.

Wine spilt across the counter—thick, dark—spreading like it had weight.

Something touched the back of my neck.

Not breath.

Pressure.

I turned sharply.

Nothing.

“Stop,” I said. My voice sounded small even to me.

I switched off the kitchen light and walked back to my room.

The air behind me felt close, like it followed at ankle height.

Then I saw it.

My diary was open on my desk.

I hadn’t touched it in days.

Loose pages stuck out, half pulled free—as if something had searched it.

I sat down slowly.

My fingers trembled as I slid the pages out.

The handwriting was wild, cut deep into the paper. Some words were smeared—like they had been written while crying or shaking.

A drawing.

The symbol again.

Three rough lines tore through a circle.
Under it, written faintly:
“If the mirror breaks again—bury iron near the door.”
I stared.
This wasn’t just fear anymore.
This was a rule.
And rules meant one thing:
Someone had done this before.
Above me, the ceiling fan groaned... then stopped.
Completely.
My curtains shifted, even though the windows were shut.
I looked at the mirror.
My reflection looked back.
Normal.
Then I noticed it.
Something stood behind me.
A tall blur.
Still.
I turned around.
Nothing.
I looked back at the mirror.
My reflection smiled.
Not my smile.
A thin crack slid across the glass.
Then another.
Then a third—three lines meeting at the centre.

My body went cold.
I lifted my hand toward it.
The glass was warm.
Not warm like sunlight.
Warm like skin.
Alive.
“Nanu...” I whispered. “What did you do?”
The air thickened. It pressed into my ribs.
Hard to breathe.
From the mirror, a voice came.
Not loud.
Not angry.
Familiar.
“Naman...”
I stumbled back.
The mirror pulsed once—dim red—like a heart under cloth.
A shape formed inside the glow.
Smoke-like. Too tall. Too still.
A face stretched in the haze. No mouth. Just black eyes floating in red.
Then it vanished.
But now I could hear something else.
Footsteps.
Not in my room.
Behind the glass.
Slow. Dragging.

My reflection blinked.

Too slow.

Then it spoke.

A voice that sounded torn and stitched back together:

“You noticed,” it said.

“That is the same as calling.”

The cracks deepened.

A pale hand pressed from behind the mirror—long fingers, joints bending wrong.

The red circle flared.

“No—no, I didn’t—” I started.

But then my voice changed.

Lower.

Hollow.

Almost not mine.

“I accept.”

The glow died instantly.

The mirror turned black.

No reflection.

No room.

Just darkness sitting where glass should be.

The air froze. Waiting.

Then—

Thak.

One knock.

Then two more.

Thak. Thak.

I turned slowly toward the door.

A tremor ran through my arms.

Because whatever was outside...

had been waiting for the third knock.

The Trip Begins

My mother's voice hit the house like a daily soap intro—loud, dramatic, impossible to ignore.

“You never take me anywhere!” she announced, one hand on her waist, the other waving like she was swatting invisible flies. “It’s been years, Manoj! Years!” When was the last time you took me out?”

My father didn’t even fold the newspaper.

He lowered it half an inch, raised one eyebrow, and said calmly, “At this age, where do you want to go? Your knees complain louder than you.”

Then he turned the page like that was the end of the discussion.

I stood in the hallway, watching.

This wasn’t a real fight.

This was theatre.

And like all theatre in my house, it ended with someone clapping.

Dad flicked the page again, pretending to be tired.

“Look at your mother,” he said to me. “She wants to travel. Travel! She should be meditating. She can’t even get into the car without chanting three shlokas.”

My mom gasped like a betrayed heroine.

“I’m not asking to go to Bangkok!” she snapped. “I want to visit Vaishno Devi. I made a vow.”

Her voice dropped on that last word.

Like it wasn’t a joke anymore.

I sighed. “Fine. Fine. Stop the drama. I’ll go.”

I turned—and in the mirror behind them, I caught something.

They were shaking hands.

Like cricket players after a wicket.

For half a second, it looked wrong. Their fingers seemed longer than they should be. Their palms didn't match.

Then it fixed itself.

As if the mirror had blinked.

My stomach tightened.

I spun around. "You two shook hands? This was a plan?"

In an instant, both went stiff.

Mom clutched her throat. "Oh-ho-ho! My thyroid!"

Dad stared at the ceiling like he had been blind all morning.

"Who shook what?" he asked the ceiling.

Their acting was a crime.

"What vow, Mom?" I asked.

She scowled. "Why should I tell you? You already said yes. Don't overthink it."

Then, from the kitchen, her triumphant voice boomed like a temple loudspeaker:

"We leave the day after tomorrow! Train at 6:40 AM! Tickets booked!"

I froze.

"How did you know I'd agree?"

She giggled. "A mother always knows."

Then she added softly, almost as a confession:

"Also... we booked it last week."

And like every Indian household miracle, that one sentence turned into packing, repacking, and three arguments about socks.

The station felt like a furnace.

Hot metal smell. Sweat. Old tea. Coal dust.

Somewhere near the tracks, a dog barked at nothing—then ran away whining.

My parents stood under a sad umbrella like royalty.

Near the edge of the platform, someone had drawn a circle in ash.

People stepped around it without noticing.

I noticed.

In my head, a thought came like a warning.

Iron is safe. Circles are not.

Mirrors don't lie... they delay.

I didn't know why that rule felt true.

I just knew it did.

Mom smiled at me. Too sweet. Too innocent.

"Naman beta, go get chips, a cold drink... chocolate... maybe pastry also?"

"I don't want anything."

"I want something," she insisted.

"Me too," Dad added, adjusting his belt proudly as if that proved anything.

I narrowed my eyes. "Then go yourselves."

"Yes, yes, go," Mom said, pushing me lightly.

Her timing was criminal.

I returned with snacks and asked, "Anything else?"

Mom shook her head too fast.

Dad whistled like a guilty man trying to look casual.

“If you two have planned something again—tell me,” I warned.
“I’ll go home right now.”

Mom placed a hand on my shoulder with fake sympathy. “No, no. Why would we lie? Everything is... normal. Right, Manoj?”

Dad nodded.

Too vigorously.

“Just another normal spiritual trip,” he said. “Very normal. Extremely normal. Totally not planned.”

Before I could grill them—

“Arey Manoj!”

A couple approached, smiling. Familiar.

My parents lit up like they had been waiting for a photographer.

And then—

“Henna is coming,” the man said.

My brain stalled.

Henna?

The name struck me as if it had already been written somewhere.

Not in my past.

In my future.

My parents suddenly became fascinated by a pigeon.

“There she is!” someone said.

A girl walked toward us through the crowd.

Not shy.

Not slow.

She walked like someone who had opinions about train timings—and wouldn’t hesitate to share them.

Blue jeans. White top.

Minimal makeup.

Her hair was tied in a low ponytail that kept slipping as she pushed it back, slightly irritated.

And she had this expression—a tiny frown when she concentrated...but eyes that smiled like she already knew three things about you.

Her father whispered, “That’s him.”

She raised her eyebrows slightly—curious, not impressed.

Her gaze flicked from my shoes to my face to the snack bag in my hand.

“Hi,” she said.

Warm voice. Brisk tone.

Not shy. Not soft.

Warm with edges.

I smiled like an idiot.

She sat opposite me in the train. Opened her sling bag. And pulled out—

a tiny notebook.

Pink. Spiral-bound. Covered in stickers.

As she opened it, her eyes flicked once to the window glass.

Not a mirror, not fully.

But reflective enough.

She looked away quickly—like she didn’t trust reflections.

I noticed that too.

She caught me staring and shrugged.

“I write people-watching notes,” she said.

Then she added casually, “Don’t worry. I don’t write names.”

I blinked.

She continued, deadpan—

“Unless they’re interesting.”

My parents exchanged silent prayers of gratitude.

Later, when we stood near the doorway, she didn’t hover.

She leaned on the railing, elbow propped, hair getting ruined by the wind like she didn’t care.

Her fingers traced a small circle on the metal rail—once, twice—then she stopped.

Like her own hand had reminded her of something.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“You say ‘yeah’ like it costs money,” she said, a small smile tugging at her mouth.

I snorted despite myself.

She didn’t push.

She didn’t lean into me.

She just stayed there—easy, solid—like she understood silence didn’t always need fixing.

She didn’t force anything.

She just existed—bright, sharp, comfortable.

Like she knew herself.

At one point, my father leaned over and whispered,

“She speaks well,” he whispered. “Good height too. Strong genes,” he added under his breath.

I glared.

He coughed and pretended he was talking about the weather.

My mother smiled at Henna with so much approval it could have been weaponised.

When Henna went for water, Mom whispered,

“She will handle you.”

I stared. “What?”

Mom continued confidently. “I like her walk. Confident.”

Then she poked my back lightly. “Not like you—always hunched like you’re hiding secrets.”

“I am hiding secrets,” I muttered.

Dad patted my back awkwardly. “That’s fine. Everyone has secrets.”

He paused.

“Even I stole laddoos at my cousin’s wedding.”

“Manoj,” Mom hissed. “Not that kind of secret.”

Henna returned at that exact moment and raised an eyebrow.

Mom instantly switched to bhajan-mode.

Dad stared at a wall that didn’t exist.

As night fell, Henna slept peacefully.

My parents snored softly—each in their own style; Mom high-pitched, Dad thunderous.

But my mind drifted to Roma.

Her memory didn’t shout.

It just stood quietly inside me.

Then I smelled something.

A faint metallic scent.

Not possible inside a moving train.

I sat up once, confused.
Then told myself it was nothing.
But the window glass... caught my eye.
It wasn't a mirror.
But it reflected enough.
And in that reflection, for a second, my face looked... delayed.
Not wrong.
Delayed.
As if my reflection was deciding whether it wanted to follow me.
I looked away fast.
Don't look twice, something inside me said.
Then came the tapping.
Soft. Slow. Measured. Not like a finger on glass. More like a nail
testing wood.
Tap. Tap.
I held my breath.
Tap. Tap. Tap.
Three.
I didn't move. I didn't wake anyone.
I just stared into the dark and waited for the sound to stop.
Henna woke beside me, smiling—bright, unaware, hopeful.
And I realised something ugly. The past doesn't leave just
because the future arrives.
Sometimes it rides along.
Quietly.
Tap. Tap.
Waiting.
And this time...
it knew my name.

Trek to Vaishno Devi

The morning air in Katra was cool and damp. Mist clung to the lower hills like a thin shawl. The sky was grey-blue, calm.

The trek point was already awake.

Ponies snorted. Bells jingled. Vendors shouted—walking sticks, water bottles, prasad.

Ahead, the path to Vaishno Devi Bhawan curled into the hills like a ribbon.

Henna and my parents had already made their decision.

They climbed onto horses, gave me one last smile, and disappeared into the crowd as if they belonged there.

I watched them go, irritation rising in my chest.

Then I turned back to Henna.

And my eyes dropped.

Bare feet.

On stone.

“You’re not wearing shoes?” I asked.

Henna didn’t blink. “No.”

I stared. “Henna... It’s a fourteen-kilometre trek. The kankri route isn’t soft.

She looked at me, calm and firm.

“If I’ve come this far, it isn’t for comfort.”

She pressed her hand lightly over her chest.

“Here, every step matters. Faith is not... halfway.”

It wasn’t poetic. It was simply how she believed.

She looked down at her feet once. Just once.

And I caught something in her eyes.

Not softness.

Stubbornness.

A choice.

“If I wear shoes,” she added, “what changes?”

I stood quiet for a second.

Then, without thinking too much, I bent down, untied my laces, and slipped my shoes off.

Henna stared. “Are you serious?”

“Of course,” I said, trying to sound confident. “If you can do it, so can I.”

She shook her head, half amused, half worried.

“This is not a competition, Naman.”

“Good,” I grinned, lifting my shoes. “Because if it were, you’d already win.”

Henna rolled her eyes.

Then we started walking.

I didn’t realise when my steps matched hers.

Or when the sound of her anklets became something I listened for.

It happened quietly—

like faith does.

For the first ten minutes, I enjoyed it.

Cold stone under my feet. Mountain air in my lungs. Henna beside me, anklets softly chiming.

Then the mountain reminded me who I was.

Pebbles bit into my soles. The path was uneven. Every step felt like the ground was testing me.

I tried to act tough for exactly twelve seconds.

Then I blurted, “Okay. This was a terrible decision.”

Henna laughed. “Already?”

“We barely started.”

“And my feet already want a divorce.”

Henna smiled. “Good. Suffering builds character.”

I shot her a glare.

But I laughed too.

Because with her beside me, even pain felt... lighter.

The stretch to Banganga was easy.

As we climbed, the crowd thinned for a while. The noise fell behind us. Only footsteps and bells remained.

The tiled path was kinder. “Jai Mata Di” rose and fell around us. Families walked in groups. Small temple bells rang at corners.

Henna kept talking—childhood visits, small legends, little jokes.

Her voice shifted between faith and mischief as it belonged there.

I found myself listening more than speaking.

Not ignoring.

Watching.

The way her eyes softened when she folded her hands at a shrine.

The way she stopped without thinking to help an old woman.

My feet were already hurting.

But my mind felt strangely light.

By Charan Paduka, I was limping.

A blister had bloomed on my heel.

Henna noticed.

She didn't ask.

She pressed a toffee into my hand, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

I realised then —she cared without making it loud.

"Sugar," she said. "And walk properly. Don't drag your foot."

"I'm regretting every decision since five a.m.," I muttered.

Her lips twitched. "Devotion is fine. Stupidity is extra."

I looked at the shrine, where pilgrims bowed to the sacred footprints.

Conch shells echoed. A child cried somewhere. The air felt alive with belief.

"Still..." I said quietly. "It's peaceful here. Like pain belongs here."

Henna looked at me properly then.

Not smiling.

Not teasing.

Just... seeing.

We sat on a wooden bench outside a shop stuck to the hillside. The shopkeeper gave us tea. The smell of cardamom rose with the steam.

Below us, the pilgrim line moved, slow and endless.

Above, snow peaks glimmered faintly.

Henna leaned back, letting the wind pull at her dupatta.

"It's beautiful," she said. "How faith carries people up a mountain."

I smiled faintly. "Faith... or stubbornness."

Henna laughed.

And that laugh pulled me somewhere else.

Another laugh.

Another bus.

Roma.

Sunlight in dust.

The memory hit my chest so hard I couldn't breathe. My fingers curled hard against the bench edge.

I stood up too fast.

"Chalo," I said. "Let's walk."

Henna's laughter stopped.

She studied me.

"I know you're hiding something," she said—simple, direct.

Then she added, softer but still firm:

"But I won't force it out."

Her words gave space. Not pity. Not romance.

Space.

I didn't know when it happened—but sitting beside her felt easier than sitting alone.

That scared me a little.

I swallowed.

"What about you?" I asked, trying to move the knife somewhere else.. "Was there ever someone special?"

Henna didn't pretend.

"Yes," she said.

I blinked. "That's it?"

"That's it," she said, light again.

Henna adjusted her dupatta and said casually, “Last year I tried starting an online craft store.”

I looked at her, surprised.

“Handmade stuff. It worked for some months.” She shrugged. “Then it collapsed. Too much work. Bad planning.”

“And you’re smiling?” I asked.

“What else can I do?” she said. “If it didn’t fail, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Her voice was light.

But her eyes weren’t joking.

I couldn’t tell which loss she was talking about.

“Some stories only make sense after you lose something,” she added.

I wanted to ask how she learned to carry loss so lightly.

I didn’t.

Some things feel too personal to touch with words.

I didn’t reply immediately.

Because she said it as she had lived it.

Then she turned her head.

“And you?” she asked. “What’s your story, Naman? Who are your people?”

I hesitated.

“I have friends,” I said.

She smiled. “Oh. So, you do have friends. I thought you only talked to mountain air.”

A laugh escaped me.

“Sumit. Ravi. Vinay,” I said.

She waited.

I didn't say the next name.

Roma.

The name stuck in my throat like a stone.

"That's it," I finished.

Henna didn't push.

She only nodded, like she understood the shape of silence.

For the first time, I felt something new:

Maybe with her... I could speak one day.

We have Ardhkuwari.

People slowed here, some sitting down, some turning back—half the climb behind them, the rest still a promise.

The mountain felt quieter at this point, as if it allowed you a pause before asking more.

I rested, slipped my shoes back on, carried both relief and resolve as we moved again.

I pressed it without meaning to.

"You don't regret it? Losing the store... losing that person... don't you ever look back and feel—

"Regret?" Henna shook her head.

"No."

She watched the line of pilgrims climb ahead of us, breath rising like prayer in the cold air.

"Regret doesn't return what's gone."

Then, like a rule the mountain had taught her long ago, she said, "You can't drink from an empty cup, Naman."

I frowned. "You make it sound too easy."

Her smile returned—soft, familiar—but something worn lingered behind it.

"It isn't easy," she said.

"It's practice."

She slowed, matching her steps to mine, as if this stretch of the climb mattered.

In that moment, the mountain, the pilgrims, and her silence said more than a hundred love lines ever could.

Sanjhi Chhat passed.

Henna moved as if she belonged on this path. Sometimes a step ahead, sometimes beside me, sometimes slowing without saying anything.

When the trail narrowed, she touched my arm lightly to balance herself.

When I slowed, she slowed.

When I went quiet, she didn't fill it with noise.

She stayed inside it with me.

Somewhere in that steady walking, something began.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just... real.

By the time we reached Bhawan, the crowd pushed us closer.

The air smelled of incense and sweat.

Henna stood beside me, shoulder brushing mine.

She didn't move away.

Neither did I.

Our hands never touched.

Still, I was aware of where hers were —
of not wanting to step away.

One more step... and it would change.

She looked at me and smiled softly.

Not her playful smile.

This one was personal.

Private.

And I knew, in a quiet way—

I didn't want the journey to end.

Aarti's smoke clung faintly to the shawls. Bells echoed in fading rhythm. The air grew crisp as the mountains pulled shadows back into themselves.

My parents started preparing to descend.

But Henna wasn't moving.

"I'm going to Bhairav Ghati," she said.

Not asking.

Telling.

Everyone paused.

"Now?" I asked. "Alone?"

Henna shrugged. "You can't complete Vaishno Devi without Bhairav Baba."

Then, as if it were obvious, she tied her hair tighter.

Her eyes were steady.

She was not fearless.

She had decided.

I exhaled. "I'll come."

Henna blinked once, then nodded.

"Good," she said. "Stay close. Don't wander."

That was Henna.

Even devotion came with instructions.

The climb to Bhairav was steeper.
Most pilgrims were descending, and the path thinned until it felt
strangely private.

The stones shifted underfoot. Henna slipped once—just enough
to lose rhythm.

Henna's hand found mine without asking.
Not tight. Not careful.
Just there.

We walked like that for a few steps before either of us noticed.

She glanced down first, surprised.
I almost let go.

Then neither of us did.

Our breath fogged the cold air, rising together. Pine branches
brushed the last light.
No chants now.
No bells.

Just two sets of footsteps learning each other's pace.

By the time we reached the Bhairav platform, the silence between
us felt earned, not awkward.

The valley spread out below like a deep, open mouth. Clouds
brushed the ridges. The last sun threw gold on distant snow.

I stood at the edge, staring at nothing.

Henna watched me instead of the view.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"It's peaceful," I said. "I don't want to go."

Henna smiled faintly.

"Then don't."

Her words sat heavy between us.

I swallowed hard.

"Roma..."

My voice cracked.

Henna went still.

“Roma... your ex?” she asked carefully.

I shook my head.

“No.”

My eyes burned.

“She didn’t leave.”

I couldn’t look at Henna while saying it.

“Life took her.”

Henna’s breath caught.

“So she’s—”

“She’s dead,” I said quietly.

The word broke inside me like glass.

I pulled out a ribbon from my pocket—old, faded.

I held it for a second.

Then I let it go.

It drifted into the abyss like a goodbye that had waited too long.

Henna didn’t try to stop it.

Some goodbyes are meant to fall.

I leaned my head on her shoulder.

Not romance.

Not weakness.

Just... collapse.

Henna didn’t say “it’s okay.”

She didn’t give film dialogue.

She just stayed.

Her hand pressed once on my back.
Steady.
I breathed in.
Her warmth felt like something solid in a cold world.
I hadn't leaned on anyone like that in years.
The fact that it felt safe surprised me.
After a while, she reached for my hand.
I didn't pull away.
My fingers found hers like they already knew the way.
"Some wounds never close," I said. "They just... learn to breathe."
Henna squeezed once.
"Then breathe," she said. Short. Practical.
"In. Out."
That was her.
Even comfort came like instruction.
And it worked.

As we walked back down toward the crowd, my mind drifted.
Roma's smile.
Kapil's betrayal.
Sumit's panic.
Vinay's calm voice.
Ravi's anger.
And then—
Nanu.
My brother.

The boy who carried too much darkness for his age.
People said Nanu was fine now.
I wanted to believe it.
But the memory of those nights still tightened my chest.
Henna felt my grip tighten.
She looked at me.
“What?” she asked. Just one word. Sharp.
“Nanu,” I said.
Henna didn’t ask, “Who is that?”
She didn’t act confused.
She only said—“Tell me later.”
Then she added, like a rule:
“And don’t hide things that can kill you.”
The temple lights behind us looked like distant stars.
The mountains looked peaceful.
But peace is not proof.
Because then the wind carried something.
Not a whisper.
Not dramatic.
Just words, counted like beads.
“It isn’t waiting anymore,” the voice said.
“It’s counting.”
“One... two... three...”
I froze.
Henna’s hand tightened around mine.
Her voice came instantly—hard, clear:

“No. Keep walking.”

My throat dried.

“Henna—”

“Don’t stop,” she snapped. “Don’t answer. Don’t look back.”

She pulled me forward.

And I understood something:

Her lips kept forming words that never left her mouth.

She was just choosing not to show it.

We walked into the crowd. But I could still feel it.

Something in the hills is counting.

And somehow, it knew my name

Call from Khara Khara

The train journey ended two days ago.

Still, my body remembered.

Even when I stood still, I felt the rhythm of rails under my skin—like something that refused to let go.

I hadn't slept properly since returning.

Every time I shut my eyes, I hear the same sound from that night ride.

It stayed in my head—even in daylight.

I stepped onto my balcony and let the late afternoon air touch my face. The sky was dusty blue. Normal. Harmless.

For a moment, I told myself everything—the tapping, Roma in my dreams, the mirror lag—was just my mind.

Then my phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

One look and my stomach tightened.

Nanu's mother.

I answered fast.

"Namaste, Mausii."

Her voice came thin, tired. Like she had been saving her fear for this call.

"Naman beta... where have you been? I called yesterday. And the day before."

"I needed some time," I said. "I just got back."

She didn't reply immediately.

I could hear her breathing. Uneven. Like she was choosing words carefully, as if the wrong word might wake something.

Then she said it.

“Naman... something is happening here again.”

My chest went tight.

I stepped inside and closed the balcony door behind me.

“What’s happening?”

“The lights,” she said. “They blink every night. Always at three.”

“Three?” I repeated.

“Yes,” she said quickly. “Not before. Not after. Only three.”

There was a pause.

“It feels like someone inside knows the exact time.”

I forced logic into my voice. “Did you check the wiring?”

“We did,” she said. An electrician came. Everything was fine.”

Her voice dropped lower.

“He stayed till midnight. Nothing happened.”

Another pause.

“But at three,” she said, “the lights started blinking the moment he left.”

The first time I ever woke up afraid for no reason, it was three.

I remember staring at the clock while the house felt... awake.

Papa had said it was just a bad dream.

But Nanu had been standing in the corridor.

Already awake.

My fingers tightened around the phone.

In my head, rules began lining up like old scars.

Three knocks.

Three lines in the circle.

Three A.M. again.

Some numbers were not numbers.

They were signals.

Without thinking, my fingers brushed the iron railing of the balcony door.

I didn't know why I needed to touch it. I just knew I did.

"And the haveli?" I asked.

She exhaled sharply.

"I don't go near it anymore."

A short pause.

"Rajiv is gone," she said.

Not dead.

Just... gone.

Rajiv.

The name hit like an old stone pushed loose.

Rajiv had once seen something near the haveli—and after that, he refused to even name it.

"But Lucky and Rajiv sit outside the gate at night," she whispered.

"They think if they keep watch, it won't come closer."

Not duty.

Fear.

The words pulled up a memory I had never understood properly.

Not then.

Mausi had told me once, late at night, voice careful like the past could hear.

Rajiv used to come often, she had said. Too often.

He always brought something for Nanu.

A sweet. A toy.

Small reasons to stay longer.

That night, he came drunk.

Not loud. Not violent.

Just unsteady.

Eyes restless. Hands moving too much.

When Mausī asked him to sit, he didn't.

When she asked him to leave, he laughed softly and said:

"You don't understand... I just needed somewhere safe."

He reached out—not openly, not aggressively—just enough to make her step back.

She pushed his hand away at once.

Rajiv froze.

For a second, his face changed.

Not anger.

Not shame.

Fear.

"I didn't mean that," he said quickly. Too quickly.

Then his eyes flicked to the window.

The one that faced the haveli.

"I shouldn't have come here," he muttered.

She slapped him.

The sound cut the room in half.

Rajiv staggered back, hand to his cheek, breathing hard.

"I saw something," he whispered. "Near that place."

When she demanded what, he shook his head again and again.

"No," he said. "If I say it... it will follow me."

He left soon after.

After that, he never entered the house again.

Now, hearing Rajiv was gone, the memory made sense.

Not confusion.

A warning I hadn't known how to read.

Mausi's voice pulled me back.

"They heard footsteps," she said.

"Running. Then stopping."

My throat dried.

"They think someone keeps going to Nanu's old room."

I swallowed. "Did they see anyone?"

"No."

Then, softer, as if she hated the next part:

"Lucky said he heard a voice near the window."

My stomach turned.

"What kind of voice?"

"A child," she whispered. "Talking to... someone else."

The line went quiet.

I could hear her breathing again.

Then she said, almost begging:

"When you come next time... just look at the house once.
Something is wrong."

"I will," I said.

My voice sounded steady.

Inside, I wasn't steady at all.

Her breath shook. "Take care, beta."

"You too," I replied.

The call ended.
But the silence it left behind felt heavier than her words.
I sat down slowly, staring at the blank wall across from me.
Three a.m.
Blinking lights.
Footsteps.
A child's voice near the window.
Lucky and Rajiv sit outside Nanu's house every night.
Because even grown men were scared to sleep indoors.
This could still be nothing,
Villages turn fear into stories.
But my body didn't believe that lie.
I pressed my palms against my face.
I had tried to leave Khara Khara behind.
Tried to bury Nanu's drawings.
Tried to forget the haveli.
Tried to walk away from Roma's death like walking away could
make it smaller.
I should have called sooner.
I should have checked on Nanu myself.
That guilt sat quietly in my chest—heavy, familiar.
And then a thought came, sharp and cold:
Some doors don't close just because you run. The thought
stayed.
That whatever was moving there hadn't finished speaking yet.
Outside, the evening sun dipped lower. Long shadows stretched
across the room.
One of them climbed the wall—wrong.

I stood abruptly and grabbed my jacket.

I needed air. Noise. People.

I needed to be anywhere except inside my flat with my own thoughts.

The park was supposed to be closed.

But the gate hung open, broken—like it had given up arguing.

Streetlights stood far apart, throwing weak yellow circles onto wet grass.

Trees leaned inward, leaves dripping after the rain.

Henna and I walked the cracked pathway. Our steps sounded louder than they should have.

Somewhere, a swing moved slowly.

No wind.

Thunder rolled far away.

Henna flinched. “I hate storms,” she said. “They feel... personal.”

We moved along the outer road beside the park, close enough to brush arms.

Streetlights stretched our shadows thin and uneven.

“If I said something wrong—” Henna began.

“It’s not you,” I said. I hesitated. “It’s starting again.”

“For a second,” I added, “the ground didn’t feel solid.”

She watched me closely.

“This isn’t random,” she said. “Everything reacted when you talked about Nanu.”

I didn’t argue.

“Maybe it doesn’t follow places,” she continued. “Maybe it follows moments.”

My phone buzzed.

I answered without looking.

“Naman...”

Aunty’s voice. Shaking.

“Nanu isn’t well,” she said. “He keeps talking to the walls.”

Henna leaned closer.

“He stood with children today,” Aunty whispered. “Not playing. Just watching.”

My stomach dropped.

“One boy collapsed,” she said. “Shaking. Not breathing right.”

Silence.

“His father ran upstairs,” she continued. “Nanu was standing on the terrace edge.”

Her breath broke.

“When his father came close... Nanu stopped. Like he saw something else.”

Then—“He fell.”

Rain filled my ears.

“Aunty,” I said, voice hard now. “Don’t leave him alone. I’m coming.”

The call went dead.

Not cut.

Dead.

Henna looked at my face. She already knew.

“It’s starting again,” I said.

A scraping sound came from the park wall. Slow. Inside the cement. Like nails searching. Something fell behind us. A photo frame lay cracked on the footpath. Three children in the picture. Faces blurred by age and water.

Behind it—an envelope.

Old. Yellowed. Sealed.

One name.

Nanu.

Henna swallowed. "Why would this be here?"

I picked it up.

It didn't feel like paper.

It felt like responsibility.

"It's not meant to be opened," she said.

"It's meant to be moved," I replied.

The seal pulsed once.

Just once.

Henna grabbed my wrist. "Don't."

A low hum began.

Not loud.

Alive.

"Rule time," she said. "No opening it here."

Thunder rolled overhead.

"Henna," I said. "Go home. Lock your door."

Her eyes widened. "What did you hear?"

The laughter came again.

Closer.

The swing creaked.

Henna's nails dug into my palm. "Don't go alone."

I couldn't look at her.

If I stayed, I'd pull her in.

Water gathered slowly on the metal slide.

"If I don't go," I said, "it won't stop choosing."

"We go together," she said immediately. "We don't split."

I hesitated. Then gently slipped my hand free. "I have to finish what began there."

“Then I’m coming,” she said.

No drama. Just a decision.

Behind us, the park lights flickered and went out.

On the wet road, our reflections didn’t match.

The hum deepened—from the ground.

Henna stepped after me. “Naman,” she said into the rain, “you’re not going alone.”

I stepped toward the park exit.

Behind me, Henna froze.

Unfinished Offering

The night over Khara Khara felt wrong.

No wind.

No insects.

No dogs.

Even the trees stood still—as if the land had decided not to breathe.

Two people walked on the dirt path toward an old, broken house.

A house time had left behind.

Once, it was Naman's home.

Once, it held laughter, fights, meals—daily noise.

Now it was only cracked walls... and memories that did not rot.

The man carried a lantern. The flame shook with each step. He held a jute bag close to his chest. Something inside it shifted.

The woman carried a bundle wrapped in white cloth—the cloth people used when they didn't want the world to see what was inside.

Their shawls covered most of their faces.

They did not speak until they reached the rusty gate.

The woman stopped first.

She didn't touch it.

Her hand stayed in the air, unsure.

"It still smells like him," she said, almost to herself.

The man nodded. "He used to come here... before everything went bad."

They entered.

Inside, the air smelled of damp stone, rot, and old dust.

The plaster seams seemed closer than they had a minute ago.
Not alive. Not magical.

Just... heavy.

Like the house had been holding a secret for too long.

The woman moved toward an old trunk kept against the wall, half buried under broken wood. She knelt and pulled at the lock.

Her hands trembled.

When the trunk opened, a sharp smell hit them—camphor, wet paper, something sour underneath.

She lifted a folded cloth—stained, brittle, worn by years.

“He said we must start with the last thing he touched.” she whispered.

The man swallowed. His voice cracked.

“He died because of this.”

“No,” she said, firmly. “He died for this.”

From his bag, the man took out a notebook.

Half-burnt.

Edges black.

Pages stuck together.

But some lines were still visible—circles, symbols, and three jagged marks inside a circle.

The woman leaned closer. “Kapil wrote it exactly like this.”

The man looked away.

“He said the offering was not complete,” she added.

Then, very quietly, she said the real rule.

“Calling it was never the danger.”

“It’s stopping halfway.”

The man nodded once, like he hated agreeing.

“If the circle stays unfinished...” he said, “it doesn’t die.”

“It waits,” she whispered.

They passed through the broken gate and entered the haveli grounds.

The structure rose in the dark—
walls split, arches bent, rooms collapsed inward like a body that
had folded into itself.

The banyan stood at a distance.

Its roots pressed against the outer wall of the haveli—not
entering.

Only touching.

Only watching.

Inside the central room, ash from old fires still clung to the floor.
Old marks scarred the stone—half-erased, layered again and
again like people trying to remember the same nightmare.

“This is where it was done,” the woman said.

“This is where he called it.”

The man poured oil onto the floor.

Not carefully.

Not neatly.

A rough circle.

The woman opened the white cloth.
She kissed it once—quick, desperate—then placed it at the
centre.

Three incense sticks were lit.

The smoke did not rise.

It dragged itself along the ceiling, as if the air above was too
heavy.

The haveli made a sound.

Not loud.

Like a wooden bone cracking inside a giant body.

The chants began.

Uncertain at first.

Broken.

Then repeated—again and again—exactly as Kapil had written them.

The walls vibrated lightly.

From below the stone floor came a sound.

A slow, wet breath.

Not wind.

Not an animal.

Something trapped under a rock.

The flame in the lantern bent inward.

The symbols in the notebook started to glow—
not bright, not holy—
just deep, like embers hiding under ash.

The woman's breath shook. "It's listening."

The man stared at the circle. "No," he whispered. "It's remembering."

Then—

The fire collapsed.

Darkness rushed in.

Only one incense stick remained lit.

Its smoke pooled near the floor—like fog.

Something beneath the haveli shifted once.

And then became still.

Deep below, a voice breathed out—

not a whisper.

Not a warning.

A promise.

The woman turned, face drained.

“It’s done,” she said. “He will rest now.”

They walked away.

Their shadows stretched behind them.

But in the ash, a tiny red point of light began to pulse.

Slow.

Steady.

Like a heart that had just opened its eyes.

The wind did not settle that night.

It moved through the broken haveli, lifting dust and dead leaves, pushing them into corners like fingers cleaning a room.

It circled the banyan tree—as if something inside the roots was turning in its sleep.

The fire was gone.

But the smells stayed.

Burnt oil.

Wet soil.

And the faint metallic scent of blood.

The earth did not forget.

Clouds swallowed the moon. The clearing turned dark—so dark it felt charged, like it was humming under the skin.

Under the banyan, the red pulse continued.

Patient.

Waiting.

Then the wind began to speak.

Not loud. Not dramatic.

Soft, steady, repeating a name as it mattered.

“Kapil... Kapil...”

The ash shifted.

Dust gathered around the burned mark in the soil—
a circle, cut by three jagged lines.

The voice grew stronger.

It no longer sounded sad.

It sounded sure.

It sounded hungry.

Far away, in a small house, a child turned in his sleep.

The wind entered through cracks in the wall, brushing old
photographs, and shaking a temple bell that no god answered
anymore.

Something else was listening.

Not the village.

Not the night.

The Devta.

The one that watched through roots and shadow.

Nanu woke up.

The room felt wrong.

The beams creaked like old bones.

The curtains moved even though there was no breeze.

The clock ticked too slowly... like it was tired.

Then he heard it.

A voice from under the bed.

“Naa... nu...”

His eyes opened wide.

He did not call out.

He did not move.

Then—

tap.

A single drop hit the floor.

Then another.

tap... tap... tap.

Warm. Sticky.

Blood.

He looked up.

The ceiling was dry.

He checked his body.

No cut. No wound.

Still, the blood kept coming from nowhere.

Then came another sound.

Anklet bells.

Soft. Light.

Floating.

“Mama?” Nanu whispered in a small child’s voice. Afraid.

The bells stopped.

The room went still again.

Then a wet breath rose from under the bed.

A single word came next.

Not like a child.

Not like Mama.

Older.

“Come.”

Nanu stepped back.

The floor felt damp, as if the stone had sweated.

The walls felt close.

The window shook. Once.

Outside, in the distance, the banyan tree in the field glowed faint red at the roots.

Not bright.

Just alive enough to be seen.

Watching.

Barefoot, Nanu walked into the hall.

Every step left a wet footprint behind him.

The small prayer bell near the door rang once—

a thin lonely sound—

then stopped.

The door latch lifted by itself.

Night stood outside—like someone waiting.

The voice returned.

Deeper now. Many voices speaking together, but calm as one.

“Come see.”

“Come finish what they began.”

Nanu walked across the field.

The banyan waited.

Its branches trembled slightly—as if they had been holding a breath for too long.

The ash on the ground glowed gently.

A circle with three jagged lines.

“Kapil?” Nanu asked softly. Child's voice again. Almost pleading.

The answer came.

Cold. Clear.

“I have been waiting.”

The ground pulsed.

Roots moved under the soil, curling around Nanu's ankles—soft, careful, but not asking permission.

The red glow climbed the trunk like veins.

“They called me,” the voice said.

“They asked for peace.”

“And they left the door open.”

Blood slid from Nanu's nose.

He did not notice.

The roots rose higher.

The air filled with the sound of thousands of anklet bells—too many, too close.

Nanu whispered, shaking. “What do you want?”

“To be seen.”

“To be kept.”

“To live again.”

“Why me?” Nanu asked.

A pause.

Then the Devta voice, calm and final:

“Because they opened the door.”

“And you were standing on the other side.”

The roots tightened.

Ash lifted into the air, spinning in small circles.

Nanu’s mouth moved.

His voice changed—half child, half something else.

“They called you wrong,” he said.

“You are not gone.”

The banyan bent toward him slightly.

Like bowing.

One word returned from the dark.

“Accept.”

The world went quiet.

The red glow sank into the soil, beating once—like an ember swallowing itself.

The roots loosened.

The air softened.

Night breathed again.

Nanu turned toward his house.

His face was calm now.

Too calm.

Behind him, the red mark pulsed one last time... matching his heartbeat.

When he reached the door, the wind brushed past him like a blessing.

The Devta was watching.

Nanu smiled.

And in a voice that was not fully his, he said—

“I won’t look away.”

The door closed behind him.

Without a sound.

Circles on the Wall

Weak afternoon light slipped through half-closed curtains, cutting thin lines across the cracked walls of Nanu's room. The air smelled of dust, old paint, and kerosene.

Nanu sat on the floor, legs folded.

His back faced the door.

A pencil was clenched tight in his hand.

At first, his mother thought he was only sitting.

Then she heard it.

A soft sound—broken, shaking.

Crying.

Not loud crying.

Not the kind children do after a fall.

This was slow. Silent. Deep.

As if something inside him was breaking again and again.

His shoulders moved.

His head stayed bent toward the wall.

The pencil scratched.

Scrrk. Scrrk.

"Nanu?" she called gently from the doorway. "What are you doing, beta?"

He didn't turn.

He didn't answer.

The crying continued—short, uneven pulls, like he couldn't breathe properly.

Nanu's mother stepped inside.

Her feet felt heavy.

She didn't know why.

But her body was already afraid.

The wall in front of him was covered.

Circles.

Lines.

Rough faces.

Not drawn neatly—scratched hard, pressed deep into the plaster,
like someone was carving.

The pencil moved again.

Circle.

Circle.

Circle.

His hand shook while drawing, but he did not stop.

“Nanu,” she said again, closer. “Bas karo. Enough.”

His crying slowed.

For one second, she felt relief.

Then he spoke.

“Papa kaise hain, Mumma?”

His voice was child-soft. Normal.

Too normal.

Her chest tightened.

“He's... resting,” she said carefully.

The pencil stopped.

Even the curtain stopped mid-sway, as if someone had pressed
pause—so suddenly it hurt her ears.

Nanu tilted his head slightly to one side.

Very slowly.

The crying stopped completely.

She watched his fingers.

They tightened around the pencil.

Then—he smiled.

She couldn't see his full face, only the edge.

But the smile was wrong.

Too still. Too controlled.

“Nanu?” she whispered.

She blinked.

And he was no longer sitting in front of her.

Her breath caught.

She turned—

Nanu was standing right behind her.

So close she could feel him near her neck.

Not breath.

Presence.

The air around him felt tight, buzzing—like before a power cut.

Veins flared red against the white.

Not wet.

Not swollen.

Red like something had burned inside them.

His head tilted sharply.

Too sharp.

And he did not blink.

His thumb rubbed against his palm again and again—like he was trying to erase something off his skin.

Nanu's mother's heart slammed.

"Nanu... step back," she said.

Her voice shook.

He didn't move.

The veins on his neck pulsed.

For a second, the room felt stretched, as if the walls had thinned.

Wood creaked softly.

Her mother stumbled back. Her hand hit the table.

The lamp blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Then darkness.

She gasped.

In the dark, she could hear him.

Not breathing.

Not crying.

Just... being there.

Then came the sound.

Scratch.

Slow fingernails dragging across the wall.

Her mother turned her head.

And her body went cold.

The drawings were moving.

The three small figures—one girl, two boys—lifted their heads.

Their faces stretched. Their eyes deepened into black holes.

Behind them, a shadow spread across the wall.

Long arms.

Too long.

It reached upward and touched the ceiling.

A low sound filled the room.

Not whispering words.

Her mother ran to the door.

It slammed shut before she reached it.

She grabbed the latch and pulled hard.

A splinter drove deep into her palm.

She didn't feel it at first.

Then the skin tore.

Warm blood slicked the handle—and still the door wouldn't move.

Not with force.

With a decision.

Something laughed.

Not a sound.

A pressure inside her chest, like mockery pushing down.

The pencil rolled across the floor by itself.

Stopped at her feet.

The candle on the table trembled... then went out.

The lamp died, and the corners thickened first.

Her hands shook as she searched for the matchbox.

Scratch.

Again—nails on plaster, slow and patient.

She struck a match.

Light burst out.

Her mother screamed.

Nanu stood in the centre of the room.

Head lowered.

Black pencil dust covered his hands. His fingers twitched slightly.

His shadow stretched too long across the walls—bending where it shouldn't.

Then a voice touched her ear.

“Mumma...”

It was sweet.

Childlike.

Almost normal.

“He’s home.”

The wall pulsed once.

The drawings vanished.

From the next room came a weak cough.

Her husband.

“Rina...” he called softly. “What’s happening?”

Nanu's mother opened her mouth.

Before she could answer, another voice came—closer now.

Not a child's voice.

Older.

Calm.

Final.

“Don’t wake him.”

Nanu's mother froze.

Nanu's thumb rubbed his palm again... again... again.

The match flame shook in her hand.

The older voice continued, quiet like it had all the time in the world.

"He's not gone."

"He's only waiting."

Her knees gave way.

She sank to the floor, staring at the wall.

Shapes bloomed again.

Circles.

Circles inside circles.

Inside them, the three children stared back.

And behind them—something vast.

Not man.

Not tree.

Its shape spread like roots climbing upward.

Too many eyes.

Too many mouths.

But no screaming.

Only certainty.

The wall shuddered once.

Not violently.

Like something inside it had shifted its weight.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor.

Slow. Heavy.

Coming closer.

Mama appeared at the doorway.

He did not step inside.

He looked once—at the wall, at the unfinished circle, at Nanu's mother crumpled on the floor—and understood everything.

His face didn't change.

That made it worse.

Nanu's mother's mouth opened. Words spilt out in panic.

“Bhai... something—”

Mama lifted one hand.

Not aggressive.

Not loud.

Just final.

“Not now.”

Nanu's mother stopped immediately.

Even her breath obeyed him.

Mama's eyes moved to Nanu.

Not with love.

Not with anger.

With a kind of tired knowing.

He didn't say Nanu's name.

He never did.

He only said:

“The boy should not be in this room.”

Nanu's mother shook her head, tears on her cheeks. “He... he was drawing—”

Mama didn't look at her.

He looked at the wall.

“Circles,” he said softly, like it was an old sin. “Always circles.”

Nanu's mother whispered, “What is this? What is happening to him?”

Mama finally looked at her.

His eyes were controlled, but something behind them wasn't.

Fear.

Hidden, kept behind ritual.

“A child does not choose,” Mama said. “A child is chosen.”

Nanu's mother flinched.

Mama stepped one foot into the room—just one.

He bent and picked up the pencil from the floor.

He did not look directly at the drawings while doing it.

He turned the pencil in his fingers once, as if testing it...

Then snapped it cleanly in half.

The sound was soft.

Too soft.

He placed the broken pieces on the table—away from the wall—like keeping them separate mattered.

Then he reached out and took the candle from Nanu's mother's shaking hand.

He turned it so the flame faced outward, not toward the drawings.

The red shimmer on the wall dimmed slightly.

Nanu's mother watched him like he was the only solid thing left.

“Bhai... tell me,” she begged. “What is it?”

Mama didn't answer directly.

He never did.

He glanced at the unfinished circle.

Then deliberately looked away.

“Some doors open only once,” he said.

Nanu's mother's throat tightened. “What door?”

Mama's jaw clenched for half a second.

Then he slid the truth away like a priest folding cloth.

“That room,” he said. “That ground that remembers.”

His eyes flicked to Nanu again.

“That child has walked too close to it.”

Nanu's mother whispered, “Can you stop it?”

Mama paused.

And for the first time—just once—his voice softened.

Not comfort.

Regret.

“If I could stop it so easily,” he said, “it would not be here.”

“But I chose control over truth.”

That one line landed like a stone.

Because it was the first time Mama sounded... human.

Then his face locked again.

Back to ritual.

He stepped back.

“Don't touch it,” he said. “Don't stare at it.”

“And don't finish anything you don't understand.”

“Nanu,” Mother's voice broke. “But what do I do?”

Mama answered in half-truth, like a mantra.

“You do less.”

“Less words. Less looking.”

“Less fear.”

Nanu’s Mother stared at him.

Mama looked at the unfinished circle once more.

His voice lowered.

“It’s not complete,” he said.

“That is the only mercy in this room.”

Then he did something small.

Something dangerous.

He reached out and touched Nanu’s head—very lightly.

Not a blessing.

Not affection.

A check.

Like a priest checking a fever.

For one second, his fingers trembled.

Then he pulled his hand back fast.

As if even touch could invite something.

He didn’t look at Nanu’s mother while speaking.

“Close the door halfway,” he said. “Not fully.”

“Light must remain.”

“Darkness becomes permission.”

Nanu’s mother swallowed. “And him?”

Mama finally glanced at Nanu again.

“The boy stays where I can see him,” he said.

Then, almost too softly to hear:

“Before he forgets he is a boy.”

He pulled the door halfway shut.

Leaving the room in shadow.
Circle after circle stared from the wall.
Until the last one—
unfinished.
A thin line ending mid-curve.
Waiting.
Open.
As if one more mark would make it whole.
The hum deepened.
Low. Resonant.
Like the earth itself was breathing.
Then the light went out again.
The room fell black—
except for a faint red shimmer bleeding through cracks in the wall.
The shape of the unfinished circle.
Still waiting.
And inside that hum, a voice rose—soft, patient, eternal.
“Almost.”

Road to Khara Khara

The rain hadn't stopped.

It came down in slanting needles, catching my headlights like thin threads of glass. The wipers moved back and forth in a nervous rhythm—too fast, too desperate—like they'd done this drive before.

Outside the window: half-drowned fields, broken milestones, and waterlogged patches where street dogs searched for shelter.

Everything was grey. Rain and road.

The dashboard clock blinked: **11:47 PM.**

My fingers tightened around the steering wheel.

Henna's voice still sat in my head.

Don't face it alone.

But I already was.

The city lights were gone behind me. Ahead was the old highway—no shops, no traffic, no life.

Only rain.

Only the engine hum.

I turned on the radio, just to fill the car.

Static.

I switched it off.

The quiet felt heavier after sound died—like it had been waiting.

My mind kept returning to the rules, without permission.

Iron keeps you safe.

Mirrors don't show truth... they delay it.

**Circles open what should stay shut.
And if a circle stays unfinished—sometimes that is mercy.**

My chest tightened at that last one.

Mercy meant something was already near.

Somewhere between the highway and the turn for Khara Khara, I
saw a shape at the edge of the road.

A man.

Barefoot.

Soaked through.

He stood completely still.

I slowed without thinking.

My headlights fell over him—and he vanished.

I slammed on the brakes.

The tyres screamed against wet asphalt.

I stepped out into the rain. My breath came out in sharp clouds.

Nothing.

No one.

Only an empty road and fog.

Rain hammered the roof harder, faster—like fingers knocking to
get in.

Then I felt it.

Not behind me.

Inside the car.

I leaned closer to the fogged windshield.

A small handprint shone on the *inside* of the glass.

Fresh.

Dripping.

My stomach turned.

I stumbled back, then forced myself to breathe.

I opened the driver's door again.

Seat empty.

No child.

No one.

But my phone screen was lit on its own.

New Voicemail —Unknown Number

I pressed play.

Static.

Then a child's voice—broken, shaky.

“...back...”

A sharp click ended it.

I didn't turn around.

Couldn't.

I got in and drove.

The road narrowed into a single lane. Ancient peepal and banyan trees formed a tunnel above me. Their branches hung low, brushing the car roof—like hands searching.

Sometimes, through the moving leaves, I thought I heard my name.

I told myself it was rain.

I didn't believe it.

Ahead, I noticed movement.

Two men stood beside a battered Hero Honda under a leaning banyan tree. The engine idled unevenly. Its weak headlight shivered as rain cut through it.

Both men waved—not frantically. Urgent.

I slowed.

One cupped his hands around his mouth.

“Sir! Slow down! Aage road baith gaya hai—half is gone!”

I frowned. That wasn’t there earlier.

I rolled the window down a few inches.

The second man leaned closer, squinting—then his face changed.

“Naman?” he said, shocked. “Arre... main hoon. Rajiv.”

He thumped his chest, then pointed at the other man.

“And this idiot is Lucky.”

Lucky gave a stiff, awkward salute. Like he wasn’t sure whether to joke or pray.

“You know this road,” Rajiv said. “But it’s not the same now. Baarish ke baad...”

His voice dipped.

“...and after other things.”

Lucky cleared his throat.

“People still drive as if nothing changed,” he said. “Isliye hum yahan khade hote hain raat ko.”

His eyes flicked toward the banyan tree behind them.

Rajiv noticed and elbowed him. Hard.

“Don’t,” Rajiv muttered.

I followed Lucky’s glance anyway.

“What about the tree?”

Lucky hesitated. Rain ran down his face like sweat.

“Nothing official,” he said quickly. “Bas baatein. People say the shadow doesn’t fall where it should.”

Rajiv snorted. “He was drunk one night. Imagined it.”

Lucky snapped back, defensive. “Maybe. But still—no one crosses this stretch alone after midnight now.”

Their banter didn’t remove the tension under it.

It only showed they were scared—pretending not to be.

I asked, “Nanu’s house... you’ve been there?”

Both of them went still.

Rajiv stepped back slowly, rubbing his arms like the cold had found him suddenly.

“You’re going there... now?”

I nodded.

Lucky spoke more softly.

“Something wakes up there every night,” he said. “Around three.”

Rajiv added, “And someone walks inside. We hear footsteps... even from the road.”

Rain filled the space after that.

Lucky leaned closer to my window.

“We won’t stop you,” he said. “You’ve lived here.”

A pause.

“But we’ll ride till the bridge.”

His eyes dipped.

“After that... you go alone.”

I didn’t ask why.

I already knew.

Some lines were physical.

Some were ruled.

They moved ahead. The bike's single headlight bobbed through dripping branches until we reached the old stone bridge crouched over the swollen river.

Rajiv shouted through the rain:

"We won't cross!"

Lucky lingered one second longer.

"Naman," he said, swallowing hard, "if you hear someone call your name near the house..."

He paused like the words tasted dangerous.

"Don't answer."

Then he turned around and left without waiting.

The red taillight vanished into the rain almost immediately.

Beyond the bridge, Khara Khara felt wrong.

The same village.

But as if someone had removed its breath.

A few oil lamps burned low in doorways. Shadows leaned in strange angles.

As I passed the old stone wall, my headlights caught something painted across it.

I slowed.

A circle.

Not neat.

Not complete.

A rough ring of ash-black paint, like someone tried to close it and failed.

Across it, in smeared red, one word:

DON'T.

My throat dried.

An unfinished circle.

Mercy.

Or warning.

When I reached Nanu's house, something inside me tightened.

The gate creaked open on its own—slow, deliberate—like it knew me.

Rain softened into mist. It clung to my eyelashes.

Inside, a dim orange light glowed weakly.

Then I heard it.

A lullaby.

Nanu's mother's voice—tired, trembling—drifting through a cracked window.

"Nanu..." I whispered.

I took one step toward the door.

And stopped.

Between me and the entrance, footprints dotted the mud.

Small.

Bare.

Leading away from the house... toward the trees behind the courtyard.

The door creaked wider.

The lullaby stopped.

The air held.

Then a voice rose from inside the house.

Soft. Close. Wrong.

“Naman...”

My stomach dropped.

The mist around me felt colder.

The voice came again, slower.

“Naa...man...”

Lucky’s warning hit my skull.

Don’t answer.

I didn’t.

I stood still, fists tight.

The door widened anyway.

Not fast. Not slow.

Just enough.

As if whatever waited inside had already decided—

I would step forward on my own.

Then the voice changed.

For a moment, it shrank.

Childlike.

Almost innocent.

“Naman... am I bad?”

My heart stopped. Then it turned older. Calm.

Not human-calm. A voice that had waited too long.

“Come.”

I didn’t answer. But my feet... shifted.

And I hated myself for it.

When Nanu Pointed Behind Me

I stood at the gate long enough for the rain to soak through my shirt.

Long enough for the house to get tired of waiting.

The front door didn't creak open.

It sagged inward—as if something behind it had been pushing for hours and finally gave up.

A reddish-brown smear marked the inside of the frame.

I stopped.

The air hit me.

Not cold.

Heavy.

Wet heat, kerosene, mould... and something metallic that stuck to the throat.

Like old blood.

I stepped inside.

A draft slipped through the beams.

A long, slow sigh moved through the walls.

A kerosene lamp trembled on a crooked table. Its flame shook hard, throwing shadows across the floor that stretched too far.

"Nanu?" I called.

My voice sounded smaller in this air.

No answer.

Rainwater had made brown streaks down the walls. Smoke stains curled like old burns.

But one wall—
one whole wall—
was covered.
Circles.
Layers of circles.
Chalk. Soot. Pencil. Charcoal. Nail marks.
Some clean.
Some torn into plaster like someone tried to dig a door open.
Inside many circles—
faces.
Three faces.
Two boys. One girl.
Drawn again and again until the features melted.
Each time, the mouths were wider.
Wider.
Until they became black holes.
My stomach twisted.
Somewhere deep inside me, a thought came like a rule I didn't
want to remember:
**Circles don't stay drawings in Khara Khara.
They become doors.**
A sound dragged through the hallway.
Wood against wood.
Slow. Uneven.
Like a chair being pulled... or a body.
I turned.
Nanu's mother stood there.

But she didn't look like herself.

Clothes were soaked and sticking to her shaking frame.

Lips cracked.

Dried blood at the corners.

And a bruise around her wrist—finger-shaped.

"Naman," she rasped. Her voice was thin, used up. "He's not eating. Not sleeping. Sometimes he talks..."

Her jaw trembled.

"...to the walls. To the corners."

I stepped closer. "Where is he?"

She pointed to the back room with a hand that wouldn't stop shaking.

"He won't let me in," she whispered. "Says they watch him."

"Who?"

Her eyes filled.

"The ones inside the circles."

Before I could speak, something slammed inside the back room.

Not a fall.

A hit.

Deliberate.

Then the house held still, like it was listening to the echo.

I moved fast.

The door hung crooked. A bulb blinked weakly above it, like it was fighting to stay alive.

The smell hit first—sweat, urine, damp fear.

The room was empty—

except for the walls.

More circles.

More faces.

More deep grooves where someone had clawed plaster with bare fingers.

Dried blood smeared across scratches.

Something metallic glinted on the floor.

A broken pencil.

Woodstained red.

I stared around.

No Nanu.

But the room didn't feel empty.

It felt occupied.

Upstairs, the dread thickened.

A sound came faintly.

A child sobbing.

Soft. Hopeless.

I followed it to the room at the end.

I pushed the door open.

Empty.

Peeling wallpaper.

A window rattles gently.

The sobbing stopped.

Then started again—somewhere else.

As if the sound was moving away from me on purpose.

Testing.

Pulling me deeper.
My skin prickled.
I moved toward the terrace.
The air up here was colder—but not weather cold.
Wrong cold.
“Nanu?” I called softly. “Where are you?”
Nothing.
Only distant thunder.
I leaned on the railing to steady myself.
And then I heard it.
A small voice.
From the storage room.
“Please... Papa... don’t hit me... it hurts... I won’t do it again...”
I froze.
The voice was child-like. Raw. Real.
But underneath it...
another voice breathed with it.
Not his.
Not loud.
Not a demon.
Older-than-human calm.
Almost amused.
I grabbed the handle and yanked the door open.
The stink hit first—rot, damp wood, rat urine.
Then movement—

cockroaches, lizards, and rats, bursting out like they were fleeing something worse than me.

And there—

curled against the wall—

was Nanu.

Bruises mapped his arms.

Dried blood crusted near his ear.

His nails were broken to the quick, dark with chalk dust.

His thumb rubbed against his palm again and again—
like he was trying to erase something.

“Nanu...” I whispered. “It’s me. Naman.”

Nanu lifted his head slowly.

Mechanically.

His cheeks were hollow. Lips split. Black circles under his eyes.

But his expression hit me harder than the bruises.

He looked terrified of everything.

Including me.

“They said you’d come,” he whispered.

Child voice.

Shaky.

“They said you’d lie.”

My throat closed.

“Who said that?”

Nanu’s eyes flicked to my shoulder.

He raised one trembling finger and pointed behind me.

“She’s standing there.”

The air behind me tightened.

I turned—

nothing.

When I faced him again, Nanu was standing.

Right in front of me.

Too close.

I didn't see him move.

The whites of his eyes looked scratched raw, thin veins webbing outward—like cracked glass. He didn't blink.

His head tilted slightly.

The thumb-rubbing stopped.

Blood welled at the corners of his eyes and slid down like dark tears.

“Nanu—” my voice cracked.

Then the bulb above us exploded.

Glass fell like sharp rain.

The room went black.

And the scratching began.

Everywhere.

Fast. Violent.

Circular.

Like dozens of hands drawing around me.

Closing something.

Trapping me.

I choked and stumbled out, half-falling into the corridor.

I grabbed my phone with shaking fingers and dialled the only person who knew the rules.

Mama.

The phone rang.

Then clicked.

No voice.

“Mama?” I whispered. “Please... talk to me.”

Nothing.

Then—

temple bells.

Slow.

Off-beat.

Wrong.

The same bells Nanu used to mention.

The ones that rang when it was near.

Under the bells, a sound rose.

A chant.

Wet. Bubbling.

Like a voice speaking through water.

“...so-hum... so-hum... sooo—”

“Mama!” I yelled. “Tell me what happened on the first night! Tell me what’s happening to him!”

The chant sharpened.

Turned metallic.

The bells slammed so loud I flinched and dropped the phone.

The screen flashed:

CALL FAILED

But the sound didn’t stop.

It stayed in my ear.

Under my skin.

My name, repeated slowly.

Na... man...

As if something on the other side of the circle had finally noticed me.

And smiled.

Cursed Photograph

I woke to kitchen sounds.

Normal.

Utensils. Fan. Footsteps.

But my head was still stuck in the night—shadows, whispers,
the banyan watching.

I got up fast.

Nanu's room was two doors away.

I pushed it open.

Empty.

Bedsheet twisted. Pillow pressed.

Like he'd been there—and left suddenly.

My chest tightened.

I searched the hallway. The veranda.

Nothing.

The house felt tight.

Like something had happened here... and the walls had
swallowed it.

In the study, I pulled open the bottom drawer.

It fought me.

Then slid out with a groan.

Broken pens. Torn pages. Old keys.

And an envelope.

Thick. Yellow. Old.

On it:

SUMMER

My hand froze.
I opened it.
Photos spilled out.
School events. Birthdays. Village fields.
Then the last photo hit me.
The lake.
Me at nine.
Smiling.
Arm around Nanu.
Behind us—the lake, like blue glass.
But the photo had changed.
Edges brown.
Colours dead.
Every face blurred.
Every face...
Except Nanu.
His face was sharp.
Too sharp.
Like it had been taken yesterday.
I stared at his eyes.
The eyes stared back.
Not memory.
Presence.
I dropped the photo on the table.
My mind pulled out rules I didn't want.
Mirrors lie.
Photos move.

By noon, I was walking to the lake.

I didn't decide.
My feet did.

The path was overgrown.
Wilder than before.
Like nobody went there anymore.

I reached.

The lake was gone.

Only cracked mud.
Only salt.
Only one puddle at the centre.

Black.
Still.
Like an eye.

The banyan stood behind it.
Roots thick.
Shadow too long.

I placed the photo down.

The sun hit it.

Nanu's eyes shimmered.

The puddle rippled.
No wind.

Something brushed my ankle.

I jumped back.

No grass.
Only dust.

And in the dust, a circle was forming.

Around my feet.

Slow.
Perfect.

My blood turned cold.

I stepped out.
The circle didn't chase.
It stayed.
Like a trap left open.
Waiting.
I grabbed the photo.
Its surface was wet.
My fingers were dry.
I looked again.
Nanu's head was slightly tilted now.
Like he was seeing me.
And smiling.
I didn't wait.
I walked back fast.
Didn't look behind.

That evening, Nanu sat on the veranda.
Legs dangling.
Humming.
Not a song.
A pattern.
His thumb rubbed his palm again and again.
Like wiping chalk.
I stood near the door.
"Do you remember the lake?" I asked.
Nanu blinked.
"The lake?"
"Yes. We went every summer."
A small flicker crossed his face.

Then he said softly—
“It’s gone.”

“I know,” I said. “I went today.”

He tilted his head.
“Why?”

“To see if it remembers us.”

Nanu smiled faintly.
Like he already knew the answer.

“Did it?” he asked.

I swallowed.
“Yes.”

He resumed humming.
For a second, his eyes looked too bright.
Then normal again.

Night came.

The fan kept turning.
Nanu breathed in the next room.

I sat under the lamp with the photograph.

Other faces stayed blurred.

But Nanu’s face changed.

The smile widened.
The eyes deepened.

Like the photo wasn’t flat anymore.
It had depth inside it.

I put the photo on the table.
Kept a glass on top.

Then—

Click.

Camera shutter.

I froze.

Looked around.

Nothing.

But a smell entered the room.

Summer water.

Hot sunlight.

And beneath it—

Metal.

Blood.

Outside, the banyan's shadow stretched toward the house.

Branches moved without wind.

Before sleep pulled me down, I checked the photo once more.

Something new had appeared.

Behind Nanu's shoulder.

Near the lake edge.

A faint shape.

Long hair.

Half a face.

Eyes turned sideways—

Looking straight at me.

Roma.

My throat dried.

I turned the photo face down.

I still felt her eyes.

Mirror Game

The day after I found the photograph, the house changed.

Not silent. The fan still clicked. A crow still cawed sometimes. A train still hummed far away.

But everything sounded muted—as if the walls had thickened overnight.

The air felt heavier, too.

As if the house was listening.

Nanu changed with it.

He spoke less.

And when he did, it was always about reflections—puddles, spoons, windows, anything that could hold another version of him.

He stared at shiny surfaces too long.

Like he was waiting for something inside them to move.

By noon, I couldn't take it anymore.

I stepped outside just to breathe.

Lucky and Mama were at the gate, sitting on their old Hero Honda as if they owned the duty of fear.

Lucky spotted me first and grinned.

“Sir, you look like you haven't slept for three days.”

Mama nodded seriously. “He looks possessed. See the eyes.”

I managed a weak laugh. “Nothing's happened.”

Lucky leaned in, lowering his voice. “Good. Because we saw something.”

Mama straightened up, as if he was giving news.

“A tall man,” he said. “No face. Standing near the banyan.”

My stomach tightened.

“And the banyan leaned away,” Mama added. “That’s how you know it isn’t human.”

Lucky clicked his tongue. “Trees know more than people.”

I looked at them. “Why are you telling me this?”

Lucky’s grin faded a little.

Mama spoke first. His voice dropped into that old village certainty.

“Because this is when things start copying.”

“First they watch,” he said.

“Then they repeat.”

Lucky added quickly, “And once they repeat... they don’t stop.”

Mama leaned forward.

He didn’t say Nanu’s name. He never did.

“If that child starts talking to his reflection,” Mama said, “don’t answer.”

I frowned. “Answer what?”

Lucky opened his mouth—then shut it.

Rajiv uncle cleared his throat.

His face was serious now. No jokes.

“Naman,” he said, “this is the rule.”

“If the mirror talks first... you break it.”

“And don’t look twice.”

Lucky shot him a look. "Uncle, why are you saying it like that?"

Rajiv rubbed his palms together, eyes on the ground.

"Because that's how it started last time," he said.

Mama's jaw tightened. "Last time when?"

Rajiv swallowed. "When Kapil was alive."

"He used to stand in front of mirrors at night. Talking. Laughing. Asking questions."

Lucky frowned. "You never told us."

Rajiv let out a dry breath. "Nobody wanted to hear."

He looked at me, eyes red-rimmed.

The mirror answered.

Rajiv didn't.

Mama muttered under his breath, half prayer, half truth:

"Mirrors don't lie."

"They delay."

"And delay is enough."

Lucky tried to scoff. "Arre, bas. Enough."

But his hand tightened on the handlebars.

Rajiv's voice stayed flat.

"If the mirror starts remembering on its own... don't wait."

The engine coughed alive.

Lucky and Mama left.

Rajiv didn't.

Rajiv waited until the bike sound faded, then stepped closer to the side window near the storage room.

He didn't know why his feet brought him here.

Only that something inside the house felt awake.

He peered in.

The boy sat on the floor in front of the tall mirror.

Whispering.

“Nanu... Nanu... Nanu...”

Rajiv’s breath caught.

The reflection lagged.

Just a fraction.

Like a shadow that couldn’t keep up.

The boy leaned closer.

The mirror didn’t follow properly.

Then the boy stopped whispering.

The reflection didn’t.

It kept moving.

Rajiv’s pulse roared in his ears.

The reflected head began to turn.

Not the shoulders.

Only the head.

Twisting too far.

Rajiv stepped back, legs weak.

The reflected eyes glowed red—wet, alive.

Blood ran from the corners like tears.

Then the reflected eyes shifted.

They locked onto Rajiv.

Not through glass.

Through the room.

Rajiv made a small, broken sound.

The reflected mouth smiled.

Rajiv didn't wait.

He ran.

No shouting.

No looking back.

Just running—as if his life depended on pretending he never saw it.

When I stepped inside later, the house swallowed me again.
Not freezing—just contained.

The sky outside had turned a sick grey, like rain waiting for permission.

I found Nanu in the storage room.

The mirror was already uncovered.

That's what stopped me.

No ritual.

No whispering.

Just the mirror standing there, patient.

Nanu sat cross-legged before it, a thin blanket under him.
He wasn't looking at his reflection.

He was listening.

"It's not broken," he said quickly, before I could speak.

Child voice. Defensive.

"It remembers."

"Remembers what?" I asked.

He shrugged.

"Faces. Voices. How people talk when they miss someone."

My stomach tightened.

His thumb rubbed his palm slowly.
Again.
Again.

I stepped closer.

The mirror showed him sitting there.
Normal.
Too normal.

“Nanu,” I said. “Who told you about this mirror?”

He didn’t answer.

Instead, he spoke toward the glass—careful, respectful.

“It doesn’t like being stared at,” he said.
“It likes being called.”

I felt the air thicken.

“Nanu,” I said firmly. “Step away.”

He hesitated.

Then whispered—not chanting, not praying—

“Nanu.”

The mirror stayed still.

But a voice came back.

Soft.
Wet.
Not loud.

“Unan.”

Nanu smiled.

“It knows,” he breathed.
“It listens better when you’re quiet.”

My blood went cold.

“Nanu,” I said. “Enough. Come here.”

He finally turned to me.

For a second, relief hit—
until I saw his eyes.

Not red.
Not glowing.

Focused.
Older.

“Will Mama be angry?” he asked, small again.

Before I could answer, the voice returned—closer this time.
Not from the mirror.

From the room.

“He fed me.”

The mirror didn’t move.

But Nanu’s thumb stopped rubbing his palm.

And I understood—

It didn’t need the glass anymore.

Men who stayed behind

Mama's courtyard lay under one weak yellow bulb.
It buzzed faintly, throwing tired light across wet walls and puddles that still hadn't dried.
The rain had stopped earlier, but the ground refused to let go of dampness.
The village smelled of soil that didn't want to dry.

Lucky arrived first, carrying a bottle wrapped in a newspaper.

"Medicine," he announced, forcing a smile.

Mama didn't react.

He sat on the cot like stone, a glass in hand, staring at nothing.

A moment later, footsteps scraped outside.

Then a dry cough—weak and deliberate, like someone trying not to be heard.

"Mama...?"

Mama didn't move at once.

Lucky turned toward the doorway, bottle still in his grip.

Rajiv stood there—half in shadow, half in the lantern light.

Rain clung to his hair and forehead.

His kurta stuck to his chest, damp.

His eyes were bloodshot.

Not tired.

Terrified.

"I shouldn't be here," Rajiv said. "But I can't stay alone."

Lucky set the bottle down slowly.

"Rajiv..." he said. "What happened?"

Rajiv stepped inside, as if the threshold itself hurt him.
As if he were listening to something no one else could hear.

Lucky poured alcohol into steel tumblers.

"If I drink any more, Mama," Lucky muttered, "even ghosts will start filing complaints."

Mama snorted once.

"You already talk like one."

Rajiv laughed.

Too loud.

Too sudden.

Lucky turned slowly.

"Rajiv," he said. "You're laughing like a man about to cry."

Rajiv waved it off.

"Old thoughts," he muttered. "Nothing."

But his grip tightened around the tumbler.

They drank in silence.

A dog barked somewhere in the lanes.

Then it went quiet instantly, as if something had shut it down.

Lucky shifted.

"I saw the boy yesterday," Rajiv said.

Mama didn't ask which boy.

He never did.

"When?" Mama asked.

"Evening. Near that house. Not doing anything."

Lucky's face tightened.

"At night?"

Rajiv shook his head.

"Before night. It still felt wrong."

Mama dismissed it like a line he'd said before.

“That child has always been quiet.”

Rajiv stared at him.

“He wasn’t like that before.”

Mama’s jaw tightened.

“People change.”

Lucky leaned forward, voice lower.

“Kapil used to say strange things,” he said.

“At night. Before he disappeared.”

Mama’s tone hardened instantly—sharp as a slap.

“That chapter is closed.”

Rajiv watched the liquid swirl in his glass.

Then he said it slowly, like it hurt his mouth.

“Kapil used to say...”

He paused.

“...nights don’t stay empty.”

Mama leaned forward.

Low. Firm.

“Rajiv. Don’t.”

Lucky frowned.

“What does that even mean—don’t stay empty?”

Rajiv didn’t look at Lucky.

Only at Mama.

“Kapil said when it comes back,” Rajiv whispered,

“It doesn’t come for everyone.”

Lucky gave a short, uneasy laugh.

“Arre bas—ab toh you’re scaring us.”

Rajiv didn’t smile.

“He said it watches first,” Rajiv continued.

“It waits. Then it chooses.”

His gaze slid past them—toward the corridor, toward the darker part of the house.

“I saw him,” Rajiv whispered.

Mama’s face stayed still, but his voice sharpened.

“Who?”

Rajiv let out a broken laugh.

“The boy,” he said.

“In the mirror.”

Lucky’s stomach tightened.

“I went back after you both left,” Rajiv said.

“Told myself it’s nothing. Child nonsense.”

His voice dropped.

“He was sitting in front of the mirror,” Rajiv said.

“Whispering his own name.”

Lucky frowned.

“Kapil?”

Rajiv shook his head once.

“The mirror...”

He swallowed.

“The mirror didn’t copy properly.”

Mama’s jaw tightened—not shock. Recognition.

“What do you mean?” Mama asked.

“Slow,” Rajiv said.

“Wrong.”

He shut his eyes.

“And then his head started turning.”

Lucky whispered, "Turning how?"

Rajiv opened his eyes again.

"Only the head," he said.

"Not the body."

His voice cracked.

"Twisting too far."

"In the mirror... his eyes were red."

Lucky flinched.

"Bloodshot?"

Rajiv shook his head violently.

"No," he whispered.

"Red like fire."

His breath hitched.

"And blood came from the corners... like tears."

The courtyard fell silent.

Even the bulb's buzz sounded louder.

"He looked at me," Rajiv whispered.

Lucky leaned forward.

"Through the mirror?"

Rajiv shook his head.

"No."

He swallowed.

"Through the room."

Mama's grip tightened on his glass.

"It smiled," Rajiv whispered.

"And I knew..."

His voice broke.

"...it knows me."

Lucky stood up without meaning to.

“Rajiv—”

Mama moved too, reaching out.

Rajiv snapped back like touch would infect him.

“No!” he shouted. “Don’t touch me!”

He dragged his palm down his face.

Then said it—flat, drained.

“It’s going to kill me.”

Not fear.

A verdict.

Then—

a soft presence behind them.

Not footsteps.

Not a door.

Mama and Lucky turned.

Rajiv saw Nanu standing in the doorway.

Still.

Watching.

His thumb rubbed against his palm in a slow loop.

No blink.

No expression.

Something inside Rajiv collapsed.

“No,” he breathed.

Again—faster.

“No... no...”

“You saw me,” Rajiv whispered.

“You shouldn’t have seen me.”

Mama stood abruptly.

“Enough for tonight.”

One sentence.

A full stop.

Lucky moved at once.

“Yes. Morning comes early.”

Mama nodded.

“Go home.”

Lucky left, muttering nonsense into the lane.

Rajiv stayed.

“Something feels wrong tonight,” he said quietly.

“The same way it felt before.”

“Before when?” Mama asked.

Rajiv didn’t answer.

He went to the hand pump and washed his face.

Water splashed into a steel basin.

He leaned over it.

Then froze.

His reflection stared back.

For a second—

it didn’t move when he did.

Rajiv stepped back sharply.

Then the reflection shifted—

late.

Like a mirror deciding.

“It’s nothing,” Rajiv muttered.

Mama watched him.

“You sure?”

Rajiv nodded.

But his hands still shook.

He picked up his slippers and turned to leave.

At the threshold, he said quietly—

“If it has started watching again...
it won’t stop with the child.”

Mama didn’t reply.

When the Offering saw him back

It was night—a suffocating, unnatural night, the kind that doesn't sleep but watches.

Inside a dim, silent room, the air hung thick with rot and heat. The only sound was the gentle creaking of an old ceiling fan spinning above, slower than it should. Somewhere in the corner, the wall peeled like old scabs.

And then —movement.

First, a single cockroach emerged from the cracked tile, its twitching antennae slicing through the darkness. It scurried forward —aimless, almost drunk —until it changed direction... and headed straight for the bed.

Behind it, like shadows in a parade of decay, a lizard crawled across the wall. Silent. Pale. Almost white, like the belly of something long dead.

And trailing them both —a rat, bloated, limping, as if half-eaten itself. Its eyes glinted with something feral.

All three moved toward the same destination:

The bed.

The man.

He slept unaware, his body curled loosely, one leg exposed to the night.

The cockroach climbed his foot —slow, deliberate.

He twitched.

Scratched.

A pause.

Then again —the crawl. The antennae brushed his skin like a curse.

He scratched harder now, groggy.

The third time —something shifted. A wrongness. The skin didn't feel right. His body jolted upright, his breath caught mid-snore.

Click.

He flicked the bedside light.

And froze.

Just beside his ankle —a cockroach. Its shell was oily and glistening. Right beside it —the lizard, unmoving, watching. And behind them both... the rat, its snout twitching, teeth faintly clicking.

Disgusted, the man shoved at them with his hand —*thwack!* They fell off the bed with a sickening skitter.

But then—

He looked to the left.

The floor swarmed.

Dozens—no—hundreds of cockroaches. Lizards clung to the walls. Rats poured from the cracks, running over each other like a tide of fur and filth.

He gasped and scrambled to the other side of the bed —but *there, too*, the same.

Walls. Floor. Ceiling. Alive. Crawling.

A sick realisation dawned: he was surrounded.

Then —something wet and cold slid under his shirt collar. A lizard. Inside.

He screamed. Loud. Desperate.

"Bachao! Koi hai?!"

No answer.

He ripped open his shirt, clawing at his skin, and flung the lizard away —but it was already too late. Cockroaches were on his legs now. Climbing. Rats followed —first his calves, then his knees, their nails digging into his flesh.

He thrashed. Screamed. But the room... seemed to get smaller.

His arm flailed upward —*thuk!*—It struck the ceiling fan.

A blade sliced across his hand. Blood. Bright and fast.

He stumbled and looked up.

The fan trembled.

Grrrkkk... Grrrkkk...

It groaned—and dipped lower.

Pain surged in his hand, but worse was coming. He tried to step back, slipping on a cockroach, and craned his head up —

CRACK!

The fan's blade struck his face.

Blinding pain.

He screamed, falling back, clutching his face. Blood streamed down his cheeks as if the night itself bled from his sockets.

Then —he slipped.

His body hit the floor, headfirst, jaw cracking against the tiles. And then they were on him.

Roaches in his mouth. Lizards on his chest. Rats burrowing under his clothes.

He gagged, coughed, tried to vomit them out—but they clung to his throat, his tongue. Something inside him was choking. Moving.

In agony, he crawled —barely breathing —and somehow pulled himself back onto the bed.

The fan still spun.

It still dipped.

Another groan. Another tremble.

He looked up —just in time.

SHHHHHHHRRRRRRRRRRRT!

The fan plunged lower —this time straight at his neck.

The blade tore through him like paper.

A burst of blood —thick, black-red —sprayed the wall.

His head fell sideways, eyes gone, mouth still open in a frozen scream. The body twitched once, then collapsed from the bed, slumping like a discarded puppet.

The room fell silent —except for the endless crawling.

And outside the room —beyond the cracked glass door — someone watched.

A boy.

Still. Barefoot. Eyes glowing red like coals in the dark.

His gaze didn't blink. His breath was slow.

It was Nanu.

The sound that tore the night open did not fade.

It moved.

The house had barely stopped trembling from the unseen force when Lucky staggered into the courtyard, breath punching out of him in thin, uneven bursts. Each exhale fogged the air, like smoke rising from a body still cooling after death.

Sound dulled at the edges.

Not quiet—muffled, as if something heavy pressed against the air itself.

He wiped his face with a trembling hand.

“Rajiv?” he whispered.

The name felt foreign in the stillness.

No footsteps.

No rustling.

Not even the low hum of night insects that never truly slept in Khara Khara.

Only the weight of something unseen.

Then—

Ching.

A single anklet bell chimed, soft as a breath beside his ear.

His breath stalled mid-inhale.

Another—

Ching... ching...

The sound drifted across the fields, delicate but purposeful, like a child skipping stones across dark water.

His heart hammered.

No woman in Khara Khara wore anklets after sunset.

Not after the stories.

Not after the disappearances.

Not after the things found near the well.

Yet the bells continued—slow, steady, calling.

Instinct screamed at him to run.

He stepped forward instead.

That's when he saw the haveli.

It hunched beyond the neem trees like something that had died standing. Parts of its roof had collapsed inward, its archway cracked apart as though something enormous had tried to force its way out—or in.

Two shapes drifted inside.

Not walking—drifting.

The bells followed them, their fading chime echoing too long, like metal ringing underwater.

Lucky stepped closer, despite the pulse pounding behind his eyes.

Inside, the air turned damp and cold—seeping into bone. He barely crossed the threshold when—

Laughter.

High. Sharp.

Children's laughter, but stretched thin until every giggle sounded like a breath cut short.

Three voices. Four. Too many.

They rushed around him, though nothing moved in the dust.

A featherlight patter of feet.

A whisper brushing past his shoulder—

“Pakad liya...”

Then—

THOK.

A ball struck the ground beside him so hard the dust burst upward.

But nothing lay there.

Lucky's heartbeat stuttered, and the laughter turned harsher—like joy peeling into hunger.

He stumbled backwards, then sprinted deeper into the haveli, the corridor groaning under his feet. Cracks crawled along the walls like veins, pulsing faintly.

He reached the only room still intact.

Something glowed inside—weak, sickly, pulsing like an infected wound.

Lucky crept to the window and looked in.

The breath left his body.

A massive stone figure towered over the chamber—half human, half beast. Its torso stretched unnaturally tall, elongated ribs pressing against cracked stone skin. From its skull rose two curved horns, sharp enough to split bone. Its eyes burned with a deep red glow that throbbed in time with the room's cold pulse.

Beneath it, scattered like offerings, lay a brass pot trembling on its side, its red cloth soaked dark—red not from cloth, but from the thick liquid seeping beneath it.

Blood.

Fresh.

And on the floor—

Two figures knelt, dragging their fingers through the dust in three overlapping circles.

Harish.

Sarla.

Kapil's parents.

Lucky's stomach twisted.

Sarla's hands were raw, skin scraped away, leaving streaks of red as she drew.

Harish's lips moved constantly, whispering a chant that rasped like his throat was filled with gravel.

The circles weren't symbols anymore.

They were trenches.

Dug deep enough to cut into the stone floor.

Lucky stepped back—and his heel pressed into something soft.

A child's handprint.

Fresh.

Warm.

He jerked around—

A silhouette crouched within the tangled banyan roots.

Kid-sized.

Bent.

Still.

Its head drooped to one side, neck stretched too long, like softened wax.

Then the shadows behind him moved.

A shuffle.

The faint crackle of brittle bones.

Lucky turned, breath strangled in his throat.

The figure's neck rotated first, twisting with a wet, fibrous krk-krk-krk before the rest of the body followed.

The head lifted.

No eyes.

Just two empty hollows, glistening faintly—as if something inside them breathed.

A thin line of dried blood dripped from where a mouth should have been.

Lucky choked on a scream.

The creature leaned forward, spine snapping into place as though remembering the shape of a human.

Lucky ran.

He didn't look back.

He didn't want to know what shape the shadows took as they followed him.

The night closed around him, thick and wet. His feet slipped in the mud; his breath scraped like fire in his throat.

Lucky burst into Rajiv's house, shouting his name, breath tearing out of his chest.

No reply. Only the soft creaking of the old fan above.

He stepped into the bedroom—

—and froze.

Rajiv's body was tangled in the ceiling fan.

Not hanging—tangled.

The fan blades were stopped at a crooked angle, and Rajiv's headless neck was caught between the motor and the metal rod, twisted as if something had spun him again and again until the spine finally snapped.

One arm dangled limply. His legs dragged along the bed, toes scraping the sheets.

Cockroaches poured across his shirt in jittery waves. A lizard clung to his ribcage, its throat pulsing.

Then Lucky saw the head.

Rajiv's severed head lay on the floor several feet away—as if it had rolled and stopped against the cupboard.

The eyes were wide open, the mouth slightly ajar, the lips stained red.

Dark blood had pooled around it, streaked where mice had moved through it.

Two of them were already perched at the torn throat, chewing silently.

Lucky's breath vanished.

His knees buckled, and he crashed to the floor, vomiting, shaking, unable to tear his eyes away from the twisted, broken shape above him.

Rajiv's headless body swayed slightly—
not from the fan,
but as if something had just stepped away from it.

Lucky understood then—this was not rage. It was a method.

Lucky stumbled out of the room, nearly crawling, the image burned into his skull.

He couldn't.

He ran straight to Mama's house.

Mama's house stood at the far edge of Khara Khara, half-hidden in the thick grey mist.

The fields behind it looked darker than the night itself—as if something was sitting inside the darkness, watching.

Lucky stumbled up the narrow mud path, slipping twice, his breath shredding in his throat.

By the time he reached the door, he didn't knock.

He crashed into it with his shoulder.

The door flew open with a dull, cracking sound.

Inside, a single oil lamp flickered near the puja shelf.

Its flame bent to one side, shivered... then straightened, as if it was breathing on its own.

Incense hung in the air—but underneath it was another smell.
Burnt. Metallic. Wrong.

Mama spun around.

The puja thali slipped from his fingers and rolled across the floor, ringing sharply.

“Lucky?” His voice cracked. “What happened?”

Lucky staggered forward, gasping, mud clinging to his feet.

“The haveli... the ruins...” he managed, voice breaking.

“They’re—they’re doing it,” he choked out. “Kapil’s parents... under the banyan.”

His words tumbled out in broken pieces.

“Circles... blood... the bells... and something... something was standing behind them...”

Mama went completely pale.

“No,” he whispered. “Not tonight... not again...”

Lucky grabbed his arm, desperate. “Mama, please! Tell me what is happening!”

Mama didn’t answer.

He moved to the window instead, his steps slow, careful—like he expected a hand to reach inside at any moment.

Outside, the wind had stopped.

The trees were still.

Even the insects had gone quiet.

Mama shut the window and pulled the curtain closed with shaking fingers.

Then he turned back.

“Did Kapil’s parents see you?” he asked, voice thin.

Lucky shook his head. “No... but something else saw me.

Something behind them. It looked like a child, but... but it wasn’t. It wasn’t touching the ground. And its eyes—”

His teeth began to chatter.

“There were no eyes. Just holes.”

Mama exhaled shakily and closed his eyes.

“That was not a child.”

The oil lamp flickered hard.

Its flame stretched sideways, long and thin, as if something invisible had just walked past it.

Lucky swallowed.

“There’s... there’s more,” he whispered. “Rajiv...”

Mama opened his eyes.

Lucky’s voice broke.

“I found him. In his room. His... his head was cut on the floor. And his body was stuck in the fan. Mama... he’s dead. He’s gone.”

Mama stiffened as the words hit him in the chest.

For a moment, he couldn’t breathe.

He sat down slowly, gripping the edge of a chair.

“Oh God... oh God...”

Lucky stood trembling, unable to stop the shaking.

“It’s all connected, Mama. It has to be.”

Mama nodded weakly, eyes hollow.

“It is.”

The floorboards creaked behind them—a slow, dragging sound.

Lucky spun toward the hallway.

No one there.

Just darkness stretching into deeper darkness.

Mama’s voice came out as a whisper.

“People think anklet bells mean a wandering soul. But the sound follows fear. It hunts it.”

Lucky’s throat tightened. “You mean... it followed me from the Haveli?”

Mama shook his head.

“No, Lucky...” He swallowed hard. “It marked you.”

The lamp beside them hissed —a strange, wet sound —and its flame darkened, turning a faint red for a second.

Lucky stepped back. “What does that mean? I didn’t do anything!”

“You opened your eyes,” Mama said. His voice was breaking. “You saw the ritual. You saw the offering. For the Devta, that is enough.”

Lucky felt the air getting thicker, heavier.

His breath grew shallow.

“Enough for what?” he whispered.

Mama looked at him with the expression people reserve for the dying.

“Enough for him to claim you.”

Tap.

A soft knock at the window.

Both of them froze.

Tap.

Tap.

Slower this time.

Lucky stared at the curtain. Something moved behind it —a faint, shifting red glow, floating like a small lantern being carried by someone standing very still.

Mama backed away, whispering a mantra under his breath.

But he stopped mid-sentence.

Because a whisper came through the cracks in the window frame —soft, cold, stretching his name like it was tasting it for the first time.

“Luuuuuckyyy...”

A single anklet bell rolled out from the darkness of the hallway,
clinking gently across the floor...
and then it stopped at Lucky's feet.

Outside, the night fell completely silent.
Not quiet. Silent. As if the whole village was holding its breath.

The Library

I was at home.

But my mind wasn't.

It kept going back to Naman.

Not the Naman I saw now—tired, distant, always listening to something no one else could hear.

The one who laughed too easily.

Who talked too much when he was nervous.

Who walked beside me at Vaishno Devi without complaining, even when his legs hurt.

Up there, everything felt safe.

At some point, I had started matching my steps with his without thinking.

That was when I understood it.

I loved him.

The thought didn't scare me.

What scared me was this:

Now, whenever he came into my mind... something stood behind him.

I tried to shake it off.

That's when my mother spoke from the kitchen.

"Henna," Mumma called from the kitchen.

I answered, but my mind was already elsewhere.

Khara Khara.

The house was there.

The circles on the wall.

Naman was already there.

And whatever had started in Khara Khara wasn't staying contained.

Distance stopped feeling safe.

"You know," she said casually, grinding spices, "old things don't like being remembered suddenly."

I looked up. "What?"

She didn't turn around. "Your nani used to say it. "Some things stay buried because they remember who touched them last."

A chill ran through me.

She added, "You've been restless since morning. Like someone is calling you... but you don't know from where."

I didn't answer.

Because she was right.

When she left the room, my eyes fell on my old notebook.

The one I hadn't touched in years.

I didn't even remember picking it up.

Soon, my keys were in my hand.

And I was walking out.

The library smelled of damp paper.

Morning light came through the old glass windows in weak, horizontal strips. Dust floated slowly in it.

I had been sitting there for hours.

Long enough to forget why I came...

and then remember again.

My notebook lay open in front of me.

The same symbol filled the page.

Three overlapping circles.

My pen paused.

Then moved again.

And the worst part—I didn't remember deciding to draw it.

I blinked.

My fingers were smudged black.

Like ash.

I flipped the page.

The circle was there too.

Not drawn.

Stamped.

Perfect, dark, like something hot touched the paper and left a burn.

My throat tightened.

I looked at my palm.

A faint black ring marked the skin.

I hadn't touched any ink.

I closed my fist quickly, like hiding it could undo it.

A chair scraped behind me.

I turned.

No one.

But the sound felt close.

Too close.

Then my stomach dropped.

On the far end of my table—near my bag—a second notebook lay open.

Not mine.

It hadn't been there before.

Its pages were filled with circles, too.

Tighter.

Pressed hard enough to hurt the page. I stood up slowly and scanned the reading hall.

People sat far away, heads down.

A student yawned.

An old man slept.

No one looked at me.

Still, the air around my table felt... occupied.

That's when the librarian stopped beside me.

He was old, his eyes half-clouded.

But they went straight to my notebook.

He leaned in without touching the page.

"You're studying geometry?" he asked gently.

"Something like that," I lied.

He didn't smile.

After the silence stretched, he spoke quietly—as the books could hear.

"Some symbols don't like being copied, beta."

A chill climbed my spine.

"They draw attention," he said. "And attention doesn't always come from the right place."

I swallowed. “What do you mean?”

His eyes lifted—not to my face.

To the glass window beside us.

My reflection stared back.

Only... it didn’t copy me perfectly.

I stood still.

In the reflection, my head tilted a second late.

A delay.

My heartbeat slammed.

The librarian didn’t react.

He only whispered, firm:

“Stop now,” he said. “Before it finishes learning.”

Then he shuffled away.

A faint smell of incense stayed behind him.

I turned back to the table.

The second notebook was gone.

As if it never existed.

My breath became thin.

I opened my own notebook again.

A heading stared at me—written in my handwriting, but not remembered by my mind:

TRIKAAL-BANDHAN

The pages beneath were uneven.

Some were torn.

Some were missing.

As if someone had removed the important parts on purpose.

Fragments jumped across the paper:

Three circles...

Not meant to be closed...

A witness is required...

Many lines were scratched out hard enough to tear the paper.

The script changed midway—almost Sanskrit, but wrong. Like someone remembered the shape of language, not the rules.

Below it, a rough translation was written in shaky English:

Do not name the lost.

Do not look twice.

A book fell somewhere deep in the stacks.

Not dropped.

Pushed.

The sound did not echo.

**It stopped too quickly—like something had caught it
before it hit the floor.**

Then in the margin, cramped by a different hand:

They promise a return.

They deliver appetite.

My mouth went dry.

I turned the page.

Blank.

The notebook felt like it had decided to stop.

A page rustled.

I hadn't touched it.

My notebook flipped back by itself.

And my pen rolled neatly into the centre of the circle I had drawn.

Like an offering.

I shoved it away. It clattered to the floor.
The sound echoed louder than it should have.
For a second, the whole library paused.
Then I could hear everything again—breathing, swallowing, the fan turning slowly.
Naman's face rose in my mind.
That café look.
His eyes were unfocused.
Like something outside the glass was waiting for him to notice.
Waiting to be seen.
I shut the notebook hard.
My hands trembled as I gathered my things.
What I had read in the library—rituals I never thought I'd need to remember.
“Naman has to know,” I whispered.
Before it reached him properly.

By morning, I drove to Khara Khara.
The road was dead.
Dry fields. No people.
The wind moved... but carried no life.
Then the village began.
Houses looked broken inward.
Doors half-open.
Courtyards full of weeds.
I felt eyes watching.
Not openly.
From behind curtains.

Like the village followed one rule—

Silence saves.

Near a small temple, the bell didn't move.

But the wind moved everything else.

Inside, the idol was coated with black-red powder.

Not ash.

Something older.

My phone went black.

No signal. No GPS.

The screen went empty, like it had never existed.

The engine stopped by itself.

The windows fogged instantly.

I stepped out.

The air hit my face like breath from underground.

At the end of the lane stood the old house.

Roof sunk.

Windows webbed.

The door was slightly open.

A humming floated out.

Low.

Continuous.

Almost human.

"Nanu?" I called.

No answer.

Only humming.

Like the house heard me.

Like it liked my voice.

I stepped in.

Inside, the damp air hit like cold metal.

Walls were covered in photographs.

Faded.

Water-stained.

Most faces were scratched out.

Violently.

Near the stairs, I stopped.

One photo.

A family.

Old man.

Woman.

Child.

Behind them—carved on the wall—

Three circles.

My heartbeat jumped.

Again.

The same symbol.

The humming grew louder.

I followed it.

Turned the corner.

And froze.

A woman sat facing the wall.

Hair loose, grey.

Nails digging into her palms until blood came.

The wall was full of fresh circles.

Black.

Wet.

Her lips moved.

Not prayer.

Counting.

Her eyes were open.

Empty.

A voice behind me—

“Henna?”

I spun.

Naman stood there.

Pale.

Hollow-eyed.

“You scared me,” I said. “I couldn’t reach you.”

His voice cracked.

“What are you doing here? You shouldn’t have come.”

“I had to,” I said.

I opened my notebook.

“The circles are part of a ritual,” I said. “Trikaal-Bandhan.”

Naman stared.

“It binds the living, the dying... and something that watches.”

“If it breaks, that watcher finds a body.”

Naman swallowed hard.

“And what returns?”

I didn’t blink.

“Not the lost person.”

“Something that wears them.”

A creak echoed.

Wind slid through the corridor.

The woman turned her head slightly.

Like she heard us.
Like she was listening.
I grabbed Naman's wrist.
"We leave. Now."
He nodded once.

Near the river, the sky was grey.
Water moved thickly.
Leaves spun in circles before breaking away.
Naman stood as if he wasn't fully in his body.
I stepped closer.
Didn't touch him.
I watched him like damage.
"You didn't eat," I said.
He didn't reply.
"Look at me."
He did.
"You're shaking."
"I'm fine."
"No," I said. "You're not."
His voice fell low.
"The circles didn't stay in that house."
"They followed me out."
Fear flickered through me.
Then I swallowed it.
"Okay," I said.
"The Library. Now."

The library smelled like dust and old paper.

Tube lights flickered.

Then steadied.

Pandit Dev Sharma looked up.

His face tightened.

“You should not have come,” he said.

“Not together.”

“He needs answers,” I said.

Naman rolled up his sleeve.

Three faint circles on his forearm.

Pandit’s eyes hardened.

“These are not wounds,” he said.

“These are permissions.”

“Permission for what?” Naman asked.

Pandit spoke slowly.

“For attention.”

“My family died,” Naman whispered.

Pandit shook his head.

“So it moves through people,” I said.

“When it is remembered.”

Naman swallowed.

“What am I?”

Pandit met his eyes.

“A witness.”

Then, even slower—

“A witness becoming a vessel.”

“What rules?” I asked.

Pandit turned a page.

“Mirrors learn you.”

“Circles open doors.”

“If it calls his name?” I asked.

Pandit didn’t blink.

“Don’t answer.”

Outside, evening felt dead.

No birds.

No wind.

A bell rang once far away.

Then stopped.

Like a warning.

That night, Pandit opened his ledger.

He wrote:

Ritual attempted.

Seal incomplete.

Vessel aligned.

He paused.

Then wrote the final line:

The watcher has started counting.

The lamp went out.

And in the dark, the walls began to buzz.

The buzzing grew stronger.

Not from the walls.

From inside the floor.

I looked down.

A thin line of black soot crawled across the library tiles—
moving like an insect... drawing a circle.

Pandit Dev's face went blank. "It shouldn't be here," he
whispered.

And from the middle of it, a soft child's laugh rose.

Wet.

Close.

Right behind me.

Death Returns to Khara Khara

Khara Khara felt wrong that day.

Not silent—emptied.

Doors stayed shut. Curtains didn't move. No children ran through the lanes. Even the birds kept away from the electric wires, leaving them bare, humming faintly in the heat.

Like the village had already heard the news...
and was waiting for the body.

Inside the small café near the square, Sumit sat alone, like he did every evening.

A faded photograph of his parents stood on the table. In front of it, an oil lamp burned weakly, fighting the air.

Sumit held a fresh marigold garland. He lifted it carefully and placed it around the frame.

Five years.

Still, the pain sat inside him like a thorn that never came out.

Sometimes, he wished he had died with them.

Sometimes, he wished Naman had.

"Bhaiya..." Sonu said from behind.

Sumit didn't answer.

"Bhaiya," Sonu tried again, softer. "You'll fall sick. You haven't slept properly."

"No," Sumit said. Oneword—flat..

He didn't look up.

Sonu swallowed. "The village is... strange today."

Sumit gave a humourless smile. "You're always scared."

Sonu stepped closer. “No... this is different. No sound. No dogs. No chai-wale. Even the mandir bell hasn’t rung once.”

Sumit’s jaw tightened.

He hated fear.

Fear made people run.

Fear made people lie.

Anger was cleaner.

Anger stayed.

He stared at his parents’ photograph and said quietly,

“This village became a grave the day he came back.”

Sonu whispered, “Naman?”

Sumit didn’t answer.

Because even saying the name felt like touching a wound.

A cold gust hit the café.

The half-shut shutters rattled like teeth.

And the café door... opened.

Slowly.

On its own.

Sonu backed away. “Bhaiya—”

Sumit stood at once, forcing calm into his body like armour.

He walked to the door and slammed it shut.

Then stepped outside.

The square was empty.

No footsteps.

No lights.

No voices.

Just heat.

And an unnatural stillness.

“I haven’t seen Khara Khara like this in years,” Sumit muttered.

Then, a scream cut through the village.

Short.

Sharp.

Stopped too soon.

Sumit spun.

Before he could move, the café door burst open behind him.

A man stumbled out.

Rajiv Uncle.

Pale.

Breathless.

Trembling like his bones were loose.

“There’s... there’s been a death.

Sonu staggered after him, choking on the words.

“I saw him—I—Rajiv is dead!”

Sumit froze for half a second.

Then, the garland slipped from his fingers and fell into the dust.

He ran.

Lanterns appeared in the lanes like insects waking.

Villagers rushed toward the square—shawls half-worn, slippers missing, eyes wide with dread.

A woman cried, “Hai Ram!”

Someone said, “Who died?”

Someone else whispered, “It’s started again.”

Sumit pushed through bodies.

And then I saw them.

Naman and Henna stood near the back, both pale.

Naman looked like a man who had not slept in years, even though it had been one night.

Henna stood closer to him—not behind him.

Beside him. A shield, not a shadow.

Mama and Lucky arrived a moment later.

Lucky's lantern shook violently.

Mama's face was grey.

Neither spoke.

Rajiv lay at the centre.

But it didn't look like a man anymore.

His skin was blackened—peeling like burnt paper.

His face had collapsed inward.

Eyes... gone.

Mouth open in a silent scream.

Not one normal wound.

Not one normal death.

Women wailed.

Men stepped back, crossing themselves.

A lantern slipped from someone's hand and fell—glass breaking.

Lucky whispered, "This can't be real..."

Mama covered his mouth like he was trying to keep his soul inside.

Naman didn't move.

Henna's fingers wrapped around Naman's wrist, tight.

Not romantic.

Protective.

Henna whispered, low and sharp:

"Don't look too long. In. Out. Naman. In."

Naman obeyed without thinking—like her voice was a rope.

Sumit shoved through the crowd and came to a halt.

His face went blank.

Then something inside him cracked.

He fell to his knees near the body.

His hand reached out—

Ravi grabbed his arm quickly. “Don’t!”

He snapped, “Leave me!”

But as his fingers touched the skin...

The flesh under his touch split.

It was dry mud.

He jerked back, breath shaking.

Ravi swore. “Bhenchod...”

That wasn’t fear. That was Ravi’s anger trying to cover fear.

The old priest stood nearby, shaking as he sprinkled holy water.

His chanting wasn’t steady.

It was rushed—like he didn’t believe his own prayer would work.

Sumit grabbed him by the kurta. “Tell me. Who did this?”

The priest’s lips trembled. “Same curse,” he whispered. “Same shadow.”

His voice broke. “What shadow?”

The priest pointed, not at Rajiv.

He pointed toward the edge of the crowd.

Toward Nanu’s direction.

“Every few years,” the priest whispered, “it finds a vessel.”

He swallowed hard.

“And those who see it first...”

His eyes moved toward Sumit.

“...are emptied.”

Gasps ran through the crowd.

Someone whispered, “It’s him.”

Another voice: “The one we do not name.”

Ravi’s hand tightened on Sumit’s shoulder. “We ended this.”

His eyes turned wild. “We were kids... but we ended it!”

The priest shook his head slowly.

“No,” he said. “You only delayed it.”

A cold wind rushed through the square.

Torches bent sideways, as something passed between them.

Some doors slammed shut by themselves.

Henna stepped half in front of Naman without realising.

Her voice stayed calm, but her fingers shook slightly.

She spoke anyway.

“Rules,” she whispered. “Listen. No mirrors. No water reflection. And nobody draws circles tonight. Not even by mistake.”

Naman stared, barely breathing.

Henna added, firmly, “If it calls your name—don’t answer.”

That line landed like a nail.

Because everyone remembered that rule.

And everyone remembered who broke it last time.

Then Naman heard it.
Not a whisper.
Not the wind.
A laugh.
His laugh.
From far away.
From the ruins side.
Henna felt Naman go stiff. “Naman—?”
Naman’s throat closed.
He couldn’t explain it.
Because he knew what it meant.
If your own voice comes back to you from the dark...
Something is already wearing you.
The priest’s eyes lifted.
Not to the dead.
To Naman.
Slowly, the whole village followed his gaze.
Henna tightened her grip on Naman’s hand and said, coldly:
“No.”
Just one word.
Like she was refusing destiny.

The priest raised a trembling hand.
“You must go to Thandoori,” he said.
The word itself changed the air.
Ravi’s face tightened.
Sumit looked like someone had been punched in the stomach.

People began murmuring.

Thandoori.

A village where even drunk men didn't enter.

A place where even temples kept their bells silent.

They said once you crossed that boundary, your shadow stopped obeying you.

Henna leaned close to Naman, voice urgent:

"What is Thandoori?"

Then—harder—

"Tell me. Now."

Naman couldn't answer.

Because memory was waking inside him like a fever.

Sumit whispered, "Thandoori...?"

The priest nodded once.

"Yes," he said. "Only there you'll learn who... or what... has been waiting."

And then—Rajiv's severed head twitched.

Just once.

Not a full movement.

A cruel reminder.

The torn mouth stretched.

A slow grin.

Someone screamed.

Henna reacted instantly.

She shoved Naman behind her and snapped:

"Back. Everyone back!"

The crowd stumbled away.

Naman stared at that grin, heart beating like it wanted to escape.

Because one truth cut through him like bone:

Rajiv's torn mouth twitched.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

"Naman," it breathed.

What the Village Said

Lucky woke at sunrise.

Not because of a sound.

Because there wasn't one.

No neighbour's radio was coughing to life.

No steel utensils clanging.

No birds arguing on wires.

The silence pressed against his ears, thick and deliberate.

He checked the time.

5:58 a.m.

The fan above him turned slowly. Its shadow slid along the wall—

—and then didn't.

Lucky stared.

The blades moved.

The shadow lagged, bent, wrong.

He sat up too fast. His foot landed in something cold.

Water.

A dark patch spread near the door.

Lucky frowned. The windows were shut. No rain had come in. He bent and touched it.

"Pipe again," he muttered.

He stood.

The patch began to dry.

Not slowly.

Quickly.

As if the floor itself were thirsty.

Lucky laughed, thin and unconvincing. “Bas... dimag kharab.”

He went to the sink and splashed water on his face. Gripped the edge. Looked up.

For a single second, his reflection didn’t blink with him.

It looked too awake.

Too prepared.

Like it had been waiting.

Lucky sucked in a breath.

Then it was normal again.

From the next room, someone turned in their sleep. A cough. A shift.

The house exhaled. Sound returned.

Morning had come.

But it didn’t feel like safety.

It felt like pause.

Outside, Khara Khara moved as if nothing had happened.

Sunlight slipped into lanes that had screamed hours earlier, finding them quiet and obedient. A rooster crowed late. Somewhere, an old radio wheezed out a bhajan through a torn speaker.

Life resumed.

That was the first lie.

Near one house, a woman swept wet leaves toward a drain. Water ran from her broom in a thin stream—faintly pink.

She froze.

Only for half a second.

Then her hand moved faster. Harder. Angry.

“Bad drainage,” she said loudly.

She didn’t say it to explain.

She said it to make the words stick.

Her eyes flicked around, quick, sharp—checking who heard, checking who nodded.

No one argued.

The tea stall near the banyan filled the way it always did—but not for tea.

Kettles hissed. Ginger cracked under the stone. Glasses clinked.

Men stood too close, not for warmth, but for nerve.

“Two adrak wali,” someone said.

“Strong,” another added quickly. “Didn’t sleep.”

No one asked why.

Teacups were held with both hands, knuckles white, as if heat could shield them.

The lane near Kapil’s house reeked of phenyl.

Too much of it.

It didn’t smell like cleaning.

It smelled like something trying to pass through.

A shopkeeper laughed too loudly. Forced it.

“Always near festivals,” he said. “Bad timing. Ruins business.”

But his eyes never went toward that lane.

The laugh died quickly, like his body refused to finish the lie.

Whispers began the way they always did in Khara Khara.

Sideways.

Not facing the lane. Not facing the truth.

“That boy—” someone started, then stopped.

He swallowed and tried again, more quietly. “He was strange from the beginning.”

Another man answered too fast, eager to seal the thought before it grew.

“Kids these days. Phones. No discipline.”

A third snorted. “Discipline? His mother kept him locked inside. What do you expect?”

No one argued.

No one finished their tea.

Because deep down, the village knew what it was doing.

He wasn’t strange.

He was afraid.

Kapil.

But fear demanded a responsibility—and the village had renamed it.

Madness.

One man whispered what no one wanted to hear.

“These things don’t happen for nothing.”

His cup trembled, tea rippling.

Then, quieter. Bitter. True.

“It happens when a village looks away.”

Near the provision store, Lucky stood beside Mama.

Lucky looked like sleep had passed him without touching him. His eyes were too open. Too sharp.

People moved around them, speaking in normal voices, pretending to be normal people.

Lucky didn't pretend.

"You keep saying it wasn't a child," Lucky said.

Mama didn't reply.

Lucky's voice tightened. "But it was. Once."

Mama's jaw worked slowly, like he was chewing something sour.

Lucky stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"And what we did back then... to keep the village quiet... to keep it under control—"

Mama snapped, sharp. "Lower your voice."

Lucky laughed without humour. "Why?" he asked. "Everyone's already chosen their story."

Mama's hand clenched around the walking stick.

Lucky leaned in, eyes wet but unblinking.

"It didn't start last night," he said. "It didn't start with those bodies."

Mama stared ahead.

"It started when we decided silence would fix him."

Mama swallowed.

"And now," Lucky whispered, "it remembers."

Mama flinched.

Not like a man hearing gossip.

Like a man hearing his own crime read aloud.

Women passed by, adjusting their dupattas again and again—
hands searching for work that wasn't there.

"I heard his mother never let him play," one said.

Another answered instantly, like reciting lines. "That's what
happens. Isolate kids. They turn strange."

Strange.

No one used Kapil's name.

Names made things real.

Kapil became *that boy*.

His parents became *those people*.

His house became *that lane*.

Even grief was stripped of names, so no one had to hold it.

Whenever someone almost said them, their throat tightened.

And the conversation turned away.

As if turning could save them.

At the temple, bells rang clean and practiced.

The priest murmured prayers, his hands steady.

But not once did his gaze turn toward Kapil's lane.

Not once.

He knew the old rules.

Everyone did.

They just followed them when it was convenient.

Across the road, Nanu's mother stood at a vegetable cart.

Her shoulders had collapsed inward. Her face looked hollowed
out, like something had been scooped from inside. Her fingers
shook as she counted coins.

The vendor avoided her eyes.
As if grief were catching.
“She still hasn’t accepted it,” someone whispered.
“Time heals,” another replied.
As if grief were stubbornness.
As if silence were medicine.

Children returned to the lanes cautiously.
They ran, shouted, kicked dust—then slowed.
An invisible line held them back.
A ball rolled toward Kapil’s lane.
A boy ran after it.
His mother grabbed him so hard that his arm reddened.
“Not there!” she snapped.
The boy stared at her, confused.
She didn’t explain.
Parents never explain fear.
They only pass it down.

Doors were bolted earlier than usual. The lights dimmed sooner.
Voices dropped into half-mouths.
A man painted over a faint symbol on the wall near the old house.
His brush moved quickly. The paint was thin.
For one second, something dark bled through.
Not dirt.
Not an old stain.

Like something underneath was pressing back.

The man froze.

Then he painted harder. Faster. His hand shook.

And the wall went quiet again.

That night, Khara Khara slept believing it had done the right thing.

Believing silence was safety.

Believing forgetting was healing.

But the truth was simpler.

By morning, the symbol was gone.

The wall was freshly painted.

The brush marks were still wet.

Underneath, something darker pressed outward.

Somewhere beneath roots and stone, something listened.

Not because it was called.

Because silence also invites.

And in this village, silence was never empty.

It was crowded.

Crowded with people who looked away.

Who chose comfort over the truth.

And when wounds rot long enough, they don't die.

They learn.

They wait.

They return smarter.

The Wind Knows First

The road outside still shone from the evening drizzle. Wet mud. Wet stone. The air smelled metallic—like rain on iron.

Henna walked beside me, arms folded tight. Her steps were small and steady, as if keeping pace could keep her thoughts from falling apart.

For a long stretch, we didn't speak.

Then she let out a breath.

"What if they don't believe you?"

"Ravi and Sumit?" I asked, eyes on the road.

"Yes," she said. "What if they think this is... nonsense?"

"They won't," I said.

I kept my voice firm because I needed it to be true.

"I've known them since school. They've seen enough to know when something is wrong."

Henna looked at me from the side.

"And if they still refuse?"

I didn't answer for a second.

Then I said, "Then I'll make them listen."

The words came out colder than I meant.

Henna didn't smile.

"Don't force anything in this village," she said softly.

I glanced at her.

Henna added, quietly: "Fear invites it. Mirrors learn faces. Circles open doors."

She swallowed.

“We don’t give it more chances.”

I nodded once.

But my chest was already tight.

Because I could feel it—the pressure in the air. As if the village had been waiting for my footsteps.

The body was taken away before sunrise.

Not with dignity.

With urgency.

By the time the first light reached Khara Khara, the square was empty again. Only dark patches remained on the ground where Rajiv had fallen. Someone had poured water there. Someone else had spread ash.

Nothing worked.

The wind kept circling the square, slow and restless, like it was searching for what had been removed.

The tea shop near the square was still open.

That alone felt wrong.

After everything, I expected locks on doors, lights out, the village pretending night had never happened. Instead, Sumit’s tea shed sat half-alive—its wooden shutter pulled down only halfway, like it hadn’t decided whether to close... or stay open.

The wind pushed against the loose tin sheet above it.

Clang.

Pause.

Clang again.

Inside, a single tube light hummed. Not bright. Just enough to see.

The floor smelled faintly of disinfectant.

For one second, it almost felt normal.

That scared me more than a locked door.

I stepped in.

Not cautious, just careful.

The kind of care memory teaches.

Henna followed, her shawl tight around her shoulders. She didn't scan the corners. She watched me instead—my stiff walk, my hands opening and closing like he was holding something invisible.

At the back, near the storage room door, Ravi and Sumit sat on overturned crates.

Ravi saw us first. His eyebrows lifted. A crooked grin appeared, then died before it reached his eyes. His leg bounced against the floor.

Sumit didn't move.

Arms folded. Jaw tight. Chin raised—like he was ready for a fight he didn't want.

"Didn't think you'd walk in here again," Sumit said.

His voice was steady.

Too steady.

"Neither did I," I replied.

I stepped aside. "This is Henna."

Henna nodded once. Warm. Present. Not trying too hard.

Ravi glanced at her.

"Namaste," he muttered.

Then to me—quick, blunt.

"Bhai... why now?"

Outside, the tin sheet rattled again.

Sumit rubbed his thumb along his forearm. A nervous habit he never admitted to.

"So," he said. "What is this about?"

I inhaled slowly.

“It’s Nanu.”

The change was instant.

Ravi’s leg stopped bouncing.

The grin vanished.

Sumit’s jaw tightened harder. His eyes dropped—like the name tasted poisonous.

“What about him?” Ravi asked.

“He’s changing again.”

Sumit let out a dry laugh.

“Changing?” His smile cracked. “Naman... stop. No. Don’t start this again. We ended it.”

I didn’t argue.

“He’s drawing again,” I said. “Three circles.”

Ravi swore softly and pressed his palms together.

“Please. Not again.”

Henna spoke, quiet but clear.

“That pattern is not random. Circles are doors.”

Sumit scoffed.

“Madam, one minute. Let’s stay on Earth.”

Ravi tried to joke.

“Bro, you sell tea that tastes like hospital regret. Don’t tell us to stay on Earth—you left reality a long time ago.”

The joke landed weakly.

Even Ravi didn’t smile properly.

“There’s more,” I said.

Henna’s hand slipped into mine.

Only then did I realise my hand was shaking.

“And under his head,” I added, “a circle of black ash.”

Ravi leaned forward.

"But we took him away from that place."

"I know."

Henna nodded once.

"Removing the child doesn't remove the watcher."

Henna looked at me once.

"Thandoori," she said.

"That's what the priest warned us not to delay."

Sumit's nostrils flared.

"Stop. Just stop."

"Last night," I said, "he touched a cracked mirror. The reflection didn't move."

Ravi whispered something that sounded like a prayer.

"And something inside whispered his name," I continued, voice low, "backwards."

Sumit slammed his palm against the wooden counter.

"Enough!"

The fear finally broke through.

"Mirrors don't talk. Ash doesn't draw circles. You're falling back into this."

I stared at him.

"Do you think I want to?"

The tube light flickered once.

Sharp.

All four of us froze.

Then it steadied.

Sumit forced a laugh that hurt to hear.

"Old wiring."

But the shed didn't smell like wiring.

It smelled like wet soil.

Like something had been dug up nearby.

Henna's eyes shifted to the small glass window of the storage room door.

I followed her gaze.

In the fogged glass, our reflections stared back.

Only—

Sumit's reflection wasn't looking at us.

It was looking behind us.

Ravi saw it too. His face drained of colour.

Sumit didn't turn.

Didn't blink.

Like he knew turning would make it real.

Henna's voice sharpened—an anchor voice.

“No. Don't look back.”

Ravi swallowed.

“Bhai... please.”

My throat went dry.

Then I said it, slow and heavy.

“Kapil's parents are doing rituals again.”

Sumit went completely still.

No denial.

No argument.

His arms dropped, like his body finally stopped fighting.

He stared at me once—hollow.

Then he stood and walked out into the dark.

Ravi followed immediately, muttering excuses no one believed.

The shed felt larger without them.
A crate shifted slightly, then settled.
Sumit didn't look back.
Henna stayed beside me. This time she didn't touch me.
Not because she didn't care.
Because she was watching the room now.
The wind rose outside.
The tin sheet rattled like teeth.
I pulled the envelope from my jacket and placed it on the counter.
Henna looked at it. Then at me.
"Rule," she said quietly.
I waited.
"Don't open it here. No mirrors. No circles."
Then, softer—
"And if it calls your name... don't answer."
The tube light buzzed louder.
And very softly, the envelope hummed.
Barely a vibration.
Like it recognised this place. Henna's breath caught. I stared at it.
Because I knew that hum now. It wasn't calling. It was claiming.
Outside, the wind dragged across the metal again—slow and deliberate.
Like nails on tin.
I picked up the envelope.
And stepped out into the lane—
into whatever the wind had already decided.

Road To Thandoori

The road to Thandoori looked like an old wound.

Narrow. Cracked. Uneven. The kind of road that felt like it was never meant to be used again. Tall grass stood on both sides, wet with morning mist, brushing against their legs like cold fingers.

The sun was up.

But its light felt weak—pale, tired—like even the sky didn't want to watch them go.

Mist stayed low between the trees. It didn't float.

It crawled.

It moved slowly around their ankles, as if the road itself was breathing.

No one spoke.

Not because they had nothing to say.

Because words felt risky here.

Because the forest felt... alert.

Ravi walked ahead, angry at everything—kicking stones, spitting in the mud, fighting the road like it was a person.

Sumit walked behind him, cigarette burning between shaking fingers. He barely inhaled. He just held it, like it was the only thing stopping him from breaking.

Henna stayed close to Naman. Shawl wrapped tight like armour. Her eyes kept scanning the path, not for animals—for shapes.

And I... walked slower than the rest.

Not weak.

Heavy.

As if something invisible was pulling my legs.

Like the village was not far away—it was pulling me back inside itself.

After a long stretch, Sumit finally spoke.

His voice sounded like it had been scraped by sleepless nights.

“This wasn’t normal,” he said. “The way Rajiv died.”

Ravi stopped kicking stones.

Henna’s breath caught.

Naman didn’t answer.

Because if he did, something inside him might collapse.

Sumit swallowed hard, eyes fixed ahead.

“People die every day,” he muttered. “But that... that wasn’t death.”

His cigarette trembled.

“It felt like... like someone decided to show us.”

Ravi turned around sharply, anger exploding.

“Because it DID,” he snapped. “That thing wanted us to know it’s back.”

Henna spoke softly, but her voice was firm, practical.

“Not loud,” she said. “Don’t give it attention.”

Ravi shot her a look. “Haan haan, madam. Fear invites, right?”

Henna didn’t flinch. She nodded once.

“Yes,” she said. “Fear invites. And names invite more.”

Then she looked at me, voice lowering. “Rule, Naman. If you see a reflection acting wrong, don’t stare. If you see a circle—don’t complete it.”

She pulled the iron keychain from my pocket and pushed it into his palm again.

“And iron stays on you.”

I nodded. My fingers tightened around it.

Henna asked the question everyone was avoiding.

“But why, Rajiv?” she said. Short. Clean. No drama.

Sumit’s face twisted.

Ravi’s jaw clenched.

Naman answered softly, eyes dead ahead.

“Because he was close,” I said. “Because he looked.”

“And because once you see, silence counts as consent.”

Sumit’s lips moved like he wanted to deny it.

Then he whispered, almost choking on the words—“He saw Nanu in the mirror.”

Ravi spat into the mud. “And the village already had rot,” Ravi growled. “That house had rot.”

Sumit muttered, voice shaking.

“Some things are dirty even if no one talks about them.”

That sentence hung like smoke.

No one argued.

Because it was true.

The forest thickened.

Branches twisted overhead, closing the sky until the road became a tunnel. The air grew colder. Not weather-cold.

Wrong-cold.

And the sound of the world slowly disappeared.
No birds.
No insects.
No leaves.
Only footsteps.
And heartbeat.
A low sound drifted from deep in the trees.
Not wind.
Not an animal.
More like... breath.
Long. Dragged.
Henna's fingers grabbed Naman's sleeve.
"Did you hear that?" she whispered.
Ravi didn't stop walking.
"Yes," he snapped. "And I'm not turning back."
But even he swallowed after saying it.
Because the mist behind them felt thicker now.
Not fog-thick.
Presence-thick.
As if something had joined their walk.
Then it came.
A soft laugh.
Faint. Thin.
Not human.
Like a child copying laughter without understanding joy.
Henna froze.

Sumit stopped breathing for one second.

Ravi's hand went to the stick he carried.

Naman felt his spine tighten.

The laugh vanished.

But the feeling stayed.

By evening, Thandoori appeared.

The village didn't welcome them.

It stood there like a memory nobody wanted.

Houses leaned forward like tired bodies. Doors were shut.
Windows were covered with cloth. No voices. No cooking smell.
No bells.

Even the dogs were missing.

It didn't look dead.

It looked afraid.

At the far end of the lane stood the last house—isolated like it had
been punished.

Mud walls cracked. The roof bent like an old spine.

But a thin thread of smoke rose from its chimney.

Someone lived here.

Or someone was trapped here.

Ravi reached the door and knocked hard.

"Hello! Oye! We need to talk!"

No reply.

Ravi knocked again, louder.

"Bahar aao!"

The door creaked open slowly on its own.

Ravi stepped back.
Sumit's cigarette fell from his fingers.
Henna's voice came tight—sharp.
“No. Stop.”

An old woman stood inside.
Bare feet cracked like dry riverbeds.
Hair hanging in matted ropes.
Skin like old paper—wrinkled, stretched thin.
But her eyes...
Too sharp.
Too awake.
She scanned Ravi.
Then Sumit.
Then Henna.
Then she saw Naman.
And her gaze stopped there.
Not kindness.
Not recognition.
Assessment.
Like she was measuring what kind of disaster he carried.
She turned and walked inside without a word.
Leaving the door open.
Ravi muttered, “Very sweet.”
Sumit whispered, “She knows.”
Henna didn't move.

She looked at the doorstep—carefully.

Then she said quietly:

“Don’t step on the threshold.”

Ravi frowned. “What?”

Henna pointed to a faint line of black ash near the door.

“A circle,” she said. “Broken. Not complete.”

She looked at Naman.

“That means mercy,” she reminded. “If we disturb it—”

“We make it whole,” Naman finished, voice tight.

Henna nodded once.

“Good,” she said. “You’re learning.”

They stepped inside carefully.

The air was heavy.

Dried herbs. Smoke. And underneath—a sour smell.

Not food.

Not medicine.

Something older.

Something buried.

Corners held shadows like a wet cloth.

The old woman pointed to the floor near the hearth.

They sat.

The fire was weak. Thin flames fighting to stay alive.

Naman spoke first.

“We need answers,” he said. “About what’s happening.”

Ravi leaned forward, voice explosive.

“About what KILLED Rajiv!”

The old woman didn’t blink.

“I don’t speak of it,” she said.

Her voice was dry. Cold.

“I stopped speaking long ago.”

She moved to close the door.

Henna stood immediately.

“No,” she said. “Not like that.”

Two words.

Firm.

She didn’t beg. She didn’t soften. She stayed standing.

“He died,” Henna said. “And the village is acting blind.”

The woman stopped.

Her fingers stayed on the door.

For a long moment, she didn’t turn.

Then she spoke slowly, like every word hurt.

“What you hear... will not leave you.”

The fire dimmed.

Shadows shifted on the wall, waking.

“The soil remembers,” she said. “Every scream. Every sin swallowed.”

Sumit leaned forward.

“So it happened before?” he asked. Voice fragile. Like he was scared of the answer.

The old woman nodded once.

“Yes.”

Ravi’s voice turned sharp.

“Then why now? Why kill him now?”

The old woman stared into the fire.

Her answer came like poison.

“Some debts... wake faster.”

Naman’s stomach tightened.

“So it feeds on pain?” he asked.

The woman’s head snapped up.

“No.”

Her voice became sharper.

“Not pain.”

She leaned forward slightly, as if telling a secret to the darkness itself.

“Injustice.”

The word made the room colder.

Henna whispered, almost to herself.

“Then it doesn’t stop... because injustice never stops.”

A slow creak came from above.

Not wood.

Not roof.

More like... weight shifting.

Someone standing.

Listening.

Henna’s head lifted instantly.

“Don’t move,” she said. “Everyone, stay still.”

Ravi stared at her.

Henna didn't look at him. She looked at the ceiling.

Her voice was calm, but hard.

"If it hears panic, it comes closer."

Sumit's breathing turned shallow.

Naman didn't blink.

The old woman finally spoke again.

"It is not new," she said.

"It sleeps in soil."

"It wakes in blood."

The room went quiet.

Then—

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Knocking from outside.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Not like a human.

Like a finger learning how doors work.

Henna's hand grabbed Naman's wrist.

"Iron," she whispered. "Now."

Naman tightened his grip on the keychain.

Ravi stood instantly.

"No chance," he muttered. "Not opening that."

The old woman hissed like a warning.

"Don't."

Her eyes widened.

“It listens.”

The tapping stopped instantly.

As if it heard her.

As if it obeyed.

That silence was worse than the knocking.

Because it proved something ugly—it wasn’t mindless.

It was aware.

The old woman leaned forward.

Her shadow stretched too long behind her.

Not matching her body. Not matching the fire.

Her voice dropped low, like a curse finally leaving her mouth. “He has risen again.”

Ravi swallowed. “Who?”

The old woman didn’t blink.

She said the name like a confession.

“Nanu.”

Silence crushed the room. Outside, the forest shifted. Not wind. Movement. Something waited.

Right there.

Listening.

Breathing.

Hungry.

String of Flesh

Lucky slammed the door behind him so hard the frame rattled. He stood there, chest heaving, sweat crawling down his temples in cold lines. His knees felt hollow—like they might fold at any second.

But worse than the weakness was the memory.
Those hollow eyes—round, glassy sockets that seemed to swallow the light around them.
Eyes that shouldn't exist at all.

Lucky shuddered, pressing the heel of his palm to his forehead.

“Forget it... just calm down...”
His voice barely sounded human.

He stumbled to the living room and collapsed onto the sofa, hiding his face in both hands. The house felt... wrong. As if it had been emptied and something else had climbed inside its walls.

Even the tube light flickered—not randomly, but with a strange rhythm, like blinking.

Rajiv eyes... why were they like that?” Lucky whispered to himself. “Why so empty?”

A tremor ran through Lucky as more images stabbed into his mind—

Rajiv was in the fan.

Kapil's parents were in the circles.

All of them were watching.

All of it blended into one truth that clawed at him:

Something was inside these people—something that watched him even now.

Silence.

Then—

Creak.

Lucky's head snapped up so fast his neck popped.

Not the door.

Above him.

He held his breath, waiting.

Another creak.

Then a dragging sound—like a foot pulling across wood.

Lucky's fingers dug into the sofa cushion until the fabric bunched between them. A chill slid along his spine like a wet hand.

"N–Nanu?" he whispered.

No answer.

The air thickened at once—humid, suffocating—like the house was holding its breath. Lucky pushed himself to his feet and moved toward the stairs with reluctant steps.

Halfway up—

A whisper.

Not a word.

Just a breath.

Right above him.

Lucky's lungs stopped working. He lifted his head slowly.

A shape stood at the top of the stairs.

Still, in a way, bodies aren't.

"N–Nanu? Is that... is that you?"

The shadow didn't move.

Lucky climbed the last few steps each one slower than the last. When he reached the landing, the air shifted—like someone brushing past him.

He spun around—

And his stomach dropped.

Something small stood in the far corner of the corridor.

Not the tall shadow.

Not Nanu.

A child.

Lucky's heartbeat exploded in his chest.

The child took a single step forward—enough to reveal empty eye sockets.

Dark.

Round.

Staring straight at him.

Lucky backed away, breath tearing out of him.

The child stepped again.

Lucky bolted, screaming, sprinting toward the terrace.

He slammed the door shut behind him and leaned on it, gasping, his entire body shaking.

The night air hit his face like a slap.

“Not real... not real... please not real...” he whispered into the darkness.

He forced himself to turn around.

The child was standing in the terrace doorway.

Still.

Head tilted.

Empty eye sockets reflecting the moonlight like polished wells.

Lucky's voice cracked into a broken squeal:

“Stay away! Please—stay away from me!”

The figure tilted its head more.

Lucky watched in horrified disbelief as its features melted into something else—

cheeks reshaping, jaw narrowing, hair lengthening—

When he blinked—

It wasn't the child anymore.

It was Nanu.

Standing in the doorway of Lucky's room.

Facing the wall.

Completely motionless, as if he had been carved in that position.

Lucky's heartbeat vibrated in his teeth.

"Nanu...?" he whispered.

Nothing.

He forced himself a step closer.

The terrace floor creaked under him.

Nanu's head snapped—a violent, jerking twitch, like someone yanked his skull with invisible wires.

But he didn't fully turn.

Lucky's voice broke into a trembling thread.

"Nanu...?"

No response.

Only that rigid posture.

He reached forward again.

"Nan—"

Nanu turned.

Slowly.

Painfully slowly.

His neck stretched first, then his jaw, then his eyes slid into view, bloodshot and bulging, like someone had inflated them too far.

They didn't look alive.

They looked *occupied*.

Lucky stumbled back.

"N-Nanu...?"

Nanu didn't blink.

Didn't breathe right.

Just stared—through Lucky, not at him—as if he was watching whatever nightmare clung to Lucky’s shadow.

Then he moved.

Not with human rhythm.

Not with hesitation.

Just... wrong.

As if joints were bending by memory, not by muscle.

He walked past Lucky, descending the stairs with silent precision.

Lucky’s panic spiked like electricity.

“Nanu! Please—say something! Anything!”

But Nanu didn’t react.

He went into Lucky’s room and vanished inside.

Lucky swallowed his fear and forced his legs down the stairs.

The house felt like it was shrinking around him, the walls leaning closer.

Inside the room, Nanu stood at the terrace doorway.

Staring into the bruised sky—purple bleeding into black.

His feet were blackened with dust.

His lips were cracked.

His skin was stretched too tight over his bones.

He looked like a boy who had been emptied and refilled with silence.

Lucky forced a trembling smile and held up two bowls of steaming maggi.

“Yaar... you scared me—the way you were looking at me earlier...”

Nanu didn’t turn.

Didn’t blink.

Didn’t breathe right.

He was a statue, holding the shape of a boy.

Lucky sat slowly on the bed, bowl shaking.

He tried to joke.

Tried to laugh.

Tried not to cry.

Nothing worked.

Finally, with shaking fingers, he reached out—slow, gentle—
and placed a hand on Nanu's thigh.

No response.

He moved his hand upward, inch by inch.

Still nothing.

Just that dead, breathless stillness.

Gathering whatever courage he had left, Lucky leaned in to kiss
him—

And Nanu turned his face away.

Toward the wall.

As if he wasn't avoiding the kiss—
but avoiding something standing behind Lucky.

When nothing happened, he rose slowly, removing his clothes
piece by piece. His chest tightened with every breath.

He stepped closer.

"Please," he murmured, reaching out with a shaking hand.

That was when Nanu turned.

The movement was sudden and unnatural. His face came into
view—veins crawling beneath the skin, lips pale as ash, eyes
darker than a sealed coffin. His mouth twitched, as though
caught between a scream and a laugh, but no sound came.

Lucky froze where he stood, naked and exposed, every trace of
bravado was stripped away. Terror rippled across his face. His
heart hammered, his breath hitched, and for the first time, he
understood—this wasn't Nanu at all.

He stumbled backwards, skin prickling with cold, his voice breaking into a whisper.

“Wha... what the hell is happening to you?”

But Nanu did not move.

He only watched.

Unblinking.

Lucky’s breath came in ragged bursts. His trembling grew violent, his chest rising and falling too fast, his eyes darted around the room like a trapped animal searching for a way out.

And then—his gaze landed on the glass jar on the shelf.

He reached for it—slowly.

His hand shook.

Then—

SMASH!

Glass exploded across the floor. A large shard, jagged and shining like ice, lay in his hand.

He whimpered something—unintelligible—then pressed the shard against his own cheek.

Blood bloomed.

Lucky’s body began to break itself apart with desperate precision—skin, muscle, and breath—all reduced to raw, tearing pain.

He didn’t scream.

The house didn’t answer.

Blood soaked the floor as he carved, pulled, unravelled—until there was nothing left of him that still felt human.

And then—

He reached his stomach.

Drove the shard deep.

Twisted.

And pulled.

Something came free—and Lucky used it without thinking,
steam rose off them in the cold room.

Lucky collapsed to his knees, face now a bloody pulp, and stared
at the ceiling fan—

Then, somehow, with shaking hands, he tied the cords of his
intestines together—

Looped them around his neck.

One final look at Nanu, whose face was now unrecognisable.

Something ancient sat behind those bloodshot eyes.

Not pain. Not sorrow.

Just... watching.

Lucky's mouth opened in a silent scream—

Nanu did not step back.

He did not blink.

He only watched—learning. And he jumped.

The fan groaned.

The body twitched.

And then—

stillness.

His skin hung in shreds. Blood dripped in a slow, steady rhythm
onto the floor.

Tick...

Drip...

Tick...

Drip...

And through it all, Nanu stood there.

Breathing.

Staring.

A boy-shaped vessel filled with something *wrong*.

Something black and ancient.

The bowl of Maggi lay untouched on the table, still steaming—

A grotesque echo of innocence, now lost forever.

Aftermath

The scream never came.

Not from Lucky.

Not from Nanu.

Only the ceiling fan above —creaking, dipping —like it was tired of spinning.

And then the other sound.

Wet. Heavy.

Blood hits the floor.

Outside, a dog began to howl —long and sharp —as if it had smelled something it couldn't fight. Footsteps rushed in the lane. Doors banged open. Voices collided.

Someone yelled, “Arre kya hua?!”

The room filled.

Neighbours poured inside, drawn by the noise, by fear. Glass crunched under slippers. Someone gagged. Someone covered their mouth.

Lucky's body hung crooked.

Unnatural.

Wrong.

No one wanted to stare long enough to understand it.

And on the table beside him —two bowls of Maggi.

Still steaming.

As if the house was mocking them.

Then they noticed the boy.

Nanu stood in the centre of the room.

His bare feet in blood.
His head slightly tilted.
Face empty.

His eyes didn't look at Lucky.
Didn't look at the crowd.

He stared at something past them.

As if the room was not the room anymore.

Nobody went near him.

Not even the bravest uncle. Not even the nosiest aunt.

The space around him hummed faintly.

Like touching him would invite something to touch back.

Nanu's mother pushed through the crowd.

"Hat jao!" she snapped —loud, sharp —the kind of anger that comes from panic.

She stopped dead at the doorway.

Her eyes went to Lucky.

Then to her son.

And didn't move again.

Her hand caught the doorframe like the wood was the only thing holding her up.

"Nanu..." she whispered.

The boy didn't react.

He didn't turn.

He didn't blink.

His chest rose.

Fell.

Rose.

The same distance every time.

The whispers started.

Fast and low.

“Something’s wrong.”

“That boy...”

“Look at his eyes...”

Nanu’s mother backed away slowly —not turning her back on him.

Her fingers shook as she pulled out her phone. The screen didn’t respond the first time—or the second.

On the third attempt, the call finally connected.

“Naman...” she whispered. The word split halfway through.

“Beta, come quickly. Please...”

She swallowed, as if the words were shards of glass in her throat.

“Nanu... he...”

“He’s not well.”

The sentence broke into sobs.

The call cut.

I sat frozen.

The phone was cold in my palm.

Ravi and Sumit stared at me.

Not asking.

Already knowing it was bad.

Henna stepped closer.

She didn’t touch me.

But she didn’t let me drift either.

Her voice was firm, quick, and practical.

“Naman. Look at me.”

I blinked.

Henna continued, steady like a rope.

“Who called?”

My throat tightened.

I forced the word out.

“Nanu.”

Ravi’s jaw clenched instantly.

Sumit’s face drained.

And in my chest —something sank.

Because the moment I said his name, I felt it.

Like a small shift in the air.

A pressure.

A notice.

Henna’s eyes widened slightly. She understood, too.

She said it quietly —like an order.

“Don’t say it again.”

I looked at her.

Henna’s voice stayed hard.

“Names are permission in this village.”

Ravi swallowed.

Sumit whispered, almost broken, “It learned him...”

I didn’t answer.

Because deep down, I knew the truth.

This wasn’t only about Lucky’s death.

Or Nanu’s change.

This was about attention.
And something had finally received it.
Something had learned a name.
And now —
it would start using it.

Someone near the door said softly,
“Mama aa rahe hain.”
The room reacted before people did.
Voices thinned.
Bodies stepped back.
Mama entered without hurry.
No shock.
No fear.
He took in the body, the blood, the bowls on the table.
Then his eyes went to the boy.
Not horror.
Recognition.
“That much blood,” Mama said calmly,
“comes when a door opens suddenly.”
Someone tried to speak.
Mama lifted one hand.
The sound died.
He moved closer—but didn’t touch.
“The child is standing,” he said.
“That is good.”
He never said the name.

“Children don’t walk into these things.”

“They are carried.”

Nanu’s mother made a broken sound.

“Bhai... mera beta—”

Mama turned to her.

For a second—just one—

his eyes softened.

Fear.

Quickly buried.

“He is still breathing,” he said gently.

“That means... it is not complete.”

Her knees gave way.

Someone asked, stupidly,

“Complete kya?”

Mama didn’t answer.

“There are thresholds you don’t cross twice,” he said

His gaze fell on the Maggi bowls.

Steam still rising.

His jaw tightened.

“This,” he said quietly,

“should not have been shared.”

The boy’s thumb rubbed his palm.

Again.

Again.

Mama noticed.

That scared him.

“No one touches the boy,” he ordered.

“No questions. No prayers.”

Then, almost casually—

“And no names.”

His eyes found me.

Measuring.

“You,” he said. Not my name.

“You should not have been called yet.”

My mouth went dry.

“We will speak later,” Mama said.

“Not here.”

Then—so softly it felt like it slipped—

“Not like this.”

For a moment, he looked old.

Tired.

Then the mask returned.

Mama turned and left.

The room breathed again.

The boy stayed where he was.

Still.

Watching something no one else could see.

And I understood something that made my chest ache:

Mama wasn't afraid of what had happened.

He was afraid of when it had happened.

Whisper in the Smoke

The fire hissed and popped in front of me. Sparks leapt out like insects, then died on the muddy floor. Smoke crept low first, crawling around our feet, then rose in thin, twisting lines that made my eyes sting.

The old woman leaned closer to the hearth. Half her face burned orange. The other half dissolved into shadow.

She picked up a small clay bowl. Inside was black dust—ash mixed with something heavier, thicker.

She sprinkled it into the fire.

The flame didn't rise.

It sank.

The smoke changed.

It grew dense, almost heavy—as if it had weight. As if it were thinking.

Henna's fingers tightened around my sleeve.

"Don't touch anything," she whispered—short, firm.

Ravi took a step back. "What is she doing?"

The old woman didn't look at him.

"Watching," she said.

Her voice sounded worn, but certain—like this was a warning she'd given before.

"In this land, a name is not just a name," she murmured. "If you speak it with fear, you feed it."

She lifted one finger.

“And if you look at it twice...”
Her eyes flicked briefly toward the smoke.
“...it starts looking back.”

My mouth went dry.

Henna didn't look at the smoke at all. Her gaze stayed fixed on the woman.

She leaned close to me. Calm. Sharp.
“Eyes forward. Breathe.”

The smoke rolled higher.

Shapes began to form within it.

Not clear. Not solid.

Like memories dragged out and forced into the air.

A man walking alone in the rain, head bent.

A small boy clutching a wooden horse.

A haveli gate opening without hands.

Then something worse.

Not a sound—

but a pressure.

In my chest. In my bones.

Like a scream trapped inside flesh.

Henna gasped once, then caught it instantly.

Ravi's jaw tightened. I could see the curse forming on his lips—
and dying there.

The old woman's eyes reflected the firelight, dull and glassy.

“Watch,” she said, almost kindly. “Your blood buried this. But the soil doesn't forget.”

The hut began to fade—not vanishing, not moving—

It simply stopped feeling like a hut.

There was only smoke.
Only fire.
Only the past, rising like a sickness.
The edges of the smoke bled faint red.
The old woman's voice dropped.
"See what was done."
"And see what did not stay buried."

1876

Midnight.

The fire was nearly dead now—just ash and a weak ember.
Ravi shifted beside me. "Enough. Tell us straight—"
"Stop," Henna snapped. "Let her show."
Ravi's fists clenched, but he stayed silent.
From the side room, a pale green light seeped out. Wrong. Sick.
My stomach tightened.
"That wasn't there," Ravi said, already moving.
He stepped toward it.
Whispers reached us—no words, no language. Just broken sounds stitched together.
Henna moved instantly, placing herself between him and the doorway.
"Stay behind me."
Not gentle.
Protective.
Practical.
Ravi pushed past anyway—anger first, fear close behind.
He reached the doorway.

And froze.

Inside, the old woman knelt on the floor.

Before her lay a red bundle, tied tight with thread.

It had split open.

What spilled out wasn't paper.

It was soil.

Black. Wet.

Like earth mixed with old blood.

Her hands worked through it slowly—pressing, shaping, kneading it like dough.

Above her, in the green light, something stood.

Tall.

Too tall.

Arms too long.

Its feet not quite touching the floor.

Ravi's breath hitched.

"Naman..." he whispered.

Henna didn't move. "Don't."

The woman stopped working.

Her head turned.

Slow.

Her eyes were no longer cloudy.

They were endless black.

Ravi staggered back.

The old woman crossed the room and opened a burnt wooden trunk.

She pulled out another red-wrapped bundle.

And placed it in Ravi's hands.

He didn't want to touch it.

I could see that.

But his fingers moved anyway.

He unwrapped it.

Inside was a diary.

The leather was swollen. The pages were stuck together like skin after rain.

On the first page, written in shaking ink:

We killed it. But it refused to die.

Below it—one date.

Ravi's hands trembled.

"What is this?"

The old woman's voice came from close behind us. Sharp. Quiet.

"It was not a man," she said. "But men made it one."

"They hurt it."

"They broke it."

"And they buried it deep."

She leaned forward. The dying fire stretched her shadow into something wrong behind her.

"But where children laugh... where promises break..."

Her voice softened.

"...that soil becomes his body."

Cold spread through my chest.

Henna whispered, barely audible:

"This is why it wants circles. It wants a door."

The old woman turned to her—as if she'd heard every word.

Then she said, gently, like the end of a prayer:

“The last boy who carried its shadow...”

Her mouth twitched—not quite a smile. Almost grief.

“...was never seen again.”

The ember went out.

Darkness rushed in.

No fire.

No glow.

Only breathing.

Then one word remained—
etched into the air.

“Bhairav.”

Unseen Hand

The silence after the storm felt heavier than the storm itself.

No wind now. No screams. No barking.

Just people standing outside Nanu's house like statues, too scared to enter, too ashamed to leave.

Nanu's mother shook so hard her bangles clinked. She kept lifting her hand as if to touch her son, then dropping it again like the air was burning.

His father lay at the bottom of the stairs, eyes wide, mouth open, staring up at the sky as if waiting for a god to finally look down.

And above him—on the porch—stood Nanu.

His bare feet on the blood-smeared tiles.

A red glow sat inside his eyes like coal under ash.

His face was calm.

Not tired.

Not confused.

Calm, like someone who already knew what would happen next.

No one dared to step closer.

No one said his name.

Then Nanu moved.

Soft, soundless steps.

His mother staggered backwards, one hand pressed to her chest.

"N... Nanu... beta..." she tried.

Her voice died halfway.

Because she wasn't calling her son.
She was begging something inside him to remember what it once was.
Nanu tilted his head.
A small smile appeared.
Not a child's smile.
Not joy.
A smile like hunger, wearing skin.
Above them, the old rubber ball rolled on the roof by itself.
Tap... tap... tap.
Nanu glanced up as if someone had waved at him.
His breathing changed—slower, deeper, expectant.
Then the temple bell rang once.
Hard.
Metallic.
Everyone flinched.
No one had touched it.
Nanu didn't even look.
He turned and walked back inside, climbing the stairs as if the house was guiding his feet.
As he disappeared into the dark, it felt like the door closed behind him without moving.

Inside, the house was colder than it should have been.
August outside.
Winter inside.
The walls didn't just smell of kerosene and damp paint.

They smelled... sour.

Like old breath trapped in the bricks.

Nanu's mother sat in her room under a weak lamp, hands joined in prayer, eyes open but empty.

Downstairs, the dog Rani stayed near the door, whining, nails scratching the floor.

She wouldn't cross the threshold.

Not because she was trained.

Because her body refused.

Far away, the priest who had blessed Nanu at birth woke up choking, drenched in sweat.

He sat up in the dark and whispered, "No..."

He had seen the same dream again:

Fields burning.

Insects blocked the sun.

And a boy with ember-red eyes stood under a sky that looked like blood.

He didn't wait for morning.

He grabbed his prayer beads, his iron tongs, his salt pouch, and ran.

By midnight, the priest stood in Nanu's room.

The villagers crowded at the doorway—Nanu's mother, Maasi, and neighbours—no one stepping in, everyone watching.

The priest didn't like that.

He hated witnesses.

Witnesses made spirits bold.

But tonight, he needed bodies.

More bodies meant more fear.

And fear... fed it.

He drew a circle of chalk around the bed.

Perfect.

He sprinkled salt along the line.

Then iron dust.

His fingers paused.

He stared at the circle like he didn't trust his own hands.

He spoke without looking at anyone.

"Three rules," he said.

"Do not say the boy's name inside this room."

"Do not look into any mirror."

"And whatever happens—do not step into the circle."

Someone swallowed loudly.

The priest's eyes flicked to the doorway.

"Even if your own mother screams," he added.

Nanu's mother covered her mouth.

On the bed, Nanu sat upright.

Still.

No swaying.

No child restlessness.

His hands rested on his knees like he was meditating.

His thumb rubbed against his palm again and again... like he was erasing something invisible.

The priest began chanting.

His voice shook, but he forced it steady.

Mantras spilled out like ropes thrown into deep water—thin ropes, stretched too far.

“Child,” the priest said. “Listen to me. Whatever is inside you... leave this body.”

Nanu blinked once.

Slow.

As if remembering how.

His lips curved slightly.

And then he spoke.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just two voices fighting inside one mouth.

First—Nanu’s voice.

Small. Broken. Childlike.

“Mumma... am I bad?”

His mother sobbed.

The priest didn’t let her answer.

Then Nanu’s face went blank.

His eyes lifted.

And the second voice came—older than the room.

“I am not your child.”

The priest’s chant stumbled.

His beads tightened in his fist.

“Leave,” he whispered. “Leave!”

Nanu smiled again.

And for the first time, his face held no trace of the boy at all. Only possession. Not of him —of the room.

The priest felt it then.
Not a spirit.
Not a ghost.
A watcher.
Something that didn't rage.
Something that observed.
Something that learned.

Nanu tilted his head.
A little.
Almost curious.
And the priest's body jerked.
Not like a seizure.
As if someone pulled a rope inside him.
His shoulders snapped back.
His jaw trembled violently.
The beads fell from his fingers and bounced across the floor.
"No—" the priest rasped.
His own hands rose.
Slow.
Stiff.
Not his choice.
His right hand slammed over his mouth so hard his teeth clacked.
His eyes went wide.
His left hand reached up and grabbed the right wrist.
Tried to pull it away.

But his body didn't obey him.
His fingers pushed into his own mouth.
Past his lips.
Past his teeth.
His throat bulged.
He gagged.
The sound was thick and wet.
Then his jaw opened wider—too wide.
Not human wide.
Something inside his face cracked.
KRRK.
His jaw broke.
A broken-bone sound that made people outside gasp like they had
been hit.
His fingers went deeper.
He choked.
Tears flooded his eyes.
His face turned purple.
His nails scraped his tongue.
Then his hand clamped around it.
He shook his head violently.
He tried to scream.
But there was only bubbling.
Only spit and blood.
The pulling began.
Slow.

Cruel.

Like a fisherman pulling a line.

The tongue stretched out of his mouth, trembling, slick with saliva and blood.

The priest's eyes begged.

Not at Nanu.

At the doorway.

At anyone.

Help me.

No one moved.

Because the circle was there.

And because they understood—if they stepped inside, the room would choose a new body.

The tongue tore free with a wet sound.

Not loud.

Just sick.

The priest's hand flung it onto the floor.

It landed like meat thrown in mud.

A woman gagged.

Someone outside retched into the courtyard.

The priest collapsed to his knees, choking on blood, jaw hanging wrong.

He raised a hand, trying to pray.

Nanu didn't blink.

He just watched.

The priest tried to crawl.
Tried to reach the circle line.
His palms slid in blood.
Then his own right hand rose again.
As if lifted by an unseen elbow.
And plunged into his chest.
He screamed—inside the broken jaw.
A ripped animal sound.
Fingernails tore skin.
Ribs resisted.
Then gave.
A horrible crunch.
His fingers dug inside.
Searching.
Grabbing.
He pulled something out.
A black, glossy lump.
Not an organ.
Not exactly.
It pulsed like a heart but looked wrong—too dark, too wet, too alive.
It dropped from his hand and slapped the floor.
The priest's eyes rolled white.
His body convulsed.
Then stopped.
He collapsed beside it, chest torn open, blood spreading fast.
Nanu's mother did not faint.

She did not scream.

She stood in the doorway, hands still pressed together, as if prayer had frozen there.

She watched like a woman who had already lost something before tonight —and understood she had just lost the rest.

The room didn't feel shocked.

It felt... satisfied.

On the bed, Nanu finally blinked again.

Slowly.

As if the watching was finished.

His head turned to the doorway.

To the villagers.

To his mother.

He looked at them like he was seeing them for the first time.

Then he stood.

He stepped out of bed.

And walked.

Past the priest.

Past the torn chest.

Past the tongue on the floor.

His bare feet left dark prints in the blood.

He didn't run.

He didn't hurry.

As if he had all the time in the world.

He walked out of the room and down the stairs into the night.

Mama stepped forward.

Not hurried.

Not afraid.

The crowd parted instinctively —not because he pushed, but because no one wanted to stand where he was about to stand.

He stopped three steps from the blood.

Far enough to stay clean.

Close enough to be obeyed.

“Enough,” Mama said.

One word.

The crying faltered.

A woman’s sob cut off mid-breath, as a hand had closed around her throat.

Mama looked at the boy.

Not at the blood.

Not at the body.

Only at Nanu.

His eyes didn’t widen.

They narrowed —the way a man looks at something he recognises but doesn’t welcome.

“This is not possession,” Mama said calmly.

“And it is not madness.”

A murmur tried to rise.

Mama lifted one finger.

It died.

“Fear spreads faster than the truth,” he continued.

“And truth, spoken at the wrong time, becomes poison.”

He turned slightly —addressing the village without looking at them.

"No one says the boy's name," he said.
"Not tonight. Not tomorrow. Not until I say so."

Someone whispered, "But he—"

Mama's head snapped toward the voice.

The whisperer shrank back immediately.

"Names call," Mama said quietly.
"And whatever answers... does not leave easily."

He crouched slowly and picked up a pinch of dust near the threshold.

Rubbed it between his fingers.

Blood-dry.

Warm.

"This house has been opened," he said.
"Not by the child."

His gaze flicked, briefly, to the women standing at the edge.
To the men who wouldn't meet his eyes.

"By silence," Mama said.
"By delay. By people who chose not to see."

No accusation.

No defence.

Just a fact.

Mama straightened and looked at Nanu again.

For a fraction of a second —so small most would miss it —
something like calculation passed through his face.

Then it was gone.

"The boy will stay inside," Mama said.
"No mirrors. No water vessels. No windows uncovered."

He turned to Nanu's parents.

"You will do exactly as I say," he told them.
"Not because I am right. Because hesitation feeds this."

Nanu's mother nodded violently, tears streaking her face.

Mama lowered his voice.

"And if anyone here thinks prayer alone will fix this..."

He paused.

"...you are welcome to try. Alone."

No one moved.

Mama stepped back.

Only then did he add —almost casually:

"This has happened before."

The village stiffened.

"And it ended," Mama said.

"Because we made it end."

He looked up at the porch roof.

At the shadows that didn't quite match the light.

"But endings," he said softly,

"are never clean."

Outside, the peepal tree shivered, though there was no wind.

Leaves rattled as whispers stuck in the throat.

A low hum rose from deep inside its branches—getting louder, thicker, like thousands of wings waking at once.

Inside the room, the black mass twitched.

At first, just a little.

Then it slid.

Smearing itself across the floor.

Moving like a slug made of shadow and flesh.

It didn't go back to bed.

It didn't go to the walls.

It went toward the people.
The crowd stumbled back.
But it didn't chase.
It kept sliding.
Purposeful.
Straight out into the courtyard.
Straight to the peepal roots.
And then it sank into the soil.
As if the earth was hungry too.
The hum grew louder.
Almost happy.
The shadows under the tree thickened and stretched far, far too long.
Someone whispered, "It's feeding..."
No one corrected him.
Because they had all seen it.
This wasn't a death. This wasn't punishment. This was a ritual.
And they were part of it now.
Downstairs, the dog Rani scratched at the door again, whining.
A thin white line of salt lay across the threshold.
It should have stopped anything from entering.
But something had already crossed it.
Not with feet. With permission.

House That Remembers

By dawn, the mist had thickened into something heavy, like wet cotton pressed against my skin. Sound didn't travel properly through it. Even our footsteps felt uncertain, as if the ground itself didn't trust where we were going. No one said it out loud, but after last night, there was only one direction left.

At the edge of the forest, Henna stopped us.

"Iron," she said.

Short. Firm.

She reached into my pocket, pulled out the iron keychain, and pressed it into my palm like it mattered—like it was suddenly the most important thing I owned.

"No mirrors. No reflections," she added. "Not even water."

Ravi gave a weak scoff. "Haan haan. Anything else? Should we stop breathing, too?"

Henna looked straight at him.

"Don't joke."

His smile collapsed immediately.

"And if you see circles," she continued, "don't touch them. Don't step inside. If a circle is incomplete—leave it incomplete."

"Why?" I asked.

She swallowed. Fear sat clearly behind her eyes, but her voice didn't shake.

"Because a closed circle is a door," she said.

"An open one is mercy."

No one argued after that.

The path narrowed quickly. Trees leaned inward, branches locking above us like ribs. The ground felt wrong under my feet—too soft, too willing, like the earth had forgotten how to stay firm. Ravi walked ahead, swinging a stick and striking bushes harder than necessary.

“This place feels pissed,” he muttered. “Like it wants us gone.”

Sumit followed behind him, a cigarette trembling between his fingers. He barely inhaled.

“If we start lying to ourselves this early,” he said quietly, “we won’t last long.”

Ravi didn’t reply.

Henna slowed and crouched, touching the mud with care.

“Someone passed through here.”

My throat tightened. “Walking?”

She shook her head.

“Dragged.”

No one asked what. We moved on.

The smell reached us before we saw anything—metallic, old, dry. Blood. An abandoned cart lay half-swallowed by weeds, a deep cut carved clean along its side, too deliberate to be an accident. Ravi crouched instinctively, his hand reaching out.

“Don’t,” Henna snapped.

He froze.

She stepped between him and the cart, eyes sharp.

“We don’t touch things here,” she said.

“We only survive.”

Ravi pulled his hand back. No jokes followed.

When the trees finally thinned, the village appeared ahead. Not abandoned. Not alive. Waiting. Houses leaned inward like tired bodies. Windows gaped open like black mouths. Dust drifted without wind.

“What the hell...” Ravi whispered.

Henna touched a wall lightly—then recoiled.

“It’s warm,” she said. “Not sun-warm. Body-warm.”

The square felt hollow. The old well stood open, dark and silent. Then a sound rolled across the hills—low, wet, wrong.

“That’s from the haveli side,” I said, my spine tightening.

A shutter slammed once. Then again. A tall shadow crossed a doorway and vanished. Sumit crushed his cigarette under his shoe.

“We shouldn’t be here.”

“Then where?” Ravi snapped.

Sumit hesitated, then said it quietly, like saying it louder might wake something.

“Nanu’s house.”

The name dropped into the square and didn’t echo. No one argued.

The lane leading to the house was too still. Not calm—staged. Even the trees leaned away from it. Henna stayed close to me, not holding me, just near enough to keep me anchored.

“Stay here,” she murmured. “Not inside your head.”

I nodded, though I wasn’t sure I could.

The gate stood bent inward, iron rusted and strained, like something had been dragged through, and the metal never recovered. I pushed. The hinges screamed.

The house woke up.

Inside, the air thickened instantly—damp stone, sour incense, and something metallic underneath. Henna’s face softened into grief.

“This place doesn’t want fixing,” she whispered.

“It wants remembering.”

A body lay beneath a torn sheet. The cloth had slipped enough to reveal a swollen, grey face. Henna staggered back, hand over her mouth. Sumit dropped to his knees.

“It’s... Lucky bhaiya.”

Ravi slammed both palms against the wall.

"No," he hissed. "Someone did this."

Near the courtyard wall, the priest lay slumped, prayer beads scattered like broken teeth. My voice sounded hollow, even to me.

"It's true," I said. "Nanu didn't leave."

Henna looked at me, her eyes wet.

"Do you think it's still here?"

I shook my head.

"No. Not the boy."

I swallowed.

"Something else has him."

The house felt heavier then. Like it agreed.

Mama entered the courtyard—measured and unhurried.

He didn't look at the bodies first.

He looked at the house.

Long.

As if it might answer him.

Then his eyes moved to us.

"Who went upstairs?" he asked quietly.

No one spoke.

That seemed to bother him more than the blood.

He stepped closer to the priest's body and crouched—not to examine it, but to feel the floor beneath it.

Warm.

He closed his eyes briefly.

"Too late," he murmured.

Ravi swallowed. "Too late for what?"

Mama stood.

“For clean solutions.”

He finally looked at the body.

Not shocked.

Not angry.

Just disappointed.

“This isn’t an attack,” he said.

“It’s an adjustment.”

The word hung wrong in the air.

Henna’s voice trembled. “Adjustment to what?”

Mama didn’t answer directly.

Instead, he turned to Nanu’s parents.

“Lock the windows,” he said calmly.

“Cover every reflective surface.”

“And no one goes upstairs again.”

“Not even if you hear crying.”

That landed heavier than shouting would have.

Sumit frowned. “You think it’s still here?”

Mama’s eyes shifted—not to the ceiling.

To the walls.

“It doesn’t leave,” he said.

“It relocates.”

A long silence followed.

Then, almost absently, he added:

“It has done this before.”

Ravi’s voice cracked. “And you stopped it?”

Mama met his eyes.

“For a while.”

That answer was worse than yes.

A sudden tap echoed from above.

Mama didn’t flinch this time.

But his jaw tightened.

“Stay together,” he said.

“And do not respond to your own voice if you hear it calling from another room.”

That rule felt new.

That rule felt personal.

Mama stepped back.

Not in retreat.

In preparation.

Returning Shadow

The house did not fall silent after the door slammed.

It *settled*.

Like something that had been disturbed and was now listening again.

Dust drifted slowly through the courtyard, visible only where weak daylight slipped through the broken tiles above. The bodies downstairs had been covered, but the smell remained—old blood, damp stone, and incense burned too late.

No one suggested leaving.

They gathered in the inner room—not sitting comfortably, not standing apart. Just... contained. Like the house had arranged them where it wanted them.

Ravi leaned against the wall, his arms folded tight. His foot tapped once, then stopped when the sound echoed too sharply.

“This place,” he muttered, “feels like it remembers where we stood last time.”

No one laughed.

Sumit sat on the edge of the charpai, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor as if he expected it to open. His hands were clenched—not in anger, but in exhaustion.

“Because it does,” Henna said. Her voice didn’t rise.

She stood near the doorway, iron keychain looped once around her fingers, eyes moving constantly—walls, ceiling, corners where light refused to reach.

“Places like this don’t forget,” she added. “They collect.”

I said it quietly. “Where is Vinay?”

The question landed heavier than expected.

Sumit looked up slowly.

Not defensive. Just stripped.

“You came back,” he said. “You didn’t look for him.”

“That’s not—”

“Isn’t it?” Sumit cut in. “Everyone leaves this house differently. Vinay left all of it.”

Ravi turned. “Left how?”

Sumit’s jaw tightened. “Temple. Somewhere near the hills. He works under a priest now.”

The word *priest* changed the air.

Henna’s gaze snapped to him. “Since when?”

“After Roma,” Sumit said. “After Nanu started... slipping.”

I swallowed. Roma’s name still had weight. Vinay’s—unfinished.

“If he’s with a priest,” I said slowly, “then he knows what people cling to when fear stops being personal.”

Henna nodded once. Agreement without comfort.

“He won’t be untouched,” she said. “No one who leaves this house is.”

Ravi dragged a hand down his face. “Great. So everyone’s either dead, broken, or hiding behind god.”

“No,” Henna said. “They’re surviving the only way they know.”

She turned to me then. Direct. Unsoftened.

“And you?” she asked. “Why are you really here?”

The house creaked softly, like it was leaning in.

I didn’t answer immediately.

“Because Nanu didn’t finish anything,” I said finally. “And whatever took him... it’s still using this place.”

A faint sound came from somewhere above.

Not a step.

A shift.

Henna's fingers tightened around the iron.

"It's listening," she said. "It always listens when names are spoken."

No one argued.

Ravi exhaled slowly. "Then we stop circling it."

He looked at all of us. "No running. No pretending we're smarter than it."

Sumit gave a hollow laugh. "And if it chooses again?"

Henna met his eyes. "Then we don't let it choose alone."

Silence followed—not fear. Acceptance.

The house smelled of damp wood and old lantern oil. The walls were peeling. The floor felt sticky underfoot.

I sat on the edge of the narrow cot—elbows on my knees, head lowered.

Henna sat beside me, back straight. Calm on the outside. But her thumb kept rubbing her finger again and again.

"You've gone quiet," Henna said.

I nodded but didn't look at her. My eyes stayed on the ground—on puddles, on shadows that felt a little late.

Minutes passed.

Then I said, "This village..."

My voice came out rough.

"It's full of my memories. Things I buried."

I kept my gaze lowered.

“But now I’m here...” I swallowed. “It feels like the village remembers me.”

Henna didn’t interrupt.

“Like something I left behind isn’t done with me.”

“You’re doing it again,” she said softly. “Listening somewhere else.”

“Just thinking,” I said.

“About Roma?”

No anger. No judgement.

“She ran ahead,” I said. “Always. I followed.”

Henna waited.

“It started with Nanu,” I said. “My cousin.”

Her body stiffened slightly. She was listening carefully now.

“He began drawing circles,” I continued. “Everywhere. Walls. Books. Dust.”

“Why circles?” she asked.

“Like he was trying to finish something,” I said. “A way through.”

She didn’t laugh.

“He drew symbols,” I added. “Names he had never heard.”

I swallowed.

“We thought it was harmless. Until Kapil took him to the haveli.”

Henna turned fully toward me. “Kapil did what?”

“He wanted something,” I said. “Banwari Uncle said it could be given.”

“But nothing is free there,” I said. “Calling isn’t the mistake.”

“Then what is?” she asked.

“Stopping halfway.”

Henna's fingers tightened around her shawl.

"So unfinished means—"

"It waits," I said.

She went quiet.

"Nanu changed," I continued. "And Roma..."

The name hurt.

"She didn't come back."

A dog barked somewhere outside the house. Then stopped.

"And Sumit's parents," I added. "They were gone too."

Henna didn't interrupt. She didn't say sorry.

"And you?" she asked finally.

I laughed once. No humour.

"I stayed alive," I said. "That's all."

She placed her hand on my arm. Not romantic. Grounding.

"Don't go inside your head," she said. "Stay here."

I inhaled. Tried.

My laugh came out bitter. "And if I can't?"

Henna didn't soften. She didn't lie.

"Then you still walk forward."

I finally looked at her properly.

Her eyes dropped for a second before she spoke—quiet, honest.

"I know what it feels like," she said, "to build your life around someone... and realise they were using you."

I stayed still.

"I trusted someone once," she continued. "Money. Plans. A future. I thought we were a team."

Her jaw tightened.

“He left me with debts I didn’t create... and shame I didn’t deserve.”

She took a slow breath.

“I didn’t know who I was after that.”

Her eyes shimmered for a moment.

Not tears.

Control.

Then she said something that surprised me.

“I’m scared of being broken again.”

She looked at me—directly.

“But I still came here.”

That line hit deeper than the confession.

Because it was a choice.

Not weakness.

Her hand stayed on my sleeve. Her fingers trembled slightly, but she didn’t pull away.

I reached for her hand slowly.

“Henna...” My voice cracked. “You don’t know what that means.”

She held my gaze.

“Maybe I don’t need to know,” she said. “Maybe it’s enough that you stop doing this alone.”

The room felt smaller.

Our faces moved closer.

When we kissed, it wasn’t playful.

It was heavy.

Like two people trying to hold onto warmth before fear returned.

When we pulled apart, Henna whispered—almost scolding—

“Don’t shut me out next time.”

I exhaled.

For one fragile moment, the world stayed still.

Later, the single bulb dimmed as the voltage dropped.

Ravi and Sumit were still arguing softly near the doorway—
voices low, tired, as even anger had run out of energy.

Henna shifted from the cot to the old sofa near the wall.

Her eyes tried to stay open.

They didn't.

Slowly, her head leaned onto my shoulder.

A warm weight.

Soft.

Real.

I didn't move, even when my shoulder started hurting. That pain
felt better than thinking.

I looked at her face.

Her eyelashes. Her calm mouth. The way her brows still held a
tiny tension—like she was fighting fear even in sleep.

My hand lifted without thinking.

I brushed her hair away from her cheek.

Tucked it behind her ear.

My fingers stayed there longer than they should have.

Henna's lips parted slightly as she breathed.

I leaned in—slow—

Just to kiss her, quick and gentle—

And suddenly, her eyes opened.

Straight into mine.

I froze.

Caught.

Henna stared for two seconds.

Then her mouth curved.

“Taking advantage of the moment?” she whispered.

My blood rushed to my face.

“No—no!” I blurted. “I was just... your hair... it was—”

Her smile widened.

She sat up, pretending to think.

“Hm. Very innocent.”

Then she laughed softly—warm, teasing.

“I don’t mind,” she whispered.

And before I could reply—

Henna leaned in and kissed me first.

Not long.

Not dramatic.

Just enough to steady my breath.

She pulled back, eyes shining.

“Ab bolo,” she murmured. “Who’s taking advantage?”

For the first time that night, I smiled.

Not forced.

Not careful.

Just real.

Henna sat at the edge of the table, my jacket folded in her hands.

She pressed her cheek to the collar, breathing in smoke, cold air... and whatever else she associated with me.

I sat by the window, elbows on my knees, staring into the dark street.

“Naman,” she said softly.

I didn’t turn.

“You need rest.”

I gave a thin laugh. “After tonight?”

Henna came closer and knelt beside me.

Not dramatic.

Just steady.

“You don’t have to hold everything,” she said.

“Maybe I do.”

Henna shook her head.

“No.”

Her voice faltered slightly.

“I was angry once,” she admitted. “Then I was scared.”

I finally looked at her.

“You didn’t try to fix me,” she said. “You just stayed.”

That line landed harder than comfort ever could.

I leaned forward, resting my forehead against hers.

Henna whispered, “Promise me you won’t disappear.”

My throat tightened.

“I won’t.”

She stayed close.

I didn’t pull away.

Outside, dawn crept in—pale and unsure.

The quiet between us didn’t bring comfort.

It just gave us time.

Priest of Shadow

The temple courtyard was full of life.

Kids moved between rows with brass plates held tight to their chests. Steam rose from huge pots. Dal, ghee, rotis—warm smell, warm air. For a moment, it felt like the world still had normal things left.

Bells rang in clean little bursts.

From inside the sanctum, mantras flowed out—routine, safe, familiar.

At the centre, the priest worked calmly.

Tilak bright. Sleeves rolled. Hands quick and sure.

He served food, blessed old women, patted children's heads, and smiled as if nothing bad had ever touched this town.

A shy boy held out his plate.

The priest bent and said softly, Eat, beta. "When hunger cries, even God feels far away."

People laughed lightly.

Faith looked like comfort.

At the gate, we looked like trouble.

Sumit stood with both hands deep in his pockets. Shoulders tight. Jaw locked. He scanned the crowd like he expected something to jump out.

Ravi leaned on the iron gate, heel tapping fast, mouth restless, eyes angry.

Henna stayed beside me.

Calm face. Sharp eyes.

She didn't watch the people. She watched the details.

A soot mark on a pillar. A burn line on the priest's forearm—fresh. Too fresh.

No one else noticed.

Henna did.

She leaned slightly toward me. "That burn," she murmured. "Recent."

I nodded but didn't answer.

Grief sat inside me like a stone. My hand crushed the bag strap till my knuckles turned pale.

The priest's voice kept floating around us.

Every time a bell rang, my stomach tightened for no reason. My breath broke for one second. Then came back.

A temple worker walked up, smiling.

"Would you like to help? We can always use more hands."

Ravi didn't smile back.

"We're here for Vinay."

The worker blinked.

Then his smile faded into discomfort.

"You mean..." he lowered his voice, "Panditji?"

Even that word changed the air slightly.

Sumit's head snapped toward Ravi.

Ravi didn't blink. Just nodded.

We waited near the steps.

Kirtan continued behind us. Families ate. A child dropped roti and laughed.

But for us, nothing felt light.

Sumit sat down on the lowest step, elbows on knees, tapping an uneven rhythm on his thigh—like he was counting seconds.

He refused to look at me.

I stood behind him, staring at the pond.

My reflection broke into shaky pieces in the water.

Henna noticed my breathing getting shallow.

She brushed my arm once—warm contact, not romantic. A reminder.

“Breathe,” she said. “Slow.”

I tried.

Ravi couldn’t sit.

He paced the narrow path like a man waiting for a fight.

Then Vinay appeared.

Not loudly.

Not calling.

He simply stepped out of the crowd like the temple itself made way for him.

Saffron cloth. Tilak clean. Rudraksh beads on his wrist.

He looked peaceful.

But when his eyes met ours... his breath stopped for half a beat.

A crack.

Only someone watching carefully would have noticed.

Sumit spoke first, voice-controlled and cold.

“You haven’t changed.”

Vinay smiled gently. “And you?” he said. “Still holding your pouch like the world might fall out of it?”

Sumit’s hand moved instantly to his bag strap.

"It's useful," he muttered.

Vinay gave a soft chuckle.

Even Ravi paused mid-walk.

For a few minutes, we joined the seva.

Passing plates. Pouring water. Nodding at strangers.

The rhythm softened something in us.

Henna smiled at a child. Sumit fixed crooked cups without thinking. Ravi stole a roti and winked at an annoyed aunty.

For a moment—

Almost normal.

Then Ravi's body stiffened.

He looked toward the gate again. Eyes scanning.

Vinay saw it instantly.

He always noticed tension.

He came to us quietly. Voice low.

"Why have you come like this?" he asked. "All four of you... you're carrying fear."

Ravi stepped closer.

No jokes now.

"We need to talk," he said. "Alone."

Vinay frowned. "Now? During langar?"

"Yes," Ravi snapped. "Now."

Vinay held Ravi's gaze.

Then he nodded once.

"Come."

Vinay led us behind the temple, toward the pond.

The air there felt cooler. Still water smells lingered. Old algae. Stone dampness.

He opened a small room overlooking the pond.

As soon as we entered, the outside sounds became muffled.

Vinay closed the door carefully.

Not just closing—

Almost sealing it.

He turned to us like a man giving instructions before war.

Sumit: arms crossed too hard, grief hidden inside anger.

Ravi: burning with impatience.

Henna: standing straight, eyes alert, ready to act.

Me: barely holding myself together.

Vinay spoke.

“I knew you’d come,” he said.

His voice was steady, but his fingers touched his beads once. Nervous habit.

“You don’t understand,” he continued. “If you chase him now—without rules—you will die.”

Ravi’s eyes sharpened.

“Then explain the killings,” he snapped. “Explain why it’s happening again.”

Vinay’s face tightened.

“You think it has woken again?”

“It has,” Ravi said. Simple. Final.

Henna stepped in.

Her voice was calm, but it didn’t bend.

“Vinay, we need Nanu. Not tomorrow. Now. Whatever is inside him is eating the boy.”

She didn't look at me for permission.

She made the call.

Sumit's voice cracked.

"Where is he?" he asked. "Still in that house? Still trapped?"

Vinay swallowed hard.

"Maybe," he said. "But understand this."

He looked directly at Sumit.

"If he is there... he's not alone in his own body anymore."

That line hit like a slap.

Outside, children laughed.

That sound suddenly felt wrong.

Too bright.

Ravi stepped forward, anger leading him.

"We face it now," he said. "Before it spreads."

Vinay studied all of us.

Then he spoke slowly.

"You must return to where it began."

His eyes flicked to the pond like it had memories inside it.

"The haveli," he said.

"The soil remembers first."

He paused, then added like a diagnosis:

"The haveli is the mouth. Kapil's house is the wound."

His voice became even more controlled.

"It is anchored," he said. "Bound to place. To what was fed there."

Henna frowned.

"Then why does it follow people who leave?"

Vinay turned toward her.

Surprised.

Not angry.

For half a second, he looked like he wanted to answer honestly.

Then he smiled gently.

“Because fear doesn’t stay where it begins,” he said.

Henna’s eyes narrowed.

“Not before,” she whispered. “It didn’t follow before.”

Vinay’s smile stayed too long.

His beads tightened in his fist, then loosened.

He avoided her eyes for the first time.

“That’s how it’s always been,” he said quietly.

Like reassurance.

Like memory.

Henna didn’t argue.

She just stored it.

Something in me hardened into a direction.

Sumit nodded once, sharply.

Ravi gave a grim grin. “Finally. A plan.”

Vinay stepped closer.

Voice low.

“And when you go, don’t take prayers alone. They won’t hold.”

He dropped a small pouch into my palm.

Salt.

Coarse. White.

“This stops crossing,” Vinay said. “Thresholds. Doors. Windows.”

Then he added something softer, almost to himself:

“It’s sealed. Boundary is holding.”

His eyes flicked down.

“This is how it’s supposed to feel,” he murmured.

Then, as he realised he had spoken too much—

“At least... it should.”

The air changed slightly.

The lamps outside steadied.

The pressure in my chest eased for a second.

Temple bells rang again—clean, confident.

And we understood something cold:

Faith wasn’t outside the darkness.

It was standing inside it.

And it had just shut the door behind us.

Later, the courtyard quieted.

Vinay stood with palms together, but his beads clicked unevenly.

“Naman,” he said softly, as the room itself could hear.

I didn’t answer.

I stared at the floor.

The stone looked normal.

But my mind kept imagining circles drawn on it.

Ravi asked, voice lower now.

“Where do you think he is?”

Vinay exhaled.

“Maybe the haveli,” he said.

Then he added carefully:

“If it hasn’t learned to walk yet.”

Ravi’s eyes widened.

“Yet?”

Vinay didn’t reply immediately.

Then he said, “Some things change once they are seen.”

Henna stepped toward me, steady voice, practical.

“Can we save him?”

Vinay’s eyes shut for one heartbeat.

“I don’t know.”

Then he opened them again.

“But we go to Kapil’s house.”

Ravi exploded instantly.

“Kapil’s? Why the hell—”

“Because he was the thread,” Vinay cut in. Short. Leader tone.

“Banwari. Haveli. Curse. All roads lead back to him.”

I forced my gaze up.

“Then that’s where it ends,” I said.

Henna’s fingers tightened on my hand.

Sumit whispered, voice cracking.

“Kapil opened the door...”

He swallowed.

“But we walked through it.”

I whispered, “He was just a kid.”

Vinay’s beads stopped moving.

“And we were blind,” he said.

“No,” I said, breaking. “I was.”

Ravi’s hand clapped my shoulder.

Firm. Loyal.

“Then we finish it,” he said. “Tonight.”

Henna squeezed my hand once.

Her voice trembled, but she didn’t look away.

“What does it want from him?”

I swallowed.

“Not what,” I said.

“Whoever it is... It’s not done.”

A sharp crack came from inside the temple.

Wood snapping.

Ravi’s hand flew to his knife.

Sumit flinched.

Henna stepped in front of me automatically.

Vinay whispered, “We should go.”

Outside, the night air felt metallic.

Even stray dogs were missing.

No barking.

No movement.

Near the banyan, the roots rose out of the soil like veins.

Ravi’s torch sputtered.

“Arre yaar...” he muttered, tapping it. “Not now.”

The flame steadied—then bent sideways.

Not flickering.

Bending.

Henna noticed first.

“There’s no wind,” she said.

Then the crows exploded out of the branches.

Dozens.

Screaming.

Feathers falling like burnt paper.

Ravi forced a laugh, but it sounded weak.

“Great. Birds also joined.”

Sumit grabbed his arm.

“Something’s wrong,” he murmured.

Then—the night tore open.

A sound rolled through the village.

Low. Wet. Wrong.

Not a scream.

Not a chant.

Like something trying to speak through a throat full of blood.

The lantern glass rattled hard.

The cot vibrated under us, as if the ground itself had shifted.

Henna’s hand clamped around my wrist.

“What was that?” she said.

Her voice didn’t rise.

But it cut clean through the air.

I went still.

My eyes snapped to the shuttered window.

“It’s here,” I murmured.

Not fear.

Recognition.

Another sound followed—closer.

Many voices together.

Not praying.

Not crying.

Something forced.

Like a crowd being made to sing while begging for mercy.

The air turned sharp—cold enough to sting skin.

A dark line of moisture crawled down the wall.

I stood up fast.

“We have to go,” I said.

Henna stood too.

“No,” she said immediately. “We don’t split.”

I stared.

Henna was already pulling my iron keychain out of my pocket.

She pressed it into my hand.

“Iron stays with you,” she said. “Rule.”

I swallowed.

Outside, the sound grew louder.

Henna’s face went pale for half a second.

Fear showed.

Then she crushed it down.

“We move together,” she said. “Now.”

We pushed the door open.

The village was waking in panic.
Doors opened. Lanterns flared. People stumbled out with shawls
half-worn, eyes wide.
A woman cried, "Hai Ram!"
A man shouted, "Where is it coming from?"
The sound rolled across the lanes like a wave.
Not from one house.
From the village itself.
Henna grabbed my sleeve.
"Eyes forward," she said. "No mirrors. No reflections."
I nodded even though my heart was slamming.
And then I saw it.
In the distance.
Under the banyan.
Something stood there.
Not a clear shape.
Not a full body.
Just wrongness inside darkness.
Like the shadow had weight.
Like the night itself had taken a form.
People around us stared but didn't understand what they were
seeing.
But I did.
Because I'd seen it before.
The banyan wasn't just casting a shadow.
It was an absorbing one.
And the shadow—

was still screaming.
Henna tightened her grip.
Her voice stayed hard.
“We leave. Now,” she said.
And for the first time, I realised—
Henna was scared.
But she was not running. She was leading.
We stepped forward.
Torchlight hit the tree.
Two bodies hung there.
Kapil’s parents.
Necks bent wrong. Tongues swollen. Eyes half open like they died
staring at something impossible.
Their feet moved slightly, like someone invisible was still rocking
them.
Then the smell hit.
Death.
Old blood.
And wet soil.
My body moved—Henna grabbed my arm hard.
“Don’t,” she said. “Look down.”
I forced myself.
The roots beneath the bodies moved.
Not like worms.
Like breathing.
Expanding. Contracting.
Wet soil lifted with each pulse.

Bubbles came up like the earth was exhaling.

Ravi swore.

"This is repeating," he said. "Same madness."

Sumit went pale.

"No," he whispered. "This is worse."

Villagers started gathering behind us.

Some prayed. Some cried. Some ran.

Henna stepped closer, legs shaking, voice steady.

"They're wrong," she said. "The shadows."

We looked.

The shadows weren't staying still.

They were crawling.

Not away.

Toward something we couldn't see.

Vinay stiffened.

"Stay behind me."

Then the sound arrived—a tear in the air, like thunder ripping through flesh.

Lanterns flared.

Flames bent sideways again.

People screamed.

The soil under the banyan rippled.

Roots tightened like they were gripping something alive below.

"It's awake," I whispered.

Ravi stepped forward.

"Let it come," he said. "We're not running."

Sumit grabbed him.

“We’re not suicidal! We need to think—”

“No,” I said quietly.

“We need to go.”

Henna squeezed my hand once.

Firm.

Steady.

“We’re with you,” she said.

Then from the haveli side—one voice slid through the air like a blade.

“Baba...”

The boundary didn’t break.

But something had already crossed it.

House of Betrayal

The bodies hung from the banyan tree as if it were showing them off.

Ropes creaked softly. Not because of wind—there was no wind—but because something in the roots kept moving, slow and heavy.

People stood far back. Mothers held their children tight. Old men muttered prayers that broke in the middle. Lanterns shook in trembling hands, throwing weak light over the dark roots below.

No one went near the tree.

Not because they were respectful.

Because they were scared the bodies might look back.

I stood in front.

My jaw was locked so hard it hurt. This wasn't fear. It was pain—sharp, personal. Like someone had taken a knife and twisted it inside my chest.

Henna stepped beside me and held my sleeve.

Not pulling.

Anchoring.

“Naman,” she said softly. “Stay with me.”

Her eyes kept moving—branches, sky, ground—but kept returning to the roots.

Thick.

Wet.

Swollen.

Almost... alive.

Ravi moved ahead, his lantern held high like a weapon.

“Bas,” he muttered. “Enough drama. Say it.”

Even he was shaking. His knuckles looked white around the lantern handle.

Sumit stood behind us, his face blank. Like grief had sucked all colour out of him.

Then Vinay stepped forward.

He hadn’t spoken since we arrived. Temple cloth on his shoulder. Prayer beads tight in his fist. Lips moving—half mantra, half panic.

He stared at the banyan.

His face drained.

“This isn’t hanging,” he whispered.

We turned.

Vinay crouched near the base of the tree. He didn’t touch the soil. His fingers hovered above the dark roots.

“They weren’t killed here,” he said, voice thin. “They were... placed.”

“Placed?” Ravi snapped. “Like showpiece?”

Vinay didn’t look up. “Like an offering.”

The crowd murmured like a single body.

A villager pushed forward—old, bent, his eyes wild.

“Don’t stand here,” he rasped. “This is not the end.”

Ravi stepped in front of him. “Then where?”

The old man’s breath stank of fear and tobacco.

“Kapil’s house,” he whispered.

The name hit like a slap.

A woman gasped. Someone spat on the ground.

“Don’t take his name!” someone shouted.

Sumit stepped forward then as if pulled by a rope.

He stared up at the bodies.

His hand rose to his mouth.

Then fell.

Slowly, he turned toward the road leading away.

He didn’t need to speak.

His eyes met mine.

Old fights. Old guilt.

Vinay stood up slowly eyes still on the roots.

“This house was prepared,” he said. “If bodies are here, it means something was called.”

Ravi’s voice was sharp. “And something answered.”

Henna lifted her chin.

“Then we go,” she said. “Together.”

Her voice stayed calm, but it didn’t allow for argument.

Vinay’s gaze slid to the dark road.

“If you step into that house,” he said quietly, “you won’t come out the same.”

The road to Kapil’s house felt like punishment.

Every hut we passed shut its door.

No dogs barked.

No radios played.

Not even a child cried.

It was as if the village had decided: *this is not our problem—this is your curse.*

Kapil's house stood at the edge, crooked and sagging, windows blank like dead eyes.

The gate groaned when we pushed it.

Henna went first.

Not me.

Not Ravi.

Henna.

She looked back at us once. Short, practical.

"Stay close. No splitting."

We stepped in.

The air hit us.

Damp soil.

Rust.

Something metallic beneath it—as if old blood were rubbed into stone.

Sumit swallowed hard. "Why does it smell like... like this?"

Ravi muttered, "Because hell has bad ventilation."

Vinay went quiet the moment we crossed the threshold.

He stood slightly behind us, hand gripping a small cloth pouch at his waist. The same pouch he never lets go of.

His lips moved without sound.

Not loud prayers.

Private ones.

Henna noticed.

Her eyes narrowed slightly, but she didn't call it out.

The floor creaked. Cobwebs brushed our cheeks.

Ravi tapped a wall. “If this house falls, I’m not paying hospital bills—”

Vinay cut him off instantly.

“Don’t joke here.”

Ravi blinked. “Bhai, tu pandit ban gaya hai ya bhoot?”

Vinay’s face stayed pale.

“Some places remember,” he said. “This one remembers too much.”

We moved deeper.

Above a broken cot, deep scratches cut into the wall.

I lifted my lantern.

Words were carved into the plaster—uneven, panicked:

I gave it to the vessel.

It will carry my revenge.

You think it ended with me...

But it has only begun.

My throat tightened.

“He knew,” I whispered.

Henna ran her fingertips near the carving, not touching.

“These aren’t proud words,” she said. “They’re scared words.”

Vinay’s jaw worked.

“This isn’t confession,” he said. “It’s a warning.”

Then—

BANG!

A chair ripped off the floor and flew toward us.

Henna shoved me sideways.

“DOWN!”

The chair smashed into the wall, splintering.

Ravi and Sumit scattered.
The room grew colder.
Not cold.
Presence cold.
Sumit took a step back—
and froze.
A child stood behind him.
Not fully standing.
Folded wrong.
Its joints bent like bones were soft.
One eye burned wet red. The other hung dull like dead glass.
It wasn't angry.
It looked... curious.
It had finally found what it wanted.
Sumit's voice cracked.
"Guys...?" he whispered. "Guys, please..."
The child's fingers held his ankle.
Not grabbing.
Claiming.
Then it yanked him backwards and slammed him into the wall.
CRACK!
Sumit collapsed, gasping.
Ravi lunged to help—
Something hit Ravi mid-run.
Not visible.
But hard.

He flew sideways like he weighed nothing and crashed onto the floor.

Henna shouted, sharp and commanding:

“Ravi! Move! Get up!”

Vinay stumbled backwards chanting fast. His fingers tore into his pouch.

His mantra faltered—as if the air itself refused to carry the words.

I stepped forward without thinking—

and stopped.

Someone stood inches from me.

Not attacking.

Waiting.

A face torn open with long scratches. Skin raw and wet like fresh wounds.

Its eyes were unblinking.

Patient.

Ancient.

I couldn't move.

My lungs stalled.

Then a hand appeared beside me—child-small, cold—and pushed something into my palm.

Something hard.

The room tilted.

Light folded.

Sound folded.

Henna's voice came from far away—

“Naman!”

I woke choking.

Henna held my face, forcing me to look at her.

“No,” she said firmly. “Look at me. Stay here.”

Ravi and Sumit crouched nearby, shaken.

Vinay knelt a step back.

Eyes wide.

Not fear.

Recognition.

“You saw it,” Vinay whispered. “Didn’t you?”

I couldn’t answer.

My hand opened slowly.

Inside was a small, blackened piece of chalk.

Sumit pulled me up, voice rough and broken.

“Don’t stare too long here,” he said. “This place lies.”

Henna had already moved.

She pried open a loose floor plank.

“Naman—light.”

I leaned forward.

She pulled out a rusted iron box.

Vinay jerked back.

“No,” he breathed. “Don’t open it here.”

Henna didn’t stop.

“If it’s here, it’s meant to be found.”

She snapped it open.

Inside—papers tied in red thread.

Old.

Stained.

Ritual pages.

Vinay grabbed one as it burned.

“These are awakening rites,” he said. “Not protection.”

Henna frowned. “Then what?”

Vinay swallowed.

“Resurrection through inheritance.”

The ceiling seemed to dip lower.

The lantern flames bent sideways.

Not flicker.

Bend.

A child cried somewhere inside the house.

Then it stopped.

Too suddenly.

Like someone switched it off.

A rubber ball rolled out and hit my boot.

Tok.

Children’s laughter followed.

Thin.

Wrong.

In the corner, four shadows crouched.

Only one was solid.

A boy.

He turned toward us.

Face sagged. Eyes bloodshot.

Smile too wide.

Henna whispered, steady but scared:

“That’s not a child.”

Vinay whispered:

“It’s the vessel.”

The boy vanished—

and stood right in front of us.

Henna screamed.

Ravi grabbed her arm.

“RUN!”

We burst outside.

Breath-tearing.

Hearts slamming.

Behind the house, Ravi dropped to his knees. Symbols were scorched into the earth. Circles layered over circles. Blood marks dried black. Bones arranged neatly. Skulls faced inward.

Lightning flashed.

For a second, in a puddle near my shoe—

Roma stood.

Smiling.

Blood dark at the corner of her mouth.

Her eyes weren’t asking for help.

My breath caught.

The water rippled.

She was gone.

“Naman,” Henna said sharply. “What did you see?”

“Nothing,” I said too quickly. “Just rain.”

Another flash.

Faint marks appeared on the wet pathway.

Lines.

Half-circles.

Not random.

Then they faded.

Henna grabbed my wrist. "You saw that."

Not a question.

"Rule time," she said, suddenly firm. "No staring at reflections."

I looked at her.

"And we don't split," she added.

Children's laughter drifted through the trees.

Soft.

Wrong.

My body reacted before my mind.

I stepped back.

Then a handprint appeared.

Long fingers.

One finger dragged down—
stopped halfway.

Henna whispered, barely audible,

"Unfinished means it waits."

She took a breath and pulled out her phone.

"Okay," she murmured. "Think."

The past had followed me for years.

Now it had found her too.

Henna tightened her grip on my wrist.

"Iron," she reminded me.

I pulled out my iron keychain and held it tight.

Vinay touched the ground—

and recoiled as it bit him.

"These were laid carefully," he said. "Not in panic."

Ravi spat. "So, they planned this."

Sumit stared, shaking.

"Who plans this?" he whispered. "Who does this to their own...?"

Vinay looked up at the house.

"They knew what they were feeding," he said.

"And instead of ending it..."

He looked at me.

"They woke what answered."

A laugh came from the window.

I turned.

There—the boy stood laughing.

Teeth red.

Eyes burning.

And beneath the laughter, a voice—soft, pleased—

"Nanu..."

My breath vanished.

Vinay whispered, shaking: "The vessel knows your name."

For once, no one spoke.

Only the house did.

Road of Echoes

The road swallowed our footsteps.

Behind us, smoke still leaked from broken windows—thin, grey—though nothing inside burned anymore. The smell clung to us: burnt metal, damp soil... and blood that hadn't dried properly.

Something unfinished.

None of us looked back.

Ahead, the road narrowed into a dark tunnel of trees. No insects. No dogs. Even the wind felt like it didn't want to enter this stretch.

We walked without speaking.

Not because we had nothing to say.

Because words felt unsafe here.

Then Vinay stopped suddenly.

"No," he said. "This isn't random."

He crouched and brushed the mud away with his fingertips.

On the ground, right beside the path—faint marks, half-washed by rain.

Three overlapping circles.

Henna's breath caught. "These were behind Kapil's house too."

Ravi frowned, trying to act normal. "So what? Some creepy village logo?"

Vinay didn't look up.

"In old tantra," he said, calm and flat, "circles are not protection."

He pointed at the marks without touching them.

“They are permission.”

My stomach tightened.

“These circles are drawn when someone wants a return,” Vinay continued. “Not blessings. Not mercy.”

Sumit crossed his arms, his voice thin. “Return of what?”

Vinay rose slowly, like his knees didn’t want to leave the ground.

“Something taken too early.”

Henna took one step closer to me. Not clinging—alert.

Then she spoke—short, sharp, practical.

“No one steps on it.”

Ravi scoffed. “Haan haan, madam.”

But he obeyed.

Vinay unfolded Kapil’s note again under the lantern light.

“These mantras are stitched wrong,” he said. “Temple verses cut up. Reused. Like stolen cloth.”

Henna swallowed. “To curse?”

“To command,” Vinay replied. “If you’re desperate enough.”

A memory hit me—

Nanu’s empty eyes.

The humming.

“They were trying to bring Kapil back,” I said, voice rough.

Vinay shook his head once.

“No.”

He looked at me properly now—steady, heavy.

The second circle was drawn over the first.

Harder.

Deeper.

The air felt colder.

Ravi forced a laugh, but it sounded fake. “So basically... sasta duplicate?”

Vinay didn’t smile.

“In some villages,” he said, “they believe in a Dusra Rakshak—a second guardian.”

He pointed ahead, toward the banyan fields.

“It sleeps beneath roots. Cremation soil. Places soaked in grief.”

Ravi muttered, “Why does it always live under trees, yaar?”

“Because roots remember,” Vinay said instantly.

Sumit’s voice cracked. “And what does it want?”

Vinay didn’t answer fast.

His jaw tightened like the word tasted bitter.

“Children,” he said.

Henna’s hand flew to her mouth.

Ravi’s face changed. No joke now.

“Kids?” Ravi whispered. “Why kids?”

“Because children aren’t weighed down yet,” Vinay said.

“They’re... empty cups.”

My throat went dry.

“And once it tastes one,” Vinay added softly, “it learns how to walk through them.”

My chest burned.

“That’s why Nanu...” I whispered.

For a second, even Ravi didn’t speak.

Then Vinay said, slow and firm:

“No.”

We turned to him.

"If it were that simple," he said, "Kapil's boy wouldn't be the way he is now."

Sumit swallowed hard. His eyes shone.

"Then what happened to them?" he asked. "What happened to the ritual?"

Vinay looked past us, toward the ruins.

"Something interrupted the passage," he said.

Ravi shifted. "Interrupted how?"

"They were meant to be doors," Vinay replied.

"But doors rot."

He didn't look at any of us when he added:

"And when a door cracks..."

Vinay dragged his nail across the wooden frame.

The wood split slightly.

Something inside the crack breathed out.

Henna's voice trembled—fear showing—but she didn't step back.

"So, they're not vessels anymore?"

Vinay shook his head.

"No."

"They're warnings."

A chill crawled up my spine.

"Then why, Nanu?" I asked.

Vinay finally met my eyes.

"That's what we have to understand," he said. "Not just the curse."

He pointed down the road—toward the haveli, the banyan, the ruins everyone avoided.

"But the mistake that created it."

Ravi snapped. "Where? Just tell na."

Vinay exhaled.

"In this village," he said. "In those ruins. In that haveli."

He paused, and his voice dropped.

"And what happened to Nanu... before it chose him?"

The words sat between us like wet ash.

Sumit whispered, broken. "That's why it took him."

Vinay nodded once.

Ravi dragged a hand through his hair, anger returning like a shield.

"Then why did it break?" he demanded. "Why didn't the ritual finish?"

Vinay closed his eyes for a second, like he didn't want to see the answer.

"Because the last offering was never given," he said.

Henna stiffened. "They stopped?"

Vinay's voice stayed controlled.

"Either fear took over," he said, "or someone intervened."

Then, colder—

"But it was abandoned halfway."

A low rumble rolled through the distance.

Not thunder.

Something deeper.

The road vibrated under our feet for a heartbeat.

Vinay looked at each of us, one by one.

"A thing that's called," he said slowly, "but not claimed..."

His eyes didn't blink.

“...doesn’t go back.”

“It stays awake.”

The lantern trembled in my hand.

Then the wind shifted.

Something moved on the road ahead.

Not an animal.

Not shadow.

Human.

I wiped my face with a shaking hand and looked up.

Two figures walked toward us—slow, tired, drained.

A man in a torn kurta, shoulders bent from years.

A woman in a dull shawl, hair loose, eyes swollen from crying.

The lantern light touched their faces, and my heart dropped.

“Nanu’s parents...” I whispered.

They stopped in front of us.

Nanu’s father’s eyes darted between us and the ruins—sharp, suspicious.

Nanu’s mother looked only at me.

And before I could say anything, she rushed forward and gripped my arm.

“Naman beta,” she whispered, voice breaking. “Where is he? Where is Nanu?”

My body went stiff.

My throat locked.

Nanu’s father stepped in, voice hard.

“Villagers said you went inside. They saw lights. They heard screams.”

He leaned closer.

“Tell us—where is our son?”

Nanu’s mother dropped suddenly.

Not slowly.

Like her knees gave up.

She grabbed my legs the way drowning people grab anything.

“Please, beta...” she sobbed. “You’re all he ever loved...”

Her tears soaked my jeans.

Nanu’s father’s voice cracked through, rough and furious.

“Bring him back,” he said. “Bring my son back. The one who was here before.”

I wanted to promise.

I wanted to lie.

But the picture of Nanu—

the body—

the ribs—

the meat-hook horror—

stole every word.

“I don’t even know if I can save him,” I whispered.

Saying it felt like tearing my own chest open.

Nanu’s father straightened, jaw locked.

“If he’s alive in there,” he said coldly, “then go get him. Standing here crying won’t help.”

Ravi snapped, anger sharp with fear under it.

“We didn’t run out for fun, uncle.”

He jerked his chin toward the ruins.

“That place threw us out. Like it was saving us for later.”

Nanu's father stepped forward again—

But Vinay moved first.

He didn't raise his voice.

"If we rush back blindly," Vinay said, "we won't save your son."

His eyes were steady.

"We'll only feed what's already awake."

Nanu's mother's crying filled the road behind him—wet, helpless, and unstoppable.

Henna wiped her face hard.

Then she spoke—quick, practical.

"Aunty... listen. We will try. But you stay behind."

She held the woman's shoulder gently, but firmly.

"No more running into that place. Not alone."

Nanu's mother nodded like she couldn't even breathe.

We turned away.

And every step felt heavier than the last.

I understood then—whatever had taken Nanu wasn't waiting for strength.

It was waiting for memory.

And memory always comes back.

The ruins stood behind us like a mouth that had spat us out.

Ravi kept looking over his shoulder like the darkness might sprint after us.

Sumit walked with his head down, whispering prayers he didn't believe in anymore.

Vinay stayed close, eyes scanning—counting dangers we couldn't see.

Henna walked beside me, knuckles white, face steady.

Then—without warning—the air turned thick.
The wind shifted.
It carried damp soil...
and smoke.
Not from the village.
Not from any fire we knew.
Something older.
Something buried.
We stopped.
All at once.
Because footsteps were coming from the dark—
slow...
dragging...
deliberate.
Henna's voice came like a command.
"No one moves."
Ravi whispered, forcing irritation into fear. "Bas... ab kya hai
yaar..."
Sumit's voice broke. "Please... please not again..."
Vinay lifted his hand. Calm. Firm.
"Stay close," he said. "Do not run."
The footsteps stopped.
Right in front of us.
Close enough that I could feel it—like someone standing inside
my breathing space.
The fog shifted.
And then—a voice came out of it.

Small.

Soft.

A boy's voice.

So familiar, my heart almost jumped out of my chest.

"Naman bhaiya...?"

For one second, the world cracked open.

My eyes burned.

Saliva refused to go down.

Henna gripped my wrist like a warning.

"Don't," she whispered. "Don't answer."

The voice came again.

Still sweet.

Still innocent.

Still wrong.

"I'm tired... can we go home?"

Ravi swallowed hard. "Yaar... that's—"

Vinay cut him off instantly.

"No."

One word. Sharp like iron. "Whatever that is... it is not him."

Then Vinay added, voice dropping even lower—rule, not advice:

"If it calls you in your childhood voice... never reply."

"That's how it enters."

The fog moved forward. Not drifting. Walking.

Henna pulled me back half a step.

"Eyes down," she said. "No mirrors. No looking twice."

My chest shook. Because deep inside—somewhere stupid and human—a part of me still wanted to call back.

Still wanted to believe.

But the road didn't feel like a road anymore. It felt like a throat.

And something inside it had finally learned how to speak my name.

Old Woman's Warning

The wind changed suddenly.

It brought the smell of damp soil... and smoke.

Not kitchen smoke.

Old smoke—like something burned and buried long ago.

We stopped.

From the darkness ahead, a bent figure came toward us—slow, dragging—like the night had grown bones.

Her shawl scraped the road. Dust lifted.

Her skin was thin like dried paper.

Hair white and tangled, shining in the lantern light.

Her bare feet made a dry sound—

shhkh... shhkh...

like bone on stone.

She stopped a few steps away, head lowered.

The road felt heavier around her. As if the air had become thick.

Ravi spoke first, trying to sound normal.

“Aunty... you followed us?”

The woman lifted her face.

Her eyes were black.

Not dark—black.

As if no light could enter them.

Then she smiled.

Toothless. Wide. Too wide.

When she spoke, her voice scratched like stone.

“I told you,” she said. “The haveli calls.”

A pause.

"And now... it has tasted you."

Henna moved closer to me. Her hand tightened around my sleeve.

Sumit's cigarette shook in his fingers.

Vinay's body went alert—ready.

Nanu's mother pulled her shawl tighter like cloth could protect her.

Nanu's father forced anger into his voice.

"Why are you here, old woman?"

She didn't even look at him.

Her gaze fixed on me—as if only I mattered.

"Because you carry the thread," she whispered. "Blood to blood."

My stomach turned.

"What thread?" I asked.

She stepped closer.

Her shadow stretched on the ground—longer than her body. Wrong—not matching her shape.

"Your brother is not sick," she said. "He is becoming a cage."

Henna's lips parted.

Sumit went pale.

Vinay spoke carefully. "You mean... Nanu?"

The old woman nodded.

"Yes."

Then she said his name again—slow, deliberate.

"Nanu."

The name dropped into the road like a stone into a well.

I forced my voice steady. "Then tell me how to save him."

The woman leaned close.

Her breath smelled sour and burnt—like ash trapped in a closed room.

“You cannot,” she whispered.

Not cruel.

Like she was reading a rule that could not change.

Heat rushed into my throat.

“Then why did you come?” I snapped. “To scare us?”

The old woman chuckled.

The sound didn’t match her weak body.

It felt like it rose from under the soil.

“To warn you,” she said. “This Devta does not hunt like an animal.”

She lifted one bony finger.

“It roots itself.”

She pointed behind us, toward the ruins, toward the haveli.

“The haveli isn’t cursed because the Devta lives there,” she said.

“The Devta lives there because the haveli was already sick.”

“Built to hide what no one wanted named.”

No one spoke.

Even the trees felt silent.

Then Henna’s voice cut in—short, practical.

“Tell us the rules.”

The old woman’s eyes shifted to her.

Henna didn’t blink. Not even once.

Vinay nodded slightly. “Rules keep people alive.”

The old woman smiled again.

"Fine," she whispered.

And she counted them like old punishments:

"Do not answer a voice in a child's tone. It is bait."

"Do not look twice in a glass or water. Mirrors learn faces."

"Iron breaks touch. Salt breaks entry. Keep both close."

"And if you see the three circles..." her mouth twitched, "...do not complete them. An unfinished circle is mercy."

A cold wave ran up my arms.

Ravi muttered, "Great. Full horror package."

Sumit whispered, "Yeh sab... sach hai?"

Vinay didn't look away from the woman. "Go on."

The old woman's eyes slid to Nanu's parents.

"And you..." she said softly. "You are tied to it too."

Nanu's father stepped forward, anger bursting through fear.

"Enough!" he shouted. "My son needs strength, not these stupid stories. Priests, devtas—nonsense!"

Vinay's voice stayed calm but hard.

"Uncle... listen. This is not normal."

Ravi muttered bitterly, "Strength didn't stop Rajiv uncle."

Nanu's father glared—

But the old woman turned sharply.

Her neck made a small cracking sound.

Her black eyes locked onto him.

And her voice became sharp—like fire touching metal.

"You think strength will save you?" she hissed.

A pause.

"Did your fists save him before?"

The road turned cold.

Henna slowly turned her head toward Nanu's father.
Sumit's mouth opened... then shut.
Even Ravi froze.

Because it didn't sound like a guess.

It sounded like the truth.

Nanu's father's confidence cracked.

His mouth opened—then nothing came.

The old woman stepped closer and jabbed her finger into his chest.

"You beat him until he became hollow," she spat.
"And that hollow..."

Her voice lowered.

"...is what the Devta filled."

Nanu's mother broke.

"No... please..."

But the old woman's voice rose, unnatural—like the haveli had borrowed her throat.

"The sins of blood open the door," she said.
"And blood will pay for blood."

The lantern shook in Ravi's hand.
Henna grabbed my arm tighter.
My fists trembled.

Deep inside, I knew—she was not lying.

I forced the question out.

"Then what does it want?"

The old woman's gaze slid to Henna.

Her smile returned—thin and horrible.

"That girl," she whispered, "is the sacrifice."

Henna's blood drained.

But she didn't step back.

She only said, calm and clear:

"Not happening."

The old woman looked back at me.

"And your friend," she said softly, "is the vessel."

Sumit's voice cracked. "So it needs both...?"

Vinay's jaw tightened. "Then how do we stop it?"

The old woman stepped back as humans tired her.

"Break the binding," she said. "Burn the ritual."

"But you cannot do it alone."

She pointed toward the hills.

"You need the priest," she whispered.

"The one who remembers the first burial."

"He lives where the river bends east... where the water tastes like iron."

I swallowed. "Tell us exactly where."

For a second, she blinked slowly.

And her eyes looked almost human.

"Follow the river," she whispered.

"Until even the moon looks red inside it."

Then her face tightened.

"But beware," she added. "He does not welcome seekers."

Ravi muttered, "Why?"

Her lips curved.

"Because remembering is a curse," she said.

"And those who remember the Devta..."

She tilted her head.

“...are marked.”

Then she stepped back into the dark.

And suddenly—

She started to laugh.

Low at first.

Then louder.

Then wrong.

Her body jerked hard—like invisible strings were pulling her limbs.

Henna cried out.

Sumit stumbled back.

Vinay grabbed Henna and yanked her behind him.

“Behind me. Don’t move.”

The old woman’s head twisted.

Crack.

Crack.

Her jaw opened wider than it should.

And her laughter turned into screams—

Not one voice.

Many voices.

Like a crowd crying through one mouth.

Then her body snapped backward.

Like unseen hands crushed her spine.

She hit the road with a dull sound.

Her legs bent wrong.

Bone shifted under skin.

A wet sound followed.

Black blood poured from her mouth, thick and shining.

We froze.

The woman gasped once—eyes rolling—throat bubbling.

She looked at me one last time.

And whispered so softly it felt like it entered my chest:

“Hurry...”

“Before it takes her.”

“I warned him once,” she breathed.

“He chose silence.”

Her head dropped.

Dead.

For a second—nothing.

Then the earth beneath her body trembled.

Crack...

crack...

The soil split open.

Small, pale hands crawled out.

Children's hands.

Too many.

Bone-white.

They grabbed her corpse.

Pulled.

Dragged.

Inch by inch—they took her under the earth.

Like the ground was eating her.

Henna covered her mouth.

Nanu's mother collapsed, crying.

Nanu's father fell to his knees—face blank.
Ravi stood frozen like a stone.
Sumit couldn't breathe.
Only Vinay kept his eyes open.
Watching like a man forced to see hell.
Within seconds, the old woman was gone.
Only her shawl remained.
Fluttering on the dirt like a dead flag.
Far away, the haveli groaned softly.
Not like a house. Like something laughing.
I stared at the empty ground. My fists shook.
“I won't lose Nanu,” I whispered.
Henna grabbed my wrist—hard. “Then we move,” she said.
“Now.”
I lifted my eyes toward the hills. “If I have to burn everything...”
My voice hardened. “...I will.”
The wind died. The night went still again. But somewhere in the trees—something breathed.
And waited.

Nanu's Diary

The old woman's shawl still lay on the road.

It moved in the wind like a dead flag.

None of us spoke.

The soil had swallowed her body—as if she was never human. As if she was only a message.

Henna kept staring at the ground, trying to breathe normally. Ravi's face was pale, his mouth half open, like he might throw up any second. Sumit's hands wouldn't stop shaking. Even Vinay—always calm, always in control—stood stiff, eyes fixed ahead as if he could still see those white hands pulling the body down.

Nanu's mother cried softly into her shawl.

Nanu's father stood frozen.

The old woman's words lingered in the air like smoke:
Did your fists save him before?

No one looked at him the same way after that.

Not angry.

Not accusing.

Just... disturbed.

Then, from the direction of the haveli—

A scream cut through the night.

Human.

Short.

Ended too early.

That was enough.

We ran.

The smell reached us first.

Burnt oil. Damp earth. Old blood.

A smell that clung to the skin. As if the village had been rotting for years, and tonight it had finally opened.

A weak lantern trembled on the verandah, its flame bending sideways in still air—as if it didn't want to face what was inside.

Two bodies lay near the far wall, covered in thin white sheets.

The cloth had already darkened where it mattered.

I stopped near the central pillar and pressed my palm to the cold stone.

Solid. Real.

My only proof that I wasn't dreaming.

Henna came close without asking.

"Naman," she said. Calm. Sharp. "Don't go blank. Stay here."

Ravi stood near the steps, fists clenched. His knuckles were split. Blood had dried inside the cracks like dirt.

Sumit sat against the wall, his head bowed. His lips moved silently—not prayer, just habit. Like if he stopped, he would fall apart.

Vinay stood a little away.

Not distant—watching.

His eyes moved fast—bodies, lantern, door, shadows, air—as if he was reading a map none of us could see.

The front gate creaked.

All of us flinched.

Ravi spoke first. His voice was rough.

"They're gone," he said. "Priest... Rajiv... Lucky... Kapil's parents... the old woman..."

He swallowed hard.

"Everyone."

I forced the words out.

"It wasn't Nanu anymore."

Sumit looked up slowly. His eyes were hollow.

"But how?" he whispered. "We stayed... we prayed... we didn't leave him alone..."

Ravi snapped.

"You saw his eyes!" he shouted. "You saw what was looking out. That wasn't human!"

His anger collapsed halfway into fear.

Vinay exhaled slowly.

"It waits for a wound," Vinay said quietly.

Henna nodded once, tight.

"Like Nanu," she said. "He wasn't safe even before this."

Nanu's mother cried harder.

Nanu's father didn't speak.

Vinay's eyes narrowed.

He turned to me.

"Naman. Think clearly. What was the first wrong thing?"

The question hit me like a slap.

Not memory.

Recognition.

Images flashed—

The humming.

Red eyes.

Nanu is standing too still.

His smile was delayed, like a puppet.

I swallowed.

"There was something else," I said slowly. "Back then. Something... not permitted."

"Permitted by whom?" Ravi asked.

"By the place," I whispered.

Henna didn't let me hide.

"Say it," she said.

"The old house," I admitted. "Something had been left there."

Vinay's expression didn't change.

As if he already knew.

"A diary," I said. "Not hidden. Not locked. Just placed... like it was waiting."

Henna's breath caught.

"His name on it," she said.

I nodded. "Carved, not written."

The lantern flared for a second, then dipped again.

Vinay's face tightened.

Sumit went pale. "You think the curse planted it?"

Vinay shook his head.

"No."

He looked straight at the bodies.

"I think Nanu did."

Henna stepped forward. Her voice didn't shake.

"Then that's where we begin," she said. "If he left anything behind, it matters."

Vinay met her eyes.

"Opening it can make things worse."

Henna didn't blink.

"So will doing nothing."

A beat.

Then Vinay nodded.

"Tonight," he said.

Ravi let out a hard breath. "Good. Because I'm tired of guessing."

I looked down at my hands.

They were shaking.

"Whatever took him," I said quietly, "already knows we're coming."

Henna squeezed my wrist once—firm.

"Then let it watch," she said.

"Enough."

Mama's voice cut across the courtyard.

We hadn't heard him enter.

He stood near the broken pillar, face hard, eyes sharper than before. Not panicked. Not grieving. Controlled.

"I told all of you," he said slowly, "no more interference. No returning to that house. No digging."

Ravi snapped back, "Digging? They're dead."

"And they are dead," Mama replied coldly, "because you believed you could outrun what was already here."

The words landed heavily.

Henna stepped forward. "We didn't start this."

Mama looked at her for a long moment.

"No," he said. "But you insisted on finishing it."

Silence.

Vinay spoke carefully. "There was a diary."

That made Mama's gaze sharpen —but only slightly.

"What diary?" he asked.

"Nanu's name carved on it," I said. "Left in the old house."

Mama exhaled once through his nose.

"Then you will not touch it."

Ravi frowned. "Why?"

"Because," Mama said, voice tightening, "some things are placed to be found."

That sentence hung in the air.

Henna didn't back down. "So we ignore it?"

"You leave it," Mama corrected. "You close doors. You do not open new ones."

"And if that's the only way?" Vinay asked.

Mama's jaw flexed.

"You are not ready for that way."

A beat.

Then he added, quieter:

"I have seen what happens when curiosity thinks it is courage."

No one answered.

Mama looked at each of us —measuring.

"Do not mistake warning for weakness," he said.

Then he turned and walked away into the dark.

He did not look back.

Vinay's hand came to my shoulder.

Not comfort.

Recognition.

"Lead," he said.

Not as a request.

As if the ritual had already decided my role.

For a second, I didn't move. The road ahead looked darker than it should. The trees leaned inward like they were listening.

Then something began.

A hum.

Soft. Familiar.

Two broken notes looping again and again.

My knees weakened.

"That's Nanu's tune," I whispered. "He used to hum it when Mama—"

My voice died.

Henna's eyes snapped to me.

"It's calling you," she said.

Vinay shook his head slowly.

"No," he corrected.

"It's reminding him."

Ahead of us, the dirt shifted.

Footprints appeared.

Small. Bare. Fresh.

One by one, pressed into the soil as if an invisible child was walking just beyond our sight.

Ravi swallowed.

"Please tell me we're not following that."

Behind us, the road blurred.

Then thinned.

Then became fog.

Only one path remained.

At the end—

Old iron gate.

Rust-eaten.

Bent inward like something had been dragged through it long ago.

Vinay's voice dropped.

"In tantra, when the path closes behind you..."

Henna finished the rule, fast.

"It means the ritual has chosen its witness."

My chest tightened.

I didn't feel afraid.

I felt... named.

The humming stopped.

The gate groaned open.

And something beneath the earth shifted—

Not waking.

Recognising.

The gate resisted before giving in.

Metal grinding. Chain dragging. A sound like teeth on bone.

Beyond it stood the old house.

Low. Rotting. Half-sunk into soil—like the ground wanted to eat it.

The roof sagged. Windows dead.

We crossed the threshold.

The air thickened instantly.

Sour incense. Damp wood. Rust.

Henna stepped closer.

"It feels like it's breathing," she murmured.

Ravi snapped his torch on.

"If this place starts talking," he muttered, "I'm setting it on fire."

Vinay stayed near the door.

He pulled the salt pouch out.

"Rule," he said. "Salt at threshold. Iron in pocket."

He handed Ravi iron keys. Ravi took them without sarcasm for once.

Sumit moved ahead, voice tight.

"No splitting. No wandering. Touch nothing unless needed."

We nodded.

Then a cracked mirror caught our torchlight.

Our reflections came back wrong.

Faces stretched. Eyes too wide.

And my reflection smiled.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Though my own mouth stayed still.

Henna moved first.

"Don't look," she snapped.

Ravi didn't wait.

He kicked the mirror.

Glass shattered.

The sound didn't echo normally.

It sank into the house.

Like the walls drank it.

A narrow room opened beside the mirror.

The walls were covered in children's drawings.

Stick figures. Dark shapes. Hollow eyes. Branch-like arms.

Many drawings were scratched out so hard that the wall beneath was cut.

Henna's voice lowered.

"Kids draw what they see," she said. "Not what they imagine."

My stomach twisted.

Upstairs—an attic door.

It resisted when I pushed.

Then it groaned open like a throat.

Cold air spilled out.

It smelled of damp paper and metal.

Blood-close.

We climbed.

Lantern light crawled across broken toys, overturned frames, and rotting boxes tied with frayed rope.

Everything here was abandoned on purpose.

Ravi whispered, "Why do cursed places smell the same?"

"Not now," Henna warned.

Something inside me pulled.

Not courage.

No choice.

Memory.

I crossed the attic and knelt beside a wooden trunk shoved in the far corner.

I lifted the lid.

Dust burst upward.

Inside—leather.

Black.

Heavy.

My breath caught.

I lifted the diary.

It weighed too much for paper.

The cover looked bruised along the edges, like skin.

And on the front—

Nanu.

Carved deep.

Ravi leaned closer.

“Naman... that thing looks alive.”

“It remembers,” I said.

Henna's hand grabbed my wrist.

“Open it carefully,” she said. “If it feels wrong, we stop.”

Vinay's voice cut in.

“If it changes, close it.”

I nodded once.

Then I opened the diary.

Dust rose—but the ink didn't fade.

It moved.

Letters shifted beneath the surface, like insects under skin.

Sumit stumbled back.

"That's impossible..."

The lantern bent sideways.

No wind.

Then somewhere below—like a clock—ticking stopped. The whole house froze. A voice slid into my ear.

Dry. Close.

Certain.

"You shouldn't have opened it."

Henna grabbed my shoulder hard.

"Naman. Don't drift."

I looked at her. "You don't have to stay."

Her grip tightened.

"I'm not here because of you," she said steadily.

"I'm here because I see it too."

A beat.

"And I'm not leaving."

I blinked. My light fell on the first page. The first word began to glow.

Not bright. Just enough. Like an eye-opener.

And in that thin red light—the diary began to write itself.

The ink bled into shape slowly.

He comes at night when everyone sleeps.

He stands in the courtyard and redraws the circle with his heel.

He thinks no one sees.

But I see.

A pause.

Then one final line carved deeper than the rest:

He said silence is stronger than truth.

He Just Kept Hitting

He Just Kept Hitting.

I must have been nine. Maybe ten.

Old enough to know how to hold a cricket bat properly.

Old enough to know I should have been studying.

But far too young to understand why some men take their rage out on things that breathe.

That evening, I was in the living room, pretending the armchair was the wicket. The ball was missing, so I rolled up an old sock and tossed it against the wall, swinging hard, lost in the joy of the game.

Then the door banged open, and the house settled.

And everything changed.

Papa stood there, still in his uniform. Eyes bloodshot, jaw clenched, breathing hard as if he'd just run miles.

I froze.

In his silence, I saw it—the moment he noticed I wasn't at my books, that I was playing.

He didn't shout.

He walked across the room, slow, deliberate, like each step was a decision.

He picked up my bat.

My favourite bat.

The one with the red sticker peeling at the edge.

And then he swung it. The first blow knocked the air out of me. The second left me stunned.

After that, time broke apart.

My arms flew up to shield myself, but he kept swinging—at my shoulders, legs, ribs, my back. The bat wasn't a toy anymore. It was punishment. It was justice. It was something else entirely.

I screamed.

Cried.

Begged.

The sock ball rolled to the corner, forgotten.

Across the room, Mom stood still.

Her hands trembled. But her feet never moved. Her eyes locked onto mine—not with fear. Not with defiance.

But with something worse—

Permission.

The sound of footsteps broke through the pounding in my ears. Rajiv Uncle's voice came from the doorway—sharp, urgent, and aimed at my father.

"What are you doing? You'll kill him! Let me handle this."

I was curled in the corner, sobbing so hard it hurt to breathe. My tears burned against the raw skin of my face.

"What happened here? Who hits a child like this?" Uncle's voice trembled, caught between anger and disbelief as he looked at my father.

"He just keeps playing," my father snapped, "and refuses to focus on his studies."

"I'll talk to him. Calm down," Uncle said, softer now, almost pleading.

But my father's expression didn't change. His words cut like ice. "Before I leave this room—if he doesn't want to study, let him rot like this. Don't touch him."

And then he walked out.

The silence that followed was heavier than the shouting. It pressed against my ears until I could hear nothing but the erratic thud of my own heart.

Minutes passed. Or maybe it was longer.

Uncle crouched down in front of me. “Forget your father. Come to my place tonight. You’ll be safe there.”

He reached out, his hand hovering over my shoulder.

I flinched before I could stop myself. The skin there screamed in pain when I moved.

“Oh... I’m sorry,” he murmured. His hand shifted, resting gently on my hair as his fingers brushed through it with care.

“Will you come?”

I wanted to answer, but my throat felt locked. My voice was somewhere deep inside, unreachable. I just kept crying, my face buried in my knees, the taste of salt thick in my mouth.

It wasn’t only the pain from his blows—it was something heavier, something that had taken root inside my chest.

I didn’t know why, but somewhere in the haze of it all, a thought surfaced, bitter and quiet:

Maybe I deserved this.

He sat me on his bike for the ride back to his house. “Sit in front,” he said, lifting me onto the narrow space between the handlebars. My hands gripped the cold metal while he steered from behind, his knees brushing against me with every turn.

We passed the small shop near his street, and my eyes lit up. In the window were my favourite comic books—*Champak*, *Super Commando Dhruva*, *Tenali Raman*, *Nagraj*, and *Sabu*.

He bought them all for me.

He was gentle.

That should have been my first warning.

When we reached his house, it was empty. The stillness inside felt strange.

I wanted to go home. But I didn't know what my father's mood would be, and I didn't want to face him. So, I stayed.

I sat cross-legged on the floor, flipping through the bright pages of my comics. The paper smelled of fresh ink. For a little while, it almost felt safe.

"You like it?" he asked from the bed.

"Yes... very much. I love this," I said, smiling faintly without looking up.

"Nanu," he said, "come sit here."

I hesitated.

But I'd always listened to him. He'd always been nice.

And I didn't know any better.

He patted the bed beside him. I climbed up, keeping space between us.

"You've grown," he said softly. "So pretty."

The words didn't feel right. I didn't know why. No one had ever called me that before.

He reached out and brushed his fingers against my cheek. "I like your lips," he whispered. "Just like your mother's."

A cold wave passed through me. My legs twitched with the urge to run.

But before I could move, his hand gripped my arm—too hard. "Where are you going? Back to your father? Did you see what he just did to you? And still...?"

"I... I want to go home," I whimpered, tears rising.

The sound of the slap cracked through the empty room. My vision blurred.

He pulled me closer.

I remember his weight.

I remember the smell of sweat and fabric.

I remember going very still—because stillness felt safer than fighting.

After that, my body stopped feeling like mine.

I remember going very still, like a statue. Like if I didn't move, it would all stop. Like maybe I could disappear.

He pulled me into his lap. My hands were stuck between us, and my book dropped to the floor.

"You're special," he said, holding me tighter. "Don't be scared. "This is our secret," he said.

And just like that, it became mine to carry. The room tilted. I could see my comic book lying on the floor—pages open, characters frozen mid-laugh—while I was trapped in a moment that felt like it would never end.

I wanted to scream. But my throat didn't work.

I wanted to push him. But my arms felt numb.

When it was over, he stood and straightened his clothes as if nothing had happened.

But something had happened.

Something I couldn't wash off.

Something that settled inside me.

Quiet.

Permanent.

My hands shook as I closed the diary and pressed it tight against my chest. My breath came fast and uneven, like I was drowning without water.

"Why didn't you tell anyone, Nanu?" I whispered into the still attic. "How did you carry this alone?"

The words fell flat, disappearing into the dust and silence. Then a sob ripped out of me—raw and jagged, pulled from somewhere deep inside. I bent forward, shoulders shaking, my tears turning the whole attic into shifting shadows.

Henna moved closer. She didn't say anything at first. She didn't need to. She knelt beside me on the dusty floor and gently touched my arm.

"Naman," she whispered, her voice soft but steady, "Don't let what they did to him disappear again. You can't change what happened. But you don't have to carry it alone."

I turned toward her, my eyes burning, vision blurred. "He was a child, Henna. A child. And they... they destroyed him." My voice cracked again. I covered my face with my hands, but she pulled them away and held them tightly in hers.

"Then let me share this with you," she said, her eyes shining but firm. "If he couldn't speak, you can. At least to me. Don't lock everything inside."

Something in her eyes—warmth mixed with courage—cut through the storm raging inside me. I felt myself give in. I leaned against her, resting my head on her shoulder. My whole body trembled.

She wrapped her arms around me, strong and steady. Her hand moved through my hair in slow, gentle strokes. No words. Just her breath. Her warmth. Her presence held me together while I was falling apart.

My forehead touched her shoulder.
I didn't lift it.
She didn't move.

After a long moment, she whispered near my ear, "Naman... we should go to him. To Nanu. He shouldn't be alone."

I lifted my head. My voice was low and unsteady, but clear enough.
"Yes..."

She brushed a tear from my cheek. "Then let's find him before the darkness does."

Behind us, the attic door creaked. I turned. Ravi and Sumit stood there, pale and silent. They hadn't said a single word since the

diary stopped... reading itself. But I could see everything in their faces.

Ravi swallowed hard. His voice shook.

"All this time... we thought he was cursed. Possessed. But—"He stopped, fighting for breath. "He was just a boy. And breaking him was easier than protecting him."

Sumit's hands trembled at his sides. "No wonder he changed," he whispered. "No wonder the shadows never left him. It wasn't a spirit that took him first... it was them."

His words hung heavy in the air.

I stood up slowly, still holding the diary against my chest. My voice felt hollow. "This is where it began. The night everything inside him shattered."

Henna looked toward the narrow attic window. The sky outside was pitch-black, but the clouds moved restlessly, swirling like smoke around the moon.

Ravi glanced at it and stepped back, fear crawling across his face. "He's not just remembering it now... he's reliving it."

Sumit's head snapped toward him. "What do you mean?"

"The diary," Ravi said, staring at the book in my hands. "When you opened it... you made him remember. Maybe that's what he was waiting for."

A soft thud echoed from somewhere below—deep inside the house.

All of us froze.

Henna whispered my name. "Naman..."

I didn't answer. My eyes were on the diary. There was a faint warmth under the cover—like the pages were breathing. Then a sound drifted up through the floorboards.

A child's laugh. Thin. Weak. Broken.

Ravi stumbled back. Tell me that wasn't—It's him, I whispered.

The wind outside howled, shaking the windows. The attic light flickered once... then went out. And in the darkness that swallowed everything, I heard it—the soft, slow rustle of pages turning on their own. The diary was not being remembered.

It was continuing.

He Was Not Praying

That was the night Mama came.

He stood at our door with folded hands. Quiet. Polite. Sad eyes that didn't ask for sympathy.

"Bas kuch din," he said. "Sirf thodi jagah."

Mami refused first.

Papa didn't listen.

"He's blood," Papa said. "He stays."

Mama stepped inside.

The house changed.

Not loudly.

Not all at once.

Just... carefully.

He looked at me once.

Not with pity.

Not with concern.

With recognition.

As if he already knew something I didn't.

He said nothing.

And that was worse.

The bar was noisy and ugly.

Too much shouting.

Too much alcohol.

No music worth listening to.

Banwari was already drunk.

He stood near the counter, a glass shaking in his hand.

"I'll bring my son back," he shouted.

People laughed.

Someone told him to sit down.

Mama frowned. "Who is this man?"

Rajeev leaned close. "Banwari. His only son died. A Fever. A few months ago."

Banwari slammed his glass onto the table.

"You all think I'm mad," he said. "But I know."

Mama shook his head. "He's drunk. Leave him."

Lucky didn't smile.

"He's not just drunk," Lucky said slowly. "He goes to that haveli."

Mama turned. "Which haveli?"

Lucky lowered his voice. "The old one."

Rajeev stiffened.

Lucky continued, "If my source is right... he's doing something there."

Mama laughed once. "Nonsense."

"He needs someone else," Lucky added. "For bali."

Mama stood up, angry. "Enough. You both are drunk."

Rajeev looked at Mama. "What if he's not lying?"

Mama snapped, "Why are you scared?"

Lucky said quietly, "He's offering two crore. To anyone who helps."

Mama froze.

For a moment, even the bar noise felt far away.

He stared at Lucky. Angry. Then thinking.

“Fine,” Mama said. “Let’s see with our own eyes.”

They followed him at a distance.

No talking.

The haveli stood in the dark like a dead animal.

Banwari didn’t stop.

He didn’t hesitate.

That scared Lucky more than anything.

Inside, the ceiling fan slowed, though no one had touched the switch.

Not cold.

Waiting.

Mama stopped at the door.

Rajeev stepped in.

Lucky followed.

What they saw inside stayed with them forever.

There was a shape near the fire.

Not fully human.

Not fully animal.

Its eyes reflected the flames.

Red.

Watching.

Banwari dropped to his knees.

He shouted again and again—crying, screaming.

“Give me my son back.”

“Give me my son back.”

He wasn't praying.
He was demanding.
Then Banwari turned.
He brought someone forward.
Small.
Too small.
Rajeev's breath stopped.
Lucky stepped back.
Banwari raised a blade.
There was a scream.
Then the fire roared.
Too loud. Too fast.
The smell came next.
Lucky shouted without thinking.
"What have you done?"
Banwari turned and looked at them.
He was smiling.
As if something had answered him.
Lucky ran.
Rajeev ran after him.
Mama stayed for one second longer.
Just long enough to understand—
This was not madness.
This was practice.

They didn't speak for a long time.

Finally, Mama said, "That man is insane."

Lucky nodded. "Yes."

Rajeev didn't answer.

Mama continued, colder now, "And he won't stop."

Lucky swallowed. "He'll come again."

Rajeev said quietly, "And next time... he'll need someone closer."

Mama turned sharply. "No."

Rajeev looked at him. "There are ways to control a child."

Mama's face changed. "Don't even think about it."

Lucky spoke carefully. "We already know one."

Mama exploded. "I said no."

He turned and walked away.

Angry.

Shaken.

Rajeev and Lucky stayed behind.

Rajeev looked at Lucky.

Lucky looked back.

Neither of them smiled.

Above them, the haveli stood silent.

And somewhere else, a boy was still peeling an orange on the steps of his house.

Not knowing what name had just been spoken.

Ink and Blood

Henna sat close beside me, her hand resting lightly on my arm. The attic had gone quiet again—only the tired creak of the old fan, the house settling into itself.

I hadn't spoken since the last page.

My eyes burned. My fingers kept tracing the edge of the diary, again and again, as if the paper might draw blood if I pressed hard enough.

"You don't have to," Henna whispered.

I shook my head. "I do."

My voice came out rough—scraped thin.

"If I stop now," I said, "I'll never open it again."

She didn't argue.

She slid her hand into mine—steady, warm.

"Then I'm here," she said. "Whatever's inside it... You won't face it alone."

I took a breath.

Then, I opened the diary.

That night, when Mama reached home, the house was already loud.

"You broke that glass again?"

Papa's voice—sharp, immediate.

"That crystal piece from your Nana's time—do you know what that costs?"

I didn't get the time to explain.

The first blow knocked the air out of me.

Then another.

Then another.

Pain erased everything—except the need for it to stop.

“Chal,” Papa growled. “Aaj tujhe kaala paani dikhaata hoon.”

He dragged me up the narrow stairs to the kothri.

That room wasn't a room.

It was punishment with walls.

The door slammed shut.

Darkness swallowed me.

Something brushed against my ankle.

Then another.

Then many more.

I learned quickly—screaming made them climb faster.

So, I went still.

Hours later, the door opened.

Papa didn't apologise.

Didn't look. He walked away.

As if I was nothing.

The house around me seemed to fade—the voices, the weeping. All that remained was the scratch of my eyes moving over the words... and the creeping dread that the pages might reveal more than I was ready to face.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog began to howl.

And in the shadowed corner of the room, something shifted—slowly, like it had been waiting for me to keep reading.

This morning...

I climbed to the rooftop before the world had woken.

Before the pigeons cooed their soft, dull songs.

Before Mama's radio crackled to life.

Before Papa's voice turned to thunder.

The sky above me was that same pale blue I used to love when I was little—when blue still meant something like peace.

But today... it looked like a lie.

Like something pretending that nothing was wrong.

I curled up in the farthest corner, where the bricks felt colder than skin.

Knees to chest. Chin pressed against my knees.

My bones felt sharper than they used to, as if they'd grown teeth inside me.

I remember being soft once.

I remember a time when I thought of myself as a child.

Now I feel like the leftover shadow of one.

I kept staring down.

The street below shimmered in the morning haze—blurry and too far.

I wondered how long it would take.

That was the most frightening part.

I don't think I was scared.

That's what frightens me most.

My hands had gone cold—not like winter. Not the kind of blanket fixes.

It was the kind of cold you feel when something inside you stops working.

Like blood forgetting how to move.

Like a heart that doesn't belong to you anymore, just a stone tossed into a well.

Then the door creaked.

Not ours. The next rooftop over.

I didn't turn.

"Arey, Nanu?" It was Lucky Bhaiya's voice—low, gentle, like someone who had already decided I wasn't going anywhere.

I wiped my eyes, even though I'd told myself not to cry.

Told him it was dust.

Said, "Haan... bas aise hi."

He didn't come near.

Didn't push.

He just leaned on the railing, eyes on the sky like nothing was wrong. Like I wasn't breaking.

"You don't look like you, yaar," he said.

I wanted to scream: Because I'm not.

I wanted to say: Something's festering inside me. And I don't know how to cut it out.

But all I did was shake my head.

He nodded—slow, as he knew.

"Okay. No pressure," he whispered.

Soft. Too soft.

But I couldn't feel it. Not even that.

I looked away.

Didn't want him to see me like this—folded in, brittle, poisoned with silence.

I didn't want anyone to see me.

I wanted to disappear.

Into the bricks.

Into the air.

Into anything that wasn't me.

"I want to leave," I said.

The words slithered out—cold, sick, and alive.

He blinked. Confused.

"Leave? But... this is your home. Your friends. Your school..."

I didn't answer.

I didn't tell him the word home tasted like rust and rot.

Didn't tell him the walls of my house knew too many secrets.

He tried to smile, to rescue me.

"Want to play something? Carrom? Everyone's downstairs—Anuj, Deepak..."

Play.

The word turned in my stomach.

I could feel it twisting.

He pointed over the edge.

"They're already playing," he said, as if it would help.

And yeah. It was all there—

Laughter.

The striker's clack.

Shouts of "foul!" and "my turn!"

But to me, it felt staged.

Like childhood was a puppet show, and I was the only one who saw the strings.

Like there was a glass wall between me and the world I used to belong to.

I nodded.

Went down with him.

Even smiled when someone passed the striker to me.

But something stayed behind on that rooftop.

Something quiet.

Something bleeding.

Something I'll never get back.

And even now, days later, I can still feel that cold stone in my chest.

Still hear the echo of a voice inside me that won't shut up:

Don't trust too easily again.

It's been three days since I sat on the rooftop and stared down at the world like it was something I could leave behind.

Since then, Lucky Bhaiya has smiled more.

He offered me his favourite comics—the ones with superheroes who never flinch.

He laughs louder now. Softer around me.

Sits beside me like he's guarding something.

Like he's was waiting.

I never told him what happened that night.

But maybe he knows.

Maybe he saw it in the way I jerk when someone touches my shoulder.

In the way my laughter comes out empty, like an echo in a hollow room.

Even hidden wounds leak.

Like blood soaking slowly through a white cloth.

No one notices until it stains.

Today, he found me sitting alone on the stairs.

“Come na,” he said, voice dipped in something sweet.

“Maggie banaya hai. Rasna bhi. Extra masala. Orange wala.”

I hesitated.

He tilted his head, all charm and mischief. “Everyone’s out. It’ll be quiet. No noise. We’ll just chill.”

Chill.

Like it was a game.

Like I was normal.

Like this was what friends did.

I nodded.

Because I didn’t know how to say no anymore.

His room smelled of detergent and damp paper.

Like sun-dried clothes and half-read comic books.

The ceiling fan above hummed gently, and the TV whispered cartoons no one was really watching.

He handed me a plate—Maggi, steaming, extra masala.

And a glass of orange Rasna in one of those heavy steel tumblers.

I sat cross-legged on his bed.

He sat down too.

A little too close.

“It’s good, right?” he asked, watching me.

I nodded, chewing slowly. But the taste vanished halfway.

The noodles turned to mush.

Then to ash.

He watched me for a while.

Then said, “You remind me of myself when I was your age. Quiet. Too quiet. Always thinking too much.”

He smiled.

Too long.

Too wide.

“I used to cry a lot too,” he said. “You know what helped?”

I looked at him.

“Touch,” he whispered.

His hand settled on me like a decision already made.

I remember freezing.

I remember not fighting.

I remember understanding—too late—that silence was what he wanted.

My stomach clenched. My muscles screamed.

But I didn’t move. Because this time, I had said yes to coming. Because this time, I had believed him.

The words were scribbled. Torn. Some letters were overwritten, as if the pen itself had been forced too hard into the page.

The diary slipped from my hands before I even realised it. It hit the floor with a sound that felt final, as if the house had been waiting for it to fall. For a moment, I just stared at it, unable to breathe.

My breath came in short bursts—sharp and uneven. My chest felt tight, like no amount of air was enough. I grabbed at my shirt, fingers digging in as if I could pull out the pain before it swallowed me whole.

Henna stayed right beside me. She didn’t pull away. She didn’t panic. Her arms came around my shaking body, holding me steady, her breath warm and calm against my hair. She didn’t lie and say it would be okay—because it wouldn’t. She just held me until the storm inside me slowly began to settle.

Across the attic, Ravi and Sumit stood frozen under the flickering bulb, pale and quiet. Neither of them spoke. The air thinned, too heavy to break with anything as small as words.

Finally, Ravi swallowed hard. When he spoke, his voice trembled. "Naman... what I just read... it's—" He shook his head, the sentence dying where it began.

I couldn't answer. My eyes stayed fixed on the fallen diary, my thoughts stuck inside every line I had just read. The truth felt too big to speak.

Sumit stepped forward, his face tight with shock. "That wasn't a story... was it?" He looked at Henna for a second, then back at me. He read what no one stopped.

My lips parted, but no sound came out. Only a dry breath. Then, slowly, I nodded. A small nod. A broken one.

Henna wiped the side of my face gently with her sleeve. "He carried this alone his whole life," she murmured. Her voice trembled, but it didn't break. "Every line... every word... was him screaming for someone to hear him."

Ravi dragged a hand through his hair. His eyes were shining. "No one did," he whispered. "Not even his own family. They just watched him fall apart."

Sumit's hands clenched at his sides. "And we... we never knew." His voice shook with guilt. "We kept thinking this was about curses and spirits. But it started here—with this pain."

Henna nodded softly. "Sometimes the real haunting doesn't come from outside," she said. "It grows inside people. And when it's ignored for too long... it finds its own way back."

Silence wrapped around us again. The bulb buzzed faintly overhead, casting shadows that felt too old to belong to us.

I finally found my voice. It came out raw, scraped clean. "This... this is why he couldn't leave Khara Khara. Why does he stay trapped here? He wasn't fighting the curse. He was what the curse left behind.. The pain he buried... it never stopped bleeding."

Ravi stepped closer and placed a shaky hand on my shoulder. “Then we end it, bhai,” he said softly. “We won’t let his story die like this. Whatever this house is hiding... we face it together.”

Henna’s fingers tightened around mine. “Together,” she whispered.

Sumit let out a long breath. “We’ll read everything,” he said. “Every page. No more secrets. No more silence.”

For a moment, none of us moved. The attic felt like it was holding its breath with us—thick with dust, old air, and grief that wasn’t ours alone.

The diary lay between us—dark, stained, humming faintly as if the house itself was listening.

I reached out again, my hand shaking, and placed my palm on the cover.

My voice came out as a whisper.

“Alright. We finish what he couldn’t.”

And for the first time, the five of us leaned closer—not toward fear, but toward the truth that had already been waiting for us.

Boy in the Dark

The rain tapped softly against the attic window.
The room smelled of damp wood and old dust.

Henna sat cross-legged on the floor, watching me pace.

I couldn't stay still.

My eyes kept going back to the diary. Every time my hand drifted toward it, I pulled away—as if the leather might burn.

"This..." I whispered. "This isn't just memories. Something is inside these pages. Something that doesn't want to stay quiet."

Henna shifted closer. "Maybe that's why he wrote it," she said. "Because he couldn't say it out loud."

I shook my head. "But it's not finished."

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

We gathered closer around the diary again.

This time—no hesitation. No fear.

Slowly, I turned the next page.

I picked up the diary again, but my fingers stopped halfway through.

Pages were missing.

Not torn clean.

Not fallen out with time.

Removed—carefully.

"See," I said. "This part jumps. One night he's scared; the next... he's already broken."

Ravi leaned forward. "So, what happened in between?"

"That's the problem," I said. "We don't know."

Sumit rubbed his arms. “Maybe Rajeev and Lucky did everything,” he said slowly. “Maybe Mama stopped it later.”

Henna looked at him. “Stopped it how?”

Sumit didn’t answer.

Ravi spoke instead. “Mama’s role still doesn’t make sense. Sometimes he’s there. Sometimes he’s not. Sometimes Nanu sounds afraid of him. Sometimes... not.”

I swallowed. “Exactly. If Rajeev and Lucky were the monsters—”

“—then why write about Mama at all?” Ravi finished.

The rain grew louder.

Henna said quietly, “Maybe Mama knew more than he said.”

Vinay, who hadn’t spoken till now, finally looked up. “Or maybe,” he said, “Mama knows everything.”

The room went still.

I felt that tightness again in my chest.

“What exactly happened to Nanu?” I asked. “What broke him like this?”

No one answered.

I turned the diary over.

Inside the back cover, something slipped out.

A single loose page—folded small.

My breath caught.

“This wasn’t removed,” I said slowly. “This was hidden.”

Henna leaned closer. “What does it say?”

I unfolded it.

The handwriting was different here. Smaller. Careful.

Like someone writing for the last time.

The attic felt heavier.

The rain outside stopped all at once.

And somewhere deep inside the house—

something shifted.

Not loudly.

Not suddenly.

It had been waiting for us to catch up.

I looked at them.

“Whatever happened to Nanu,” I said, “it’s not over.”

And this diary—

I looked back at the missing pages.

“It’s not finished.”

No one spoke.

Ravi stood near the wall, his arms folded tight. His jaw worked like he was chewing rage. He looked like he could punch the whole world and still not feel better.

Sumit sat on the edge of the table, head down, hands locked together. His lips kept moving—half prayer, half broken thoughts. As if saying anything louder would invite it back.

Vinay stood at the doorway.

Still. Silent.

But his eyes were on me.

I sat in the corner, knees pulled close, back against the wall. My chest felt heavy—like wet cement. I couldn’t cry. I couldn’t think. I could only see Nanu... a child learning how to survive things that should’ve killed him.

Ravi cracked first.

He punched the wall.

THUD.

Dust fell.

Sumit lifted his head slowly, eyes red. “Ravi—”

“And Lucky...” Ravi continued, louder now. “Lucky watched. Rajiv watched. And his father—”

My chest tightened.

“He couldn’t move,” I whispered.

Everyone turned.

“He wasn’t weak,” I said. My voice sounded far away. “He wasn’t born wrong. He was punished. He was trained.”

My hands shook as I spoke.

“He was forced to stay quiet,” I said. “Forced to stay alive.”

Sumit’s breath broke. “Naman...”

“He waited,” I continued. “Because waiting was the only thing they allowed him.”

The room felt smaller.

I swallowed hard.

“They weren’t random deaths,” I said. “Rajiv. Lucky. All of it—”

My throat burned.

“—they were consequences.”

My eyes were wet, but my mind was clear.

“It changed,” I said. Quiet. Sharp.

Ravi froze.

“At first, it remembered,” I said. “It punished.”

I swallowed.

“Now it’s starving.”

The words landed like a slap.

“And when it starves,” I added, “it stops following rules.”

Sumit stumbled backward like the floor moved under him.

“That means—” he whispered. “That means anyone can be taken.”

Vinay stepped between us. Calm voice. Minimal words.

“He’s right,” Vinay said.

A pause.

“It’s feeding.”

Silence settled.

Then the wind struck the windows.

Not a normal breeze.

A hard gust, like the house being tested.

The wooden frames rattled.

Somewhere inside the house...

Creeeeek.

A door opened.

Slow. Deliberate.

The wick trembled.

And died.

The corners thickened first.

“Naman—” Sumit gasped.

Ravi shouted into the dark, trying to cover fear with anger. “If you’re here, I swear I’ll—”

“He’s not done,” I said.

My voice didn’t shake.

“Nanu isn’t finished yet.”

The ceiling fan gave one last tired groan—

And stopped.

Stillness.

Then Sumit spoke, barely breathing. “He was here... wasn’t he?”
His voice broke.

“Nanu spent time in this room.”

“Nanu...” I whispered.

A slow draft moved past him, lifting dust from the floorboards in one tired sigh.

From deep inside it... Something started crying.

Not like normal crying.

Crying like a child trapped too long.

Crying like someone nobody came for.

A single footstep sounded behind us.

Ravi spun, his torch raised. “SHOW YOURSELF!”

Nothing.

Only the dark leaned forward.

Then a laugh echoed.

Thin. Cracked.

And it collapsed into a choking sob that scratched the walls.

And then we saw him.

At the end of the hallway.

A small boy crouched on the floor. Knees tight to chest. Hair dirty and stuck to his forehead. His shoulders shook.

“Nanu...” my voice cracked.

He lifted his head.

It was him.

And it wasn’t.

His eyes looked hollow—like something had used them already. His skin looked stretched, sick, too thin. His mouth moved, but no sound came— only a dry breath.

Behind him—

The shadows peeled off the wall.
Not moving like smoke.
Moving like roots.
Black arms rose. Twisted. Wrapped around him.
He tried to curl tighter—smaller—like a child trying to disappear.
The lantern flickered again—
And—
He was gone.
The hallway was empty.
Henna grabbed my arm hard. Her nails bit into my skin.
“Tell me you saw it,” she said. Short, sharp. “Tell me we’re not
imagining this.”
I couldn’t answer.
The house went dead-still.
And then it came.
Not a voice.
A feeling.
A sentence pressed into the bones.
YOU LEFT ME HERE.
Not anger.
Memory.
The diary snapped shut—
CRACK!
Like a bone breaking.
The house screamed.
Fire erupted.

Not a normal fire.
Not spreading fire.

Fire that moved as if it were alive.

Veins of flame crawled across the beams. Smoke poured out thick, heavy—rolling low, turning corners like it knew where we were.

Ravi shouted, “RUN!”

But the smoke didn’t drift.

It hunted.

It wrapped around Henna’s ankles.

Henna’s eyes snapped wide.

“No!” she yelled. “Naman—LOOK!”

She dropped, dragging herself forward with her hands, fighting like hell.

“DON’T. LET. GO.”

Each word hit like a command.

I lunged and grabbed her wrists.

Her skin was freezing. Wrong.

Vinay grabbed my shoulders from behind. “Hold!” he ordered.

Sumit grabbed Henna’s arm.

Ravi grabbed the other.

Four humans. One pull.

Vinay’s voice cut through like a blade.

“PULL!”

Henna’s shawl dissolved into smoke.

Black veins rose beneath her skin like ink spreading in water—fast, crawling upward.

Henna screamed. Not fear only. Rage too.

“NAMAN!” she shouted. “DON’T LET GO!”

Her grip slipped.

The smoke yanked.

Her body jerked upward like the house itself was pulling her inside.

A sharp crack—

Bone.

Henna screamed again—raw, inhuman.

And she was gone.

Not falling.

Not dying.

Taken.

The fire throbbed like a heart.

I collapsed to the floor.

My hands were smeared with blood—her skin torn under my grip.

Her warmth was gone.

My chest broke open.

Before any of us could move, the house exploded with flame.

Not spreading.

Blasting.

Heat punched the air out of us. The walls roared. The roof screamed.

“OUT!” Vinay shouted.

He grabbed my collar and hauled me up.

Ravi and Sumit didn’t argue. They ran.

The house screamed again.

The door turned into fire—

And still, we were thrown out, as if the place had rejected us.

We hit the dirt outside.

Hard.

Cold ground. Brutal night air.

We turned back.

The house was burning like a living thing.

Every window looked like an eye.

The fire wasn't eating it.

It was wearing it.

No shadows moved inside now. No cries. No struggle.

Only fire.

Standing where a home used to be.

And somewhere inside that flame...

something watched.

It had finally learned how to take what it wanted.

What It Spat out

The night air struck us like a slap.

Cold. Sharp. Merciless.

After the suffocating heat inside the house, the open air felt wrong—too clean, too empty—as if even the night wanted nothing to do with us.

We stumbled out as if the house had rejected us.

Like it had *spat us out—unfinished*.

I dropped to my knees. My palms hit the dirt. I felt nothing.

No pain.

Only a hollow emptiness— as if my body had decided nothing mattered enough to hurt.

Behind us, the haveli stood silent.

Its broken arch hung crooked like a jaw.

Smoke crawled out of the windows, carrying the smell of charred wood... and something darker underneath.

Something old. Something wrong.

I couldn't stop seeing her.

Henna.

Right there.

Almost in my hands.

And then—

gone.

I pressed my forehead into the soil.

“Henna...” I whispered.

Her name tore out of me like a wound.

“She was right there... I almost touched her...”

The rest of the sentence broke inside my throat.

Because “*almost*” meant nothing.

Ravi hovered nearby, breathing hard, with blood running down his arm. His shirt was torn, and his ribs looked bruised, but the worst injury was his face—shock sitting on it like dust.

Sumit sat against a cracked pillar, staring at his palms as if they belonged to someone else. His lips moved without sound. Not prayer—just habit.

Vinay stood a little apart.

Quiet.

Alert.

His eyes kept moving—scanning the road, the shadows, the haveli gate... as if he was expecting the darkness to stand up and walk.

“We don’t stop here,” Vinay said finally.

His voice was calm, too calm.

“Every second she’s inside that place, she suffers. We move. Now.”

Ravi swallowed hard.

“It didn’t kill her,” he muttered.

His voice cracked.

“It took her.”

Something inside me turned cold.

“If she’s gone inside,” I said, standing slowly, “we go inside too.”

Sumit looked up sharply.

“No,” he whispered. “Not like this. Blind rushing is how people die.”

He pointed at the haveli with shaking fingers, but couldn't even hold the point.

"That place... it didn't throw us out to spare us. It threw us out because it's saving us for later."

Ravi snapped, anger rising like panic.

"People are already dying, yaar," he said. "Standing here crying won't save anyone."

He looked at me.

"Henna would've kicked us senseless if she saw us frozen like this."

His voice tried to stay tough.

But it broke at the end.

Sumit's breath shook.

"Her screams..." he whispered. "I can still hear them."

He swallowed.

"I don't think they'll ever leave."

The words hit me like a punch.

My chest split open.

I slammed my fist into the dirt.

Once.

Twice.

Again.

My skin tore.

Blood came.

I didn't feel it.

Vinay grabbed my shoulders, firm.

"If we go back now," he said evenly, "we all die."

“And then Henna dies anyway,” he continued, voice low. “And Nanu dies too.”

The name made my throat burn.

Nanu—my brother—hanging there like meat.

Pinned.

Alive only to suffer.

I shut my eyes hard.

“We can’t leave them,” I whispered.

My voice shook.

“We can’t.”

Ravi stepped closer, his voice breaking into something honest.

“So what do we do?”

Vinay didn’t answer immediately.

He stared at the haveli as if he were watching a wild animal.

Then he spoke—slow and clear.

“We need answers first.”

“Not courage.”

“Not anger.”

“Answers.”

Sumit nodded weakly.

“If we don’t understand what this is,” he said, “it will kill all of us one by one.”

The silence after that felt heavy.

Then the wind stopped.

Not slowly. Not naturally.

It stopped as if something had pressed a palm over the night.

My skin prickled.

The haveli loomed behind us—quiet, patient.

Not defeated.

Just waiting.

Vinay's grip tightened around the rusted spear he had brought out.

"This is it," he whispered.

Not fear. Recognition.

I felt it too.

Not movement. Not sound.

Just a decision settling into place.

Whatever was watching us had finished choosing.

And then—the ground beneath us growled. A deep rumble. As if the earth itself had started waking up angry.

The wind died. The night held its breath. And somewhere inside the haveli...
something smiled.

The Father's Death

The rumble grew louder.

Dust shook on the ground. The lantern flames trembled.

Villagers froze behind us, holding torches and phone lights—but nobody came close to the haveli. They stood far back as if they were scared of the air itself.

Then a cry tore through the crowd.

“Nanu!”

Nanu’s mother ran forward, her dupatta slipping, eyes wild with desperation.

His father followed—stiff as stone—but fear was written all over his face.

Behind them, two more figures pushed through.

My stomach dropped.

My parents.

My mother’s face was pale as ash.

My father looked angry... but it wasn’t real anger. Just fear wearing a mask.

My mother grabbed my arm.

“Naman!” she sobbed. “What is happening? Where is Henna? Where is—”

I couldn’t answer.

Words jammed in my throat and died.

Nanu’s mother fell to her knees in the dirt, hands shaking.

“Please...” she cried. “Bring my son back... bring Nanu back...”

Nanu's father snapped at us.

"Villagers said you went inside!" he shouted. "They saw lights! They heard screams! Where is he?"

Vinay stepped forward. Calm but firm.

"Uncle," he said. "Shouting won't help."

A pause.

Ravi muttered, bitter and shaking, "That place doesn't want us dead yet. It wants us scared."

Sumit's voice cracked.

"It's feeding..."

My father exploded.

"Enough!" he shouted.

"All this curse-devta nonsense!"

He pointed at the haveli as if he wanted to punch it.

"This is just fear. Stories."

Then he turned on me.

"Naman, you are my son. You will not stand here like this."

His voice rose.

"We are going inside."

My mother grabbed his arm.

"No—"

He shoved her away.

"I'm going," he said. "I'll bring them back myself."

A cold wave crawled up my spine.

"Papa..." I whispered.

Vinay moved instantly.

He pointed at the ground near the haveli gate.

A thin white line of salt cut across the soil.

Beside it, a rusted iron rod was pushed into the earth like a nail.

Vinay's voice turned hard—rule-like.

“Stop.”

“Don't cross that.”

My father scoffed.

Vinay continued, eyes fixed on my father's feet.

“Salt is a boundary.”

“Iron blocks it.”

“Circles invite it.”

“And unfinished circles...” he swallowed, “...mean mercy.”

My father laughed once.

“Enough drama.”

He stepped forward.

His foot crossed the salt.

The night noticed.

Not cold.

Not wind.

Weight.

As if something vast turned its attention toward us.

The ground vibrated—not shaking, vibrating—as if something deep below had drawn a breath.

Then came the sound.

Not cracking.

Tearing.

Like the earth ripping its own skin open.

Someone screamed.

I realised it was my mother.

We all looked up.

The broken stone arch of the haveli—already sagging, already dead—shifted.

Slowly.

Deliberately.

As if guided.

The structure groaned— not from strain—but from choice.

And then it fell.

A slab of stone—thick, heavy, ancient—dropped straight down.

My father didn't scream.

There wasn't time.

The impact wasn't loud.

It was wrong.

A flat, wet sound.

Like meat slapped onto mud.

The dust rose.

And when it cleared—

There was nobody.

There was something pressed into the ground.

Flattened.

Unrecognisable.

Bone had been reshaped.

Skin had been stained.

Blood leaked slowly from the edges, dark and steady, like ink bleeding through cloth.

My mother's scream broke the village.

She collapsed beside him, shaking what couldn't be lifted, calling his name into nothing.

There was nothing left to hold.

Only ruin.

Ravi staggered back, retching.

Sumit covered his mouth, his eyes glassy

Nanu's mother screamed Nanu's name again and again—as if she said it enough, death would hesitate.

Vinay dragged my mother away as her hands slipped in blood.

I couldn't move.

My lungs forgot how.

Then—

from inside the haveli—

a laugh.

Not sound.

Pressure.

Deep. Slow. Satisfied.

The haveli groaned, settling, like an old mouth closing after a meal.

And I understood.

This wasn't rage.

This wasn't chance.

This was payment.

A rule obeyed.

Something had answered.

My hands curled into fists without my permission.

When I spoke, my voice didn't sound like mine.

Low. Cracked.

“Enough...”

The word shook.

Not with courage.

With something breaking.

I looked at the dark windows—empty, watching.

“You don’t get him,” I said.

“You don’t get Henna.”

“You don’t get Nanu.”

My breath hitched.

“You don’t get to choose anymore.”

The haveli stayed silent.

But the silence felt... amused.

Vinay turned to us, face pale but set.

“We find the priest,” he said.

Ravi wiped his face, jaw clenched.

“Good,” he muttered. “Because I’m done running.”

My mother sobbed into Vinay’s chest.

Nanu’s mother collapsed, whispering her son’s name like a prayer.

Behind us—

inside the haveli—

something rubbed its thumb slowly against its palm.

Like erasing a mark.

Like learning.

Like it had just understood the rule...

and how to bend it.

War Begins

The temple smelled of oil and damp stone. Incense clung to the walls like something that refused to leave.

It wasn't large. Just a square room pressed into the earth —half prayer, half shelter.

We sat like men who had run out of places to run.

Nanu's mother crouched near a pillar, a dupatta clutched around her shoulders. Nanu's father remained near the sanctum, staring at the idol's stone feet as if waiting for it to answer him.

Vinay stood by the door.

Not guarding it. Listening.

Ravi leaned against the wall, an unlit cigarette crushed between his fingers. Sumit sat cross-legged in front of me, his hands still, but not calm.

And I sat with my hands locked together so tight my knuckles burned.

The temple felt safer than the haveli.

Not because it was holy. Because the haveli wasn't here.

Yet.

Outside, the village moved carefully. Even sound felt cautious.

No one spoke.

Until Nanu's mother broke.

It started as breath, then became sobbing.

She crawled to me.

"Please," she whispered. "Save my son."

Her forehead hit the stone floor.

I looked down at her shaking body.

Grief tried to rise.

Something colder stopped it.

“You want to call it a curse now,” I said quietly. “Possession.”

She nodded helplessly.

“But what happened to him didn’t begin in that house.”

Her crying slowed.

“It began long before that,” I continued. “When he needed to be seen... and wasn’t.”

Nanu’s father flinched, but he didn’t look up.

“You didn’t ask why he changed,” I said. “You asked how to keep people from knowing.”

Silence filled the room.

I didn’t shout. I didn’t accuse again.

I just let it sit there.

Vinay crouched beside her. “If he were gone completely,” he said softly, “the haveli wouldn’t keep him alive.”

Ravi stepped forward. “Then he’s still in there.”

That was the first time hope entered the room.

It felt fragile.

Like glass.

Then the temple bell rang.

It hadn’t rung in years.

The sound came wrong —too heavy. Like metal striking bone.

We turned.

The priest stood at the doorway.

Thinner than I remembered. Ash smeared across his forehead, unrefreshed. As if he had come without preparing himself.

Vinay touched his feet.

“Guruji.”

The priest didn’t bless him.

“So,” he said calmly. “It has reached here.”

He stepped inside.

His eyes moved across the room —over us, over Nanu’s parents, over the lamps that flickered without wind.

“What happened to that child,” he said, “did not begin in the haveli.”

No one interrupted him.

“It began in silence.”

The words were not loud.

They didn’t need to be.

Nanu’s father tried to speak, but nothing came out.

The priest’s gaze shifted to me.

“You think this is possession,” he continued. “It is not.”

The lamps trembled.

“It is a method.”

Ravi’s jaw tightened. “Method of what?”

The priest didn’t answer him immediately.

Instead, he looked toward the hill where the haveli stood.

“There are rituals,” he said slowly, “that do not summon gods.”

“They create vessels.”

The word hung heavy.

My throat tightened.

“Banwari performed a ritual,” the priest said. “That much is true.”

My heart skipped.

“But he did not do it alone.”

The air in the temple changed.

Vinay straightened.

“What do you mean?”

The priest’s eyes darkened.

“There are things buried beneath that haveli,” he said. “Not bodies. Not bones.”

“Intent. Permission.”

He looked directly at me.

“Your Mama knew what that ritual could do.”

The room went still.

“He did not fear it,” the priest continued. “He wanted it.”

Ravi swore under his breath.

Sumit shook his head. “For what?”

“Power,” the priest said simply.

“Power our ancestors sealed away for a reason.”

The word ancestors landed like something ancient waking.

My pulse thundered.

“You are tied to it,” the priest said to me. “Not just by blood. By inheritance.”

I stepped forward. “Say it clearly.”

He held my gaze.

“Mama did not just use Banwari.”

“He completed what was started generations ago.”

The lamps flickered again.

"But that story," the priest said quietly, "is not told inside a temple."

Silence followed.

The wind outside shifted.

For the first time that night, the haveli on the hill felt closer.

Vinay spoke. "Then what do we do?"

The priest lifted one finger.

"You do not go to fight," he said.

"You go to witness."

My body went still.

"That house is a knot," he continued. "A place where cruelty was sealed into soil... and called normal."

"To break it, you must uncover what was buried."

Ravi asked, "And if we fail?"

The priest did not blink.

"Then it will not stop with Nanu."

He turned toward the doorway.

"There are things your Mama did," he said quietly, "that none of you was meant to know."

He stepped into the night.

"And tomorrow," he added without turning back,

"You will hear them."

The temple fell silent.

Outside, somewhere on the hill, something answered.

Soft. Two broken notes.

Looping endlessly.

Behind Closed Doors

What the priest had promised to reveal did not unfold in daylight—it began behind a locked door.
“You two had one job.”

Mama’s voice was low, sharp.

“You couldn’t even bring one child to the haveli,” he said. “Now I have to do it myself.”

Lucky looked away. “He’s too scared,” he muttered. “We tried.”

“Tried what?” Mama snapped.

Rajiv answered quietly. “Talking to him. Gifts. Toys. Taking him out. Making him feel safe.”

Mama let out a bitter laugh.

“Safe?” he said. “You think safety works on a boy who already knows fear?”

Lucky swallowed. “We thought... if he trusted us enough... if he came close... then maybe he would follow.”

Mama’s eyes hardened.

“So you touched him.”

No one replied.

Mama stepped closer. “You didn’t want him,” he said coldly. “You wanted control.”

Rajiv’s voice shook. “We needed him weak,” he said. “Quiet. Obedient. That’s what the haveli responds to.”

Mama closed his eyes for a second.

When he opened them, there was no anger left. Only decision.

“You broke him halfway,” he said, “and stopped.”

He turned away.

“I’ll finish it.”

Mama didn’t shout after that.

Didn’t threaten.

He sat down instead.

Quiet.

“He won’t come to the haveli like this,” he said finally. “Not scared. Not shaking. Fear makes noise.”

Lucky frowned. “Then how?”

Mama looked up. Calm. Certain.

“Trust,” he said. “Trust makes people walk where you want them to.”

Rajiv hesitated. “He won’t trust us anymore.”

Mama nodded. “That’s why it won’t be you.”

He stood, adjusting his clothes.

“I won’t touch him as enemies do,” he said. “I’ll stand where he feels safe.”

No one asked what that meant.

Mama didn’t explain.

At first, he played it perfectly.

Smiles.

Gentle jokes.

Little gifts.

He brought a game console. He sat with me at night like a brother.

Tetris. Racing. Laughing.

Papa liked him. Maa tolerated him. The house relaxed around him.

He became normal.

And that was the trap.

One night, after dinner, after laughter, after Maa went to sleep—

He leaned close like he was sharing a secret.

“Sleep in my room?” he said. “We’ll play late.”

I nodded.

Because he had been kind.

Because I was tired of being scared.

Because after Papa’s hands, anyone gentle felt safe.

His room was upstairs.

Quiet.

Separated.

The walls smelled of detergent and damp paper, like clothes dried without sunlight.

The fan hummed above us.

We played again.

I lost.

He smiled slowly—like he had been waiting for that.

Then he switched off the console.

The screen died.

Darkness spread across the room.

“Upset?” he asked softly.

“No,” I whispered.

The mattress dipped.

He shifted closer. My skin prickled.

“Tell me,” he said. “You have girls in your class?”

I turned, confused. “Haan.”

He chuckled. “Ever wonder about them? The way they look... the way they talk?”

Something in his voice made my stomach tighten.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled.

He nodded like I had given the right answer.

“It’s okay. Curiosity is normal.”

He paused.

“Has anyone explained these things to you?”

Before I could speak, his hand landed on my shoulder.

Gentle.

Then lower.

Too low.

My body locked.

Not fear like screaming—

fear like freezing.

“I should go,” I whispered.

His hand stayed.

Not violently—just refusing.

“Where will you go?” he said sweetly. “Everyone’s asleep. Just talk.”

His breath came warm and sour near my ear.

The room shrank around me.

Then he moved.

I don’t remember every detail.

I remember the weight.

The smell.

His hand covered my mouth for a moment—not hard, just *enough*.

I remember my mind leaving my body.
As if, if I wasn't inside myself, it wouldn't hurt as much.
After that, my body stopped feeling like mine.
When it ended, he adjusted his clothes calmly.
Like he had eaten dinner.
Like he had done nothing wrong.
Then he bent close and whispered—
“This is our secret.”
And just like that, the secret became a chain.

The next morning, the house looked the same.
Sunlight. Steel vessels. Radio.
But inside me, something had shifted.
The walls felt closer.
Air felt heavier.
I slipped downstairs, feet cold on the floor.
Maa was sleeping on the couch. Her face was turned away.
I stared at her for one long moment, wanting to wake her.
Wanting to throw the truth at her lap like a bleeding thing.
But my mouth didn't open.
Because my brain had already learned a new rule:
If you speak, you will be punished.
So, I turned away and hid in my room.
A little later, I heard whispering from the kitchen.
Papa's voice was excited.

“Let’s get Parvinder married,” he said. “He’ll stay. Help in the shop.”

Maa’s voice shook. “We don’t know where he came from. There’s something off about him.”

“He’s like our own son,” Papa insisted. “He needs stability.”

Maa snapped, bitterly. “He needs to be watched.”

Then footsteps.

He entered the room.

And the word “*Mama*” died inside my mouth.

He walked straight to me.

Calm. Smiling.

Private cruelty behind his eyes.

He bent down and brushed my cheek slowly.

I flinched.

“Arre Nanu,” he said gently. “You woke up early?”

I looked down.

Papa laughed, proud. “Come sit, beta. Join us.”

He sat with us, still watching me.

Like I was his.

Mama leaned closer. His voice dropped, calm and slow.

“You won’t say no,” he said. “You can’t.”

I shook my head, barely. My throat was dry.

“If you don’t come tonight,” he continued softly, “I’ll talk.”

My stomach twisted.

“I’ll tell your father what you did,” he said.

“I’ll tell him about Rajiv. About Lucky. About me.”

His fingers tightened around my wrist.

“You know how he listens,” Mama said. “You know what he does when he thinks you’re dirty.”

My breath broke.

“They’ll believe me,” he said—not you.”

He smiled again. The same smile.

“So, you’ll come,” he said. “Quietly.”

He leaned back, as if the matter was settled.

“To the haveli,” he added. “Tonight.”

I didn’t answer.

Because running meant being beaten.

Speaking meant being destroyed.

And staying silent was the only thing that had ever kept me alive.

Mama let go of my wrist.

I stood there, shaking in the sunlight, knowing one thing clearly—

I wasn’t choosing to go.

I was being taken.

I didn’t answer.

Mama released my wrist slowly, as if sealing a deal.

Later that evening, when the house went quiet, I heard him speaking downstairs.

Not softly. Not loudly.

Carefully.

Banwari’s name came up first.

Then the word *ritual*.

Then something else.

“Not yet,” Mama said. “He isn’t ready.”

I froze near the staircase.

Ready for what?

A chair scraped. Someone moved.

“You rushed it,” Mama continued. “Fear is noise. Noise resists.”

There was a pause.

“What the haveli takes,” he said calmly, “must already be divided.”

Silence followed.

Then—“Once the mind splits,” Mama said, “it stops fighting.”

My stomach turned cold.

Later that night, when the house had gone silent, Mama walked alone to the courtyard.

The ash circle near the back wall had almost faded.

He crouched, pressed his thumb into the soot... and completed the missing line.

He watched it for a long moment.

Then, without expression, he dragged his heel through one edge—breaking it again.

And walked inside.

Footsteps approached.

I ran back to my room before he could see me listening.

That night, he did not touch me.

He studied me.

Watched how I flinched when someone raised their voice.

He noted how I avoided eye contact.

How quickly I obeyed.

He asked simple questions.

“Do you still dream?”

“Do you hear anything when you’re alone?”

“Do you feel like you’re outside yourself sometimes?”

I didn’t understand why he cared.

Now I do.

He wasn’t checking if I was hurt.

He was checking if I was ready.

Two nights later, he stood at my door again.

“No more games,” he said softly.

His hand rested on my shoulder.

“Tonight, you come to the haveli.”

I shook my head once.

His grip tightened.

“You think this is about you?” he whispered.

“It’s bigger than you.”

His eyes weren’t cruel.

They were hungry.

“You don’t know what sits under that house,” he said. “What can it give?”

His voice trembled slightly —not with fear.

With anticipation.

“I won’t stay small,” he muttered. “Not like them. Not like my father. Not like any of them.”

He leaned closer.

“You were chosen,” he said.

Not kindly.

Not proudly.

Like a man choosing a tool.

I understood then.

I was never the secret.

I was the key.

Then he brushed my cheek again—like wiping off the last bit of innocence—

and walked away.

I stood there frozen.

Sweat cold on my spine.

Breaking in slow pieces.

That was the moment it truly began. Not the beating. Not the insects. Not even the touch.

The moment my mind accepted silence as survival.

And once you learn that lesson... you don't unlearn it.

The ink ended there.

Not neatly.

Not like a memory finished.

Like a wound closing over rot.

I dropped to my knees before I realised, I was moving.

The pages weren't neat anymore. The words were rushed. Slanted. As if they had been written while listening for footsteps.

He says I am ready now.

He says I don't have to be scared if I stay quiet.

They say it is for something bigger.

My hands shook as I turned the pages.

They bring me here when it is dark.

They make me sit where the floor is warm.

I am not allowed to look up.

Ravi swallowed hard.

"This wasn't written later," he said. "This was written here."

Sumit's voice broke.

"This room... this was his hiding place."

I reached the last page.

The writing was smaller. Pressed deep into the paper.

He says the Devta listens better when I don't cry.

He says I am useful.

He says this is how power stays alive.

The sentence stopped halfway.

The pen had torn through the page.

My hands were shaking as I stared at the last line. The room felt tighter—the walls closer, the air thicker. Even the bulb looked weak, like it didn't want to light what we had just read.

Behind us—a sound.

Not footsteps.

Cloth shifting.

We turned.

I could still hear the bat.

Still smell that room.

Still feel the sick quiet of a child learning that silence is the only way to survive.

This was not just a story.

It was a blueprint.

This was how the cage was built.

Not by a Devta.

Not by shadows.

By hands that were supposed to protect him.

By mouths that chose not to speak.

My eyes blurred. Only then did I realise I was crying—tears dropping onto the page, darkening the ink like fresh stains.

I pulled the diary back to my chest before my fingers crushed the paper.

My jaw shook.

“They broke him,” I whispered. “They broke him... and then called him cursed.”

“The curse didn’t arrive,” I added. “It was invited.”

No one answered.

The words hung there, heavy.

Something settled in my chest—cold, sharp, finally clear.

The Devta didn’t enter him first.

Pain did.

Then fear.

Then silence.

The diary page darkened where a tear fell.

The ink spread outward.

The circle beneath it deepened.

I closed the diary slowly, like shutting a coffin.

My throat burned. My eyes stung.

“This is why it found him,” I said. “This is why it stayed.”

Ravi didn’t look at me. His voice came low.

“Because he was already trapped.”

Behind us, the attic wood creaked.

A slow sound.

Like someone shifting weight in the dark.

My fingers jerked.

The diary.

The cover felt warm.

Not sun-warm.

Body-warm.

Sumit inhaled sharply. “Do you feel that?”

The diary trembled—barely.

Like it was breathing.

Like the memory inside it wasn’t memory at all.

I froze.

The attic fan creaked like an old throat clearing.

And from somewhere under the floorboards—

a child’s laugh drifted up.

Thin.

Weak.

Broken.

The light thinned until only outlines remained.

And in that darkness, we heard it—

the soft, slow rustle of pages turning on their own.

A new line pressed itself into the paper.

The ink was still wet.

Ravi moved first.

He crossed to the attic window and wiped the fog from the glass with his sleeve.

“Look,” he said.

We gathered beside him.

On the hill, the haveli’s top window was lit.

Not by lightning.

Not by reflection.

By a steady, yellow flame.

Vinay's breath caught. "There hasn't been power there in years."

And below it —on the path leading up —a shadow moved.

Slow.

Deliberate.

Carrying something.

"That's not wind," Sumit whispered.

Ravi swallowed hard.

"That's someone going in."

A long silence stretched after that.

Not empty.

Heavy.

Like the ground itself was listening.

Behind us, the village stayed quiet.

No dogs.

No bells.

Only fear moving from door to door.

Vinay's voice came low.

"We go now."

Ravi swallowed.

"To the haveli?"

I looked toward the hill.

The house that ate my father.

Stole Henna.

Turned my brother into a cage.

"Yes," I said.

My voice didn't shake.

Smoke rose from the haveli roof.
Not drifting. Curling downward.

“We go.”

And we stepped forward—into the orchard that was already waiting.

The moment our feet touched the path, the trees leaned inward as if they were listening.

Mist thickened behind us, slowly swallowing the village.

And somewhere deep inside the orchard...

A child began to hum.

And this time, it wasn't alone.

Breathing Haveli

The orchard felt different the moment we stepped in.

Not quiet.

Not dangerous.

Aware.

The path I had walked since childhood didn't go straight anymore. It curved. Twisted. Folded back as if someone was changing the route behind our feet. Trees leaned in, their branches locking overhead, slowly cutting off the sky.

This wasn't night-cold.

This was... absence.

Moonlight fell in thin lines through the leaves. Shadows hugged the trunks like stains. And when I stared too long, they shifted—just slightly—as if they didn't like being noticed.

I kept looking back.

Not because I feared something behind us.

But because I feared one of us might not be there if I stopped checking.

Ravi snapped a twig under his boot—loud on purpose.

"Of course," he muttered. "Haunted trees. Lying paths. Full package."

The sound didn't disappear.

It echoed too far, too deep—as if the orchard swallowed it and threw it back.

Vinay grabbed Ravi's wrist.

"Stop."

Ravi rolled his eyes, but Vinay wasn't looking at him. His head tilted. Listening.

"Something's coming," Vinay whispered. "From behind."

Leaves rustled.

Soft steps.

Too light for an adult.

Then a giggle slipped through the trees—childlike, breathy—then cut off as if someone pressed a hand over a mouth.

Sumit went still. His voice came out small.

"This isn't the orchard," he said. "It's a memory acting like one."

My skin tightened.

I caught Sumit's wrist and pulled him forward.

"He's here," I said. "And Henna is here too."

Ahead, the same broken tree appeared—trunk split down the middle like a wound.

We passed it.

Two minutes later...

It was there again.

Ravi stopped walking. His jaw clenched.

"We're not lost."

Vinay nodded slowly.

"No. We're being taken."

Then we saw him.

A boy stood in the shade, barefoot.

Thin.

Too thin.

His limbs looked stretched—just a little wrong, as if the bones had forgotten the right shape.

His smile was wide.

Not happy.

More like... pulled.

His eyes didn't reflect moonlight.

They drank it.

"Nanu..." I breathed.

For one heartbeat, he looked like my brother again.

Small.

Scared.

Human.

Then the hollowness returned. Skin tightening. Jaw loosening. His eyes sank into something deeper.

He lifted his hand.

"Bhai," he said.

The word didn't sound like a child's voice.

It sounded like something copied from a child.

"Come home."

He smiled wider.

Then he turned and walked between the trees.

I ran.

We all ran.

And suddenly the orchard ended—as if someone tore a curtain away.

The haveli rose in front of us.

Half-sunk into the earth, like a body being pulled out of a grave.
Its arches looked like broken jaws. Cracks split the walls in long,
violent lines—as if the building had tried to escape and failed.

Vines wrapped around it, thick and choking.

The iron gates stood open.

Not broken.

Not forced.

Waiting.

We stepped inside.

Our lantern flames shrank, trembling as if they wanted to die.

The courtyard felt wrong underfoot. Broken statues lined the
walls. Their faces weren't worn smooth by time.

They looked worn by hands.

Hands that had touched too much.

Too cruelly.

Three.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw it—three small shapes flickered.

Running.

Hiding.

Cornered.

Children.

Sumit swallowed hard.

"This place remembers," he whispered.

"And it remembers children," Vinay replied.

We moved into the hall.

It opened wide like a throat.

Pillars rose on both sides, carved with animals—half-human, half-beast. Faces twisted in pain. Mouths open as if they had been screaming for centuries.

This wasn't prayer.

This was feeding.

We stopped.

Because we knew this hall.

We had been here before.

At the far end stood the statue.

Dusriya Devta.

Massive.

Half-man, half-beast.

Stone arms stretched forward like hunger frozen mid-reach. Its mouth was open, waiting.

And beneath it—

a man sat cross-legged on the floor.

Mama.

He didn't turn.

Didn't move.

Didn't react.

As if he had been expecting us.

As if we were late to a ritual that had already started.

No one spoke.

My chest tightened—not fear.

Recognition.

And somewhere inside its walls...

something shifted.

Not waking.

Not for the first time.

For us.

Then—everything stopped.

No wind.

No shifting vines.

No breath from the walls.

Even the lantern flame froze—straight, unmoving.

For one long second, the haveli was completely still.

As if it were listening.

What the Haveli Was Fed

Mama sat beneath the statue as if he had been born there.

The Dusriya Devta towered above him—half man, half animal—mouth carved open in hunger. The stone looked wet in the lantern light, as if it had been licked too many times.

Mama's back was straight.

His hands rested on his knees.

Calm.

Almost peaceful.

He didn't even turn.

"So," he said quietly, "you came back."

Ravi stepped forward, rage shaking in his bones.

"You did this?" he snapped. "You fed that thing? You made it kill—"

Mama smiled.

"That's a small question."

The smile wasn't warm.

It was controlled.

Like a priest smiling at a sacrifice.

I stepped forward, too.

"Explain," I said. "Before I stop listening."

Mama finally turned.

His eyes were clear.

Not mad.

Not panicked.

Not guilty.

That scared me more than anything.

“I didn’t start it,” he said. “I recognised it.”

Vinay stiffened. Sumit swallowed hard.

Mama lifted his chin toward the statue.

“This doesn’t reward devotion,” Mama said. “It rewards endurance.”

His eyes came back to us.

“Pain buys permanence.”

He paused.

“Silence buys survival.”

My stomach dropped.

“You abused Nanu,” I said.

Mama shrugged as if I had mentioned the weather.

“That child was already learning how to disappear.”

The words hit my chest like a stone.

Ravi snarled, “You piece of—”

Vinay slammed his palm into Ravi’s chest.

“Not now,” Vinay hissed. “Inside this place, anger is bait.”

Mama watched the small fight, amused.

“He needed someone to stay,” Mama continued, voice smooth.

“Fear keeps people close.”

He didn’t say names.

He never said names.

“Others understood that,” he added. “That man. That boy.”

Rajiv.

Lucky.

But he wouldn't speak them.

Ravi's eyes reddened.

"You mean Rajiv... you mean Lucky..." Ravi's voice cracked.
"They died because of you."

Mama nodded lightly.

"As offerings," he said.

Sumit's voice shook. "Why... why would you...?"

Mama stood slowly.

"Because when I came to Khara Khara," he said, pacing, "I was tired of being disposable. Useful until replaced."

He stopped in front of us.

"I didn't want worship," he said. "I wanted permanence."

His gaze moved to the haveli walls.

"This place understands permanence."

Vinay's voice stayed cold. Leader voice.

"Kapil."

Mama nodded. "Kapil was ready."

"How?" I asked.

Mama's smile widened slightly.

"Grief hollows people fast," he said. "Faster than hunger. Faster than fear."

Ravi's jaw clenched.

"You killed him."

Mama shook his head.

"No. His parents did."

He leaned forward just a little.

"I only gave their desperation somewhere to kneel."

The air in the hall changed.

Like the haveli liked hearing that.

"I gave them the book," Mama said. "I gave them hope."

Hope.

The dirtiest word in horror.

"Resurrection always sounds holy," he added, "when loss is loud."

Ravi's voice broke.

"You made them keep reading."

Mama nodded again.

"Yes."

Each word was clean.

No emotion.

No apology.

"Each ritual stripped them thinner," Mama said. "Each chant taught the house how to eat."

Sumit whispered like his throat couldn't carry volume.

"And when they wanted to stop...?"

Mama's smile disappeared.

"They wanted forgiveness," he said flatly.

Silence filled the hall.

Not natural silence.

Held silence.

"They stopped being useful," Mama finished.

Vinay's eyes narrowed.

"This was not only you," he said. "You didn't invent it."

Mama placed his palm on the statue's foot.

"I told you," he murmured. "You think this began with me."

He turned slowly.

"This was already here."

He pointed down at the floor.

"At the soil."

"At the rot.

"A god made by human hands," Mama said. "Not begged for."

His voice dipped lower.

"Built."

My throat tightened.

"You mean... the burial," I said. "The binding."

Mama laughed once.

Short.

Bitter.

"They didn't bind it," he said.

"They failed it."

He looked directly at me.

"And I refuse to be remembered as another man who turned away."

The word felt like a curse.

"Failed?" Vinay repeated.

Mama nodded.

"They feared what it demanded," he said. "They feared how much blood it would take."

He leaned forward.

"And they feared what it would turn them into."

Then he pointed at me.

“Your father helped bury it.”

My whole body went cold.

Mama didn’t blink.

“He burned parts of the book,” he said. “Told people it was forbidden. Told people to forget.”

His voice softened, almost kind.

“But forbidden things don’t disappear.”

He smiled slightly.

“They wait.”

Sumit whispered, pale, shaking.

“The book... it wasn’t lost.”

Mama nodded.

“It was inherited.”

Ravi snapped, “Then why, Kapil?! Why start with him?!”

Mama’s answer was simple.

“Because sacrifice begins small,” he said. “Small grief cracks faster.”

“And Nanu?” I demanded. My voice rose. I couldn’t stop it.

“Why him?”

Mama looked at me.

His eyes finally sharpened.

“Because blood remembers,” he said.

Then, quieter:

“And trauma hollows a vessel... without killing it.”

My hands shook.

“You broke him,” I whispered.

Mama shook his head.

“No.”

The word came out like a correction.

“The world did.”

He walked toward me.

“I only prepared what remained.”

My heart hammered.

“And Henna?” I shouted. “Where is she?!”

For the first time—

Mama hesitated.

Just one beat.

“She was never meant to be part of it,” he said.

His voice tightened slightly.

“That’s why she matters now.”

My throat tightened. Another truth burned louder than grief.

“And my father?” I said.

My voice came out broken.

“Why, *my* father? Why did he die?”

For the first time, Mama didn’t look amused.

He stared at me—slowly, carefully—like the question touched something hidden even inside him.

Then he said, calm as poison,

“Ask your mother.”

My blood turned cold.

“What?” I whispered.

Mama didn’t blink.

“Ask her,” he repeated. “Why him?”

Ravi snapped, “What kind of answer is that—?”

Mama’s gaze didn’t move from me.

“Some deaths are punishment,” he said softly. “Some are payment.”

He stepped back under the statue’s shadow.

“And some...” his voice lowered, “...are chosen long before the stone falls.”

For a second, nobody breathed.

Then Ravi’s whole body jerked as if someone had slapped him.

“Bhosdike...” he hissed, voice shaking with rage.

And then he snapped.

Ravi roared and lunged forward. That’s when the haveli moved.

Not like wind.

Not like an earthquake.

Like hunger.

Every lantern died together.

One breath.

Darkness slammed down so thick it felt like wet cloth on the face.

Then the sound started.

Click. Click. Click—

Not insects.

Teeth.

Jaws.

Bones snapping into place like someone assembling creatures in the dark.

Sumit gasped, “Oh God... oh God...”

The floor pulsed.

Once.

Twice.

The heartbeat climbed through my shoes into my legs.

The haveli wasn't haunted.

It was alive.

Vinay grabbed us both.

"BACK!" he shouted. "STAY TOGETHER!"

A shadow lunged past my shoulder.

I saw ribs.

I saw spine.

I saw something crawling in mid-air like it didn't need gravity.

Vinay shoved iron forward—an old rod, rusted spearhead.

The creature recoiled.

Not from pain.

From the rule.

"Iron slows it!" Vinay snapped. "Remember that!"

Ravi laughed—wild and broken.

"Then it picked the wrong idiots!" he shouted.

He swung a broken temple trident from the wall.

The metal struck.

A skull burst into white powder.

But the thing didn't die.

It rebuilt.

Bones stitched themselves together again like spiders weaving.

Sumit stared in horror, voice collapsing.

"It's not possession..." he whispered. "It's—it's copying... it absorbs..."

He swallowed hard.

“It learns.”

A creature leapt again.

Its jaw snapped on Sumit’s arm.

Bone screamed.

Sumit’s mouth opened, but no sound came for a second.

Then—

“Aaaah!”

Vinay slammed the iron spear into its spine.

CRACK.

The body dropped.

But the jaw didn’t open.

It stayed locked.

Bonded.

Sumit sobbed like a child.

“It’s rewriting me...” he gasped. “It’s—inside—”

Vinay grabbed salt from his pouch and pressed it to the bite.

Sumit screamed louder.

The jaw snapped open and fell away.

Rule.

Salt hurts it.

Salt pushes it back.

The floor pulsed again.

Stronger.

Then the hall went still.

Not quiet.

Stunned.

Because someone stepped forward.

Nanu.

Between Mama and us.

Bent.

Thin.

Breathing like every inhale was painful.

His eyes flickered.

Not empty.

Confused.

Lost.

His thumb rubbed against his palm again.

Erasing.

Erasing.

Erasing.

“Bhai...” he whispered.

The word hit me like a knife.

Mama froze.

Ravi froze.

Vinay froze.

Even the creatures paused like dogs waiting for an order.

Nanu looked at Mama.

Then looked at us.

His lips trembled.

His voice came out soft.

Child voice.

“I... I don’t know...” he whispered, shaking, “...if I’m here to stop him.”

The walls seemed to inhale.

Then his head lifted slowly.

Eyes going a shade darker.

The second voice arrived.

Not loud.

Not a demon.

Old.

Cold.

“...or finish what he started.”

For the first time since we entered, the statue hesitated.

As if the god itself had met something it hadn’t expected.

As if what it had been fed...

was finally looking back.

Haveli Awakens

The lamps shook again.

Not from wind.

This tremor felt *heavy*—as if something under the floor had turned in its sleep.

Then we heard it.

Low.

Wet.

Steady.

A heartbeat.

Not in the air.

In the stone.

Mama smiled, as if he had been waiting for us to notice.

“You feel it now,” he said softly. “The haveli doesn’t like being named.”

Ravi struck a match. His grin came up like armour, but his hand still trembled.

The flame caught—

and instantly shrank.

Not flickering.

Shrinking.

As if the air was squeezing it.

Mama walked to the Devta statue and placed his palm on its stone leg like a lover.

“All this,” he said, gesturing around the hall, “is not punishment.”

He tapped the stone.

“It is digestion.”

The heartbeat deepened.

My stomach turned.

I didn’t answer him.

Because if I spoke, I would remember.

And if I remembered, I might break.

I stepped to the centre of the hall.

Broken idols lay scattered—heads snapped off, hands lying apart like severed limbs. Burnt beams were piled like bones.

The floor was black with soot.

But beneath it—

the stone stared back.

Cold.

Watching.

This was where it began.

Vinay came close behind me.

His voice was low. Commanding.

“Rules,” he whispered. “Don’t forget.”

I nodded, jaw tight.

Iron protects.

Salt blocks thresholds.

Mirrors lie.

Circles don’t guard—circles invite.

And unfinished circles... give mercy.

My fingers dipped into ash.
Still warm.
Still alive.
It clung to my skin as if it knew me.
Slowly, I drew the circles.
One.
Then another.
Then the last.
Three overlapping circles.
A complete invitation.
The heartbeat changed.
Not faster.
Aware.
The air tightened.
Mama laughed softly behind me.
“You think you’re calling it?” he said. “No, Naman... you’re calling the haveli.”
His voice lowered.
“And the haveli remembers its food.”
The staircase ahead now looked wet.
Black moss glistened on each step.
Swelling...
collapsing...
in time with the beat beneath us.
I climbed anyway.
Each step sank slightly, like stepping on meat.

Behind me, Ravi muttered jokes he didn't believe.

"Bas... haunted building with breathing stairs... normal Tuesday..."

Sumit scanned the walls, desperate for logic.

Vinay stayed close, counting danger without blinking.

At the landing, I stopped.

Because the hallway was no longer a hallway.

It looked like the inside of a ribcage.

Bones lay layered on the floor—thick, uneven—settling into place like bricks.

Skulls were stacked along the walls like offerings.

And above us—

ribs hung from the ceiling like arches.

They tightened...

loosened...

in rhythm.

Sumit's voice broke.

"Bones don't move."

Mama answered calmly.

"They do," he said, "when they belong to something larger."

The heartbeat hit once.

Hard.

A jaw clicked.

A finger twitched.

Then the bones obeyed.

Not wild.

Not chaotic.

Purposeful.

They pulled toward each other—assembling like a machine building itself.

Bodies formed incorrectly.

Too many joints.

Limbs bent where limbs shouldn't bend.

Eyes opening inside skull sockets that still had soil in them.

Ravi swore.

“Bhai... this is *next level*—”

The first body rose.

Then another.

Then ten.

They moved like puppets pulled by the same string.

Vinay snapped, sharp:

“Don't let them touch you!”

Ravi swung first.

Anger. Force. Straight violence.

He smashed a skull. Bone dust sprayed.

Vinay fought like a surgeon—precise.

Knees.

Elbows.

Necks.

Breaking the joints that made them move.

Sumit ripped a rib from the floor and stabbed it into a spine.

“It's the backbone!” he shouted. “Break that!”

They fell—

but not for long.

The bones crawled back.

Rejoining.

Rebuilding.

Learning.

The heartbeat didn't change.

It didn't panic.

It didn't rush.

It was just...

continuing.

Then a villager stumbled out from a side corridor, screaming.

He ran straight into the hallway.

Ravi shouted, "Uncle, stop—!"

Too late.

The floor flexed like muscle.

Bones rose under the villager's feet—

wrapped his legs—

pulled.

He sank waist-deep as if the ground had become mud.

His nails tore against the skulls as he tried to claw out.

He screamed once—

and the floor closed over him.

Like swallowing.

One wet contraction.

Gone.

Mama watched without blinking.

“This,” he said, almost gently, “is what power looks like.”

He turned toward us.

“Not command.”

“Continuation.”

My blood ran cold.

Then a voice came from the end of the hall.

Soft.

Child-soft.

“Naman bhai...”

I froze.

My chest cracked open.

At the far end, under a broken arch, stood a small boy.

Barefoot.

Thin.

Still.

Nanu.

He wasn’t twisted.

He wasn’t normal either.

He looked like a child stuck between two worlds.

His head tilted slightly.

And his thumb rubbed slowly against his palm—
again and again—

as if he was trying to erase something from his skin.

My throat worked.

“Nanu...”

He looked at me.

And for one second, it was him.
Eyes wet.
Scared.
Human.
Then his gaze flickered.
Something older moved behind it.
Mama turned sharply.
“Don’t answer,” he snapped.
Nanu blinked.
Child voice again:
“Why... why is it hungry?”
The beat under the floor stuttered.
Like the haveli paused to listen.
The bones froze mid-motion.
Even Mama’s face shifted.
A crack.
Fear.
He hissed at Nanu:
“You don’t speak.”
“You listen.”
I stepped forward, shaking.
“He remembers,” I said, voice raw. “That’s why it’s waking.”
Vinay’s eyes snapped at me.
“What are you doing?”
I didn’t answer.
I reached the hanging bell rope beside the pillar—

and rang it.

The bell rang once.

The sound didn't fade normally.

It layered itself over the heartbeat, cutting into it like a blade.

The ash circle shivered.

The hallway walls tightened inward.

Veins surfaced beneath the stone—

pulsing.

Alive.

Sumit whispered, terrified:

“It's answering...”

Mama stepped back.

His lips parted.

“No,” he muttered.

“This wasn't the bargain.”

The heartbeat deepened.

The floor softened.

Stone turned into something else—

muscle.

Roots burst upward from cracks in the tiles.

Thick.

Veined.

They wrapped around the pillars like arms reclaiming prey.

From below—

a scream rose.

Short.

Sharp.

Then silence.

Then the voice came.

Not from one place.

From every wall.

From every bone.

From the air itself.

“Who calls me back?”

Ravi staggered backwards, eyes wide.

“Bhai... what the hell is that?”

Nanu stepped forward.

Between Mama and us.

Between the living and the haveli.

He looked up, confused.

Child voice:

“I hear you...”

His thumb kept rubbing his palm.

“I hear you... But I don’t know you.”

The heartbeat stopped for one second.

Just for him.

Mama lunged.

“NO—”

The floor split open.

The crack ran from the Devta statue to our feet like a mouth ripping wider.

Something red throbbed below.

Wet.

Pulsing.

The heart.

The haveli's heart.

And the truth hit me like ice—

The haveli didn't want us.

It wanted him.

It wanted its best vessel back.

Nanu stared down into the crack.

His face trembled as if he was choosing between fear and surrender.

Then his eyes lifted.

He looked at me.

Not the Devta.

Not Mama.

Me.

And he whispered, so softly it hurt—

Child voice:

“Bhai... will you leave me again?”

My soul broke.

And then we fell.

The floor gave way like rotten flesh.

The hall tilted.

Bones screamed.

Smoke burst upward like breath.

As we dropped into the living dark—

I saw Nanu still standing at the edge of the crack.
Watching.
His thumb rubbed his palm.
Still choosing.
And behind him—
Mama's face turned into panic.
For the first time in his life, his control had ended.
Because now the haveli had fully woken.
And it was hungry.

The Hive

We didn't fall far.

The dark caught us first—wet, close, and breathing.

When we hit the ground, the space around us *exhaled*, as if it had been waiting for our weight.

My ears rang. My mouth tasted of iron and ash. Ravi groaned somewhere to my left. Sumit was breathing too fast. Vinay didn't make a sound.

That scared me more than anything.

The lamps along the walls came alive on their own.

Dim.

Yellow.

Sickly.

We were in a lower hall—older than the rest of the haveli. The stone here was darker, swollen with damp. Pillars rose around us, carved with animals whose mouths were open too wide, as if they were begging for food.

And then I smelled it.

Not dust.

Not incense.

Honey.

But spoiled honey—sweet and rotten at the same time.

Like a hive left in a grave.

Sumit coughed, eyes watering. "What... is that smell?"

Vinay's face tightened. "Don't breathe deeply."

A second later, the sound came.

Not loud.

Not yet.

A faint vibration... inside the walls.

Like tiny wings brushing against stone.

Ravi frowned. "Tell me that's not—"

Mama stood at the centre of the hall.

Unharmed.

Smiling.

He dusted off his kurta as if we had simply fallen into a basement.

"Well," he said lightly, "that went better than expected."

I pushed myself upright, rage and disbelief locked into my ribs.

"You fed them," I said. "All of this—you fed it."

Mama chuckled. "Fed? No."

He tapped the floor with his heel.

The stone answered with a dull thud.

Something shifted behind him.

A shape peeled itself out of the shadows.

Small.

Barefoot.

Nanu.

He stood a few steps away from Mama, head tilted, thumb rubbing slowly against his palm—again and again—as if he was erasing something that wouldn't go.

"Nanu..." I whispered.

He didn't look at me.

Mama's smile faltered when he saw him.

For the first time... it didn't fit his face.

"Nanu?" Mama said softly. "You shouldn't be here."

The buzzing changed—sharpened.

Mama swallowed. His eyes darted to the walls—then to the Devta statue.

As if he suddenly understood.

"No..." he whispered. "Not now."

Vinay stepped closer to me, his voice low and urgent.

Mama took one step back.

His voice cracked—just once.

"I did everything," he muttered. "I gave you what you wanted."

The buzz grew louder.

And Nanu finally lifted his eyes.

Not fully human. Not fully empty.

Watching.

Mama tried again, forcing authority into his tone as if he could command fear.

"Go back," he said. "This place isn't for children."

Nanu didn't answer.

Instead, a single bee crawled out from the corner of his eye.

Black.

Wet.

Wrong.

It dragged itself across his cheek like a tear made of insects.

Mama stumbled back.

"No... no, no—"

Another bee slid out of Nanu's ear.

Then one more—forcing its way out through his lips.

The buzzing surged.

Nanu's body trembled. His skin didn't tear like flesh.

It cracked like dry earth.

Thin lines opened across his arms, neck, and chest.

And from those cracks—

bees poured out.

Not dozens.

Thousands.

They spilled onto the floor like living smoke. They climbed the pillars. They filled the carved mouths of the stone animals until those mouths looked *alive*.

The air turned thick with wings.

Every single one of them moved toward Mama.

Mama screamed and ran.

He barely made it two steps.

The swarm hit him like a wall.

Bees slammed into his face—into his mouth, into his nose.

He clawed at himself, screaming as his own nails ripped his skin away.

Vinay's hand crushed my shoulder.

"Don't," he whispered.

Mama fell to his knees, convulsing.

His veins bulged black under his skin, pulsing as if the swarm had become his blood.

His tongue swelled—

then gave way as bees poured out.

His scream collapsed into something else—

a sound made of wings.

The bees lifted him.

Not gently.

They hauled him upright, jerking his body like a puppet on invisible strings.

Mama's head lolled.

His eyes were gone.

And when he spoke, his voice wasn't fully his anymore.

"I didn't... I only... I deserved..."

The swarm swallowed the words.

Then, his neck snapped sideways.

A clean sound.

Final.

They pinned him to the stone.

The sound that followed wasn't a scream.

When the swarm lifted, nothing stood there.

The buzzing softened.

Slowly, the bees returned.

They crawled back into Nanu—

through eyes, mouth, torn skin—

until the cracks sealed.

Nanu stood alone.

Still.

Quiet.

I took one step forward, my heart hammering.

"Nanu..."

He turned his head.

He looked at me.

For one small moment, I saw the boy I remembered.

Then he spoke.

Softly.

“Why didn’t anyone stop him?”

His voice didn’t accuse.

It remembered.

No one answered.

The hall held its breath.

The hall stayed silent.

No wings. No movement.

Only him.

The One I Left Behind

The stone slammed shut.

Not loud.

Not violent.

Just.. final.

Henna's scream cut off mid-breath as the haveli swallowed it.

Dust spilled from the ceiling and settled on us, grey and thick, sticking to the skin like funeral ash.

I lay where the staircase had been, palms flat on the stone. I scratched at it until my nails split. Until blood marked the surface in thin lines that felt useless.

"Henna..."

My voice came out wrong—thin, dead.

No answer.

Behind me, someone was breathing hard—Ravi or Sumit—I couldn't tell. The hall stank of old incense and fresh blood. Bones lay scattered like the place had finished eating and gone quiet.

Vinay's arms wrapped around me from behind.

Not to stop me.

Not to comfort me.

Just to keep me standing while my body forgot how.

"It didn't throw us out by accident," he said, voice rough. "It chose."

I didn't reply.

Because something worse than fear had entered my chest.

Understanding.

The lamps above us trembled once. Our shadows stretched across the hall—

and didn't behave like shadows.

They leaned forward.
As if they were listening.

That was when I heard it.

“Bhai...”

One word—Soft.

And it crushed me anyway.

My head lifted slowly. My hands rose on their own—shaking, empty. I felt the others stiffen behind me.

Ravi's weapon dropped a little.
Sumit stepped back like he'd lost his balance.
Vinay tightened his grip.

The voice was close.

Not echoing.
Not far.
Inside the walls.

“When you stopped talking to me,” the voice said, flat and quiet,
“when you left me there...”

A pause.

“I had no one.”

The plaster cracked.

Dark liquid seeped out—black-red, thick like old blood. It crawled across the wall and shaped itself into words, as slow as a wound opening.

I HAD NO ONE

My knees gave out.

“Nanu...” I whispered.

The floor trembled.

Bones slid together at our feet—ribs, fingers, skulls—forming scenes.

Not monsters.

Scenes.

A small boy sitting alone in dirt, knees hugged to chest, face down.

A taller boy turned away.

Walking.

Not angry.

Not cruel.

Just... done.

The smaller one stood up and followed anyway.

Not calling. Not crying.

Just following anyway.

My throat tightened until I tasted metal.

“I didn’t know,” I said. Even I could hear how pathetic it sounded.

The voice answered—smaller now. Younger—a child trying to be brave.

“I followed you, Bhai. Past the orchard. Past the mango trees. I didn’t understand why you were angry.”

A pause.

“I only knew you were leaving.”

The bones shifted.

Walls rose.

A doorway formed.

A shadow filled it—too tall, too still, smiling too wide.

The Boy.

Sumit's voice cracked, barely there. "This place didn't invent cruelty..."

"...it learned it," Ravi finished, jaw shaking with hate.

Nanu's voice trembled.

"He said I was safe," he whispered. "He said I didn't have to tell anyone."

The haveli answered with whispering faces in the plaster—mouths pressed into stone like trapped prayers.

You're safe.

It's fine.

Don't tell anyone.

Blood seeped through the words like stains through cloth.

I pressed my fists to my head as if I could crush the memory out.

I remembered leaving.

Not with a fight.

Not with drama.

Just choosing... that I was done with him.

Like he was a weight I could drop.

"I thought you forgot me," Nanu said.

Then, softer—the sentence that killed me:

"Then I thought you didn't want me."

Something tore inside my chest.

"I didn't know," I sobbed. "I swear—I didn't know."

The wall carved new words into itself. The letters opened like cuts.

WE REMEMBER

WE PROTECT

WE RETURN

Vinay's voice came—sharp, immediate.

“Naman. Don’t fall.”

Ravi stepped in front of me without thinking. As if his body understood what mine couldn’t.

Nanu’s voice hardened.

“I told them everything, Bhai.”

The haveli showed it—fast, brutal flashes.

A raised hand. A belt. A door slammed shut.

A small room.

Dark.

And then—

Me. Walking away again.

I couldn’t breathe.

Then Nanu screamed.

Not just a child.

Something screamed *through* him—old and starving.

“It hurts, Bhai!” he cried. “It never stopped! It lives inside me!”

“But it isn’t me.”

Bone chains snapped tight around a small, broken form.

The sound of skin pulling.

A spray of blood across the stone.

Then—silence broke.

And Nanu stood there.

Real.

Pale skin.

Black veins.

Bones clung to him like armour, skulls nested at his shoulders as if they didn’t want to let him go.

But beneath it, his face flickered.

Still a child.

Still my brother.

“Bhai...”

Then another voice pushed through him.

Not loud. Not a demon.

Older than breath.

“He belongs.”

My stomach turned. My body shook. Love, rage, and guilt—everything collided until I couldn’t tell what I was feeling.

I staggered forward.

“Where is she?” I choked. “Where’s Henna?”

Nanu’s jaw trembled. Something in him fought.

“She is where one was marked,” he said—his voice layered now. Child and something else.

“Below.”

“Where the house keeps its promises.”

The floor split.

A spiral staircase revealed itself—dropping into darkness that smelled of wet stone and graves.

And from below—

Henna’s scream rose.

Raw.

Real.

A living person’s scream.

I didn’t think.

I jumped.

Ravi swore and followed. “Pagal hai kya?!”

Sumit stumbled after us.

Vinay came last, voice hard.

“Stay together. No gaps. No circles broken.”

The air below was colder. Wet stone. Old blood. Soil like an open grave.

Henna hung above a circle of bones.

Chains burned into her wrists and ankles—glowing faintly like heated iron. Blood dripped from her fingers. Each drop landed like a slow heartbeat.

Henna’s face was twisted in pain—yet when her eyes found mine, she still fought to speak.

“Naman—”

Vinay stared, horror cracking his calm.

“She’s not the offering,” he whispered.

His eyes widened.

“She’s the lock.”

The Devta roared through Nanu’s mouth. The sound shook the stone.

“THROUGH HER BLOOD—I RETURN!”

The staircase exploded upward.

Not fire.

Stone.

The haveli snapped shut like a jaw.

The floor surged, walls squeezing in, pushing us out—

rejecting us—

sealing her in.

Henna screamed as the stone closed.

“Naman—don’t leave me—!”

Then—

nothing.

I crashed outside, clawing at stone until my fingers split. My palms smeared red. My mouth moved, but no sound came.

Vinay held me from behind.

Solid.

Shaking.

“It sealed,” he whispered.

But I understood now.

This wasn’t rejection.

This was selection.

The stone stayed shut.

Not loudly. Completely.

Henna’s scream was gone—as it had never existed.

The air afterward was not empty.

It was full.

Full of her absence.

Full of the space where her voice should have been.

I stayed on the ground, forehead pressed to stone, breathing where she had been—as if my breath could reach her through rock.

Behind me, no one spoke.

The haveli settled.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Like something putting itself back to sleep.

And from somewhere deep inside the walls—a sound drifted up.

Soft.

Uneven.

Almost familiar.

A child's breath.

Waiting to be answered.

I closed my eyes.

My throat burned.

My heart kicked like an animal trapped in a box.

And this time—

I became the same silence that killed him.

Questions That Would Not Die

Dawn never truly came to Khara Khara.

The sky only changed from black to a tired grey—as if the sun looked at this village and decided to stay away.

The haveli stood behind us, quiet again.

Cracked walls. Dead windows.

A house pretending it hadn't just swallowed a girl and chewed up our lives.

I sat on the stone step outside, in the same position since the Devta threw us out.

My fingers were still curled, as if they were holding chains that weren't there. My throat burned. My eyes felt empty, but inside my head—

Nanu was still screaming.

Henna was still screaming.

I hadn't even noticed the blood drying on my knuckles.

Grief didn't feel sharp anymore. It felt heavy—as if someone had replaced my ribs with wet sand. Every breath came out as if it were being dragged.

Nanu's last words kept looping inside me.

Save me... or kill me.

I leaned forward, forehead against the stone.

"I didn't choose you," I whispered to the haveli. "You chose us."

Behind me, Ravi paced in tight circles like a trapped animal. Short breaths. Angry movements. He kicked stones across the dirt as if they had insulted him personally.

“Great,” he muttered. “Fantastic. Wonderful.”

Then louder, as if he could insult the nightmare away—

“Kid turned into a walking curse. Henna trapped inside bone-demon jail. And we get thrown out like garbage.”

He laughed once.

It broke halfway.

Then he punched the wall—hard enough to cut his skin open.

“We left them,” he said. His voice wasn’t angry now. It was scared.

“We actually left them.”

None of us could answer.

Ravi stared at the blood on his knuckles, wiped it on his jeans, and snapped at me.

“Tell me we’re going back.”

Vinay stood closest to the haveli. He hadn’t taken his eyes off it since we landed outside.

No fear in his face.

Calculation.

He fought panic with logic—because that’s all he had.

“We can’t go in blind again,” he said. “Inside isn’t just a ghost.

It’s a system. A ritual.”

He paused. “Rules.”

I lifted my head slowly.

Vinay spoke as if he were reading instructions aloud.

“Mirrors are doors.”

“Iron blocks contact.”

“And circles—circles don’t protect. Circles invite.”

Ravi spat on the ground. “Great. Haunted geometry.”

“And Henna is inside that structure now,” Vinay added.

That sentence stabbed deeper than anything the Devta had done.

Ravi turned on him immediately.

"Don't talk about her like she's a machine!"

"I'm talking about how to save her," Vinay snapped back. "Not how to die screaming."

I pushed myself up. My legs shook so badly that I nearly fell. My body felt destroyed.

But something inside me was still burning.

"I don't care what it costs," I said. "I'm going back for both of them."

Vinay took one step closer. His voice lowered.

"And if saving everyone means killing Nanu?"

That question dropped like a knife between us.

My breath got stuck.

For the first time—

I didn't have an answer.

Sumit had been kneeling near the entrance for a while, quiet like a man trying not to break. He pressed his fingers into the soil, frowning.

"The ground is moving," he murmured.

We all looked at him.

Vinay nodded once, grim.

"The Devta isn't fully awake yet," he said. "It's recovering. That's why it let us live."

Ravi swallowed. "That's supposed to comfort us?"

Vinay didn't even look at him.

"It shouldn't."

Then Vinay turned toward me again, gentler but firm.

“Nanu isn’t fully gone, Naman. Henna hasn’t been sacrificed yet.” He kept it blunt. “If the ritual was complete... we’d already be dead.”

I swallowed hard.

We found what remained of the diary near the broken steps.

Half the pages were burned to ash. The rest felt brittle like old skin. I turned them slowly, carefully—as if touching them too hard would wake something.

One word repeated again and again.

Bhairav.

Ravi frowned. “Who the hell is Bhairav?”

“Not who,” Sumit whispered. “What?”

Further down, in older ink, one more name sat like a curse.

King Mihirakula.

My voice shook as I read:

The King feared death.

Bhairav said death is only a doorway.

The Devta listened.

The air thinned.

Vinay’s jaw tightened.

“A king,” he said. “A watcher.”

His eyes flicked toward the haveli.

“And a god that should never have been called.”

Ravi went quieter. Too quiet for Ravi.

“What if Bhairav was the first vessel?”

My stomach turned.

A memory flashed in my head—

Nanu was sitting alone. Talking to his reflection.

Listening.

Answering.

“He wasn’t playing,” Ravi whispered.

“He was being watched,” Vinay said.

“Or being trained,” Sumit added.

The last pages made my heart hammer hard enough to hurt.

Trikaal-Bandhan —Binding Across Three Realms

One circle for the living.

One for the dying.

One for the watcher.

If the ritual stayed pure, the soul rested.

If it broke—

The watcher became the vessel.

And what returned was not the person lost, but the thing waiting behind the loss.

Below it, a verse:

Three circles drawn, three shadows bind.

Name not the lost. Look not behind.

For when the breath of silence wakes,

The living breaks, the dead remakes.

My throat tightened.

The footprint near the haveli was small.

The one beside it was deeper.

As if something heavier had learned to walk in step.

Ravi asked the question that scared everyone.

“What does it want from him?”

“A body that can cross worlds,” Sumit replied, voice shaking.

“A god that no longer needs a temple,” Vinay said softly.

I closed my eyes.

It followed me... because he followed me.

And then another truth hit me.

Henna. Why her?

Vinay looked at me, heavy and honest.

"Some sacrifices are chosen for power," he said.

"Others..." he paused. "Others are chosen because they're noticed."

That hollowed me out.

And the questions kept growing—more and more—until my mind could no longer hold them.

Not just the ritual.

Not just the haveli.

Everything.

Why did the Devta take Henna alive, not kill her?

Can Nanu still be saved... or does saving him mean ending him?

And if we end him... what escapes?

By the time weak morning light touched the village, the haveli had gone quiet again.

Not dead.

Quiet like an animal after feeding.

Smoke curled from the broken roof. A wall leaned inward, its shadow stretching toward us.

No birds sang.

The orchard stood still—leaves unmoving, branches bowed as if they were listening.

Near the entrance, something glistened in the mud.

I stepped closer.

A footprint.

Small. Bare. Pressed deep—as if the ground had softened to receive it.

Beside it—

another.

And another.

They didn't go toward the village.

They led away from the haveli.

Into the trees.

Ravi's voice came out rough. "He walked."

Sumit stared like he couldn't breathe. "Or... it walked inside him."

Vinay didn't take his eyes off the prints.

The footprints didn't return.

They widened.

My throat burned.

Behind us, the village stayed frozen.

Ahead, the trees swallowed the footprints one by one.

A branch shifted.

Not with wind.

With weight.

From somewhere deep inside the orchard—
three soft knocks.

Close.

Then nothing.

The footprints stopped at the tree line.

No return marks.

No birds.

No wind.

Only the echo of three knocks—
still hanging in the air.

Epilogue

In Khara Khara, people didn't write horror down. They buried it inside routine.

By the third day, the village had returned to its old timings—morning tea, evening aarti, shop shutters, school bells. But everything happened with one extra step, like a limp no one admitted to.

No one walked past the banyan lane anymore.

Not because someone stopped them—
because their feet stopped on their own.

If a ball rolled that way, children didn't chase it.
If a kite fell there, no one climbed to get it.
If someone forgot and turned toward the haveli, an elder would hiss from a doorway:

“Bas. Not there.”

And the person would obey without asking why.

That lane became a blank space on the village map.
A place that still existed... but was not spoken of.

The women started tying iron into everything.

Iron nails were hammered into door frames.
Iron bangles appeared on wrists that had never worn them before.

Even temple bells were replaced with heavier ones, so the sound lasted longer.

Vinay watched all of it without smiling.

“People don't know the rules,” he said quietly. “But fear teaches the body.”

At night, the village slept early.
Not like tired people.
Like people pretending that sleep could protect them.
But every night, one thing happened.
The dogs stopped barking at exactly the same hour.
One second, they would growl at the dark—
Then their tails went low, their ears folded back, and they fell
silent.
As if something had passed nearby.
Not running.
Walking.

Naman stayed in Khara Khara.
Not because he thought it was over.
Because leaving felt like another crime.
He didn't go near the haveli.
Some nights, he woke up with mud under his fingernails.
He would sit up in bed, chest heaving, and stare at his hands as if
they belonged to someone else.
And always—always—there would be one smell in the room:
wet soil.
Like rain without rain.
Like the earth after it opens.

One evening, a man arrived from outside the village.
Not a priest. Not a policeman.
Not even a relative.
Just a stranger with cracked heels and a cloth bag.

He walked into Sumit's café, asked for water, drank it slowly, and left a single coin on the counter.

But before he went, he said one line—without drama, without fear:

“This village has started breathing again.”

Sumit laughed nervously. “What nonsense?”

The stranger looked at him once.

Not angry.

Not warning.

Just tired.

Then he walked away.

Later that night, Vinay called Naman outside.

He didn't speak immediately. He didn't like unnecessary words anymore.

Instead, he handed Naman something wrapped in cloth.

It was not a book.

Not a relic.

Not a charm.

It was a thin copper strip.

Old. Stained. Bent slightly at the edge, as if it had been dug out of the ground.

On it, three circles were etched—clean, precise.

But the third circle had one small gap.

Unfinished.

Naman's throat tightened.

Vinay's voice stayed controlled.

“This is not from our time,” he said.

Naman didn't ask what it was.

He asked the real question.

“Why give it to me?”

Vinay answered instantly, as if he had been holding it in his mouth for days.

“Because whoever made this... expected one person to return.”

Naman stared at the unfinished circle.

“Return where?”

Vinay didn’t point at the haveli.

He pointed beyond it—toward the hills.

“Where it began,” he said. “Before Khara Khara became Khara Khara.”

That same night, near the banyan lane, an old woman opened her window to throw away leftover food.

She had lived there her whole life.

She knew every sound on that road.

So when she heard it, her body froze.

Not footsteps. Not wind.

A soft scraping.

Like someone dragging something heavy... carefully.

She shut the window fast.

Then she sat down and didn’t move for an hour.

In the dark, she whispered only one line—again and again—like a prayer, like panic:

“Don’t let it learn the new names.”

Far from the village, beneath stone older than memory, Henna opened her eyes.

There were no marks on her.
Only a dull ache in her bones.

A lantern burned nearby, its flame steady and calm, as if someone had placed it there long ago and knew it would still be needed.

Henna stood slowly.

The walls around her were carved with symbols—deep, ancient, patient.

Not like warnings.

Like records.

As she stepped forward, the outline shifted one inch to the left.

Not chasing.

Matching her steps.

Walking with her.

Then a voice spoke—close, clear, curious:

“You didn’t scream.”

Henna swallowed once, forcing her breath to steady.

“Not yet,” she said.

A pause.

Then the voice, softer:

“Good.”

A silence.

Then:

“Because the one who screams... becomes weak.”

Henna’s fingers curled into fists.

“And the one who stays quiet?” she asked.

The darkness felt as if it smiled.

“...becomes useful.”

Henna's blood chilled.
But she didn't step back.
She stepped forward.
And somewhere, far away in Khara Khara, Naman jerked awake—
as if a thread tied around his heart had been pulled.

In the haveli, deep inside the dark hall, Nanu sat alone.
Still. Calm.
He didn't draw circles anymore.
He lifted his head slightly, listening.
Not to the house.
To something older than the house.
Then, in a child's soft voice, he whispered to the darkness:
"Tell me the truth."
A pause.
Then another voice answered him.
Not a demon. Not angry.
Just old... and patient.
"We will."
Nanu smiled faintly.
Not happy. Not cruel.
Just... certain.
And in that moment, Khara Khara understood something it had
been avoiding for generations:
This was never a story about a haunted house.
It was a story about something that had been buried...
and had finally found people worth choosing.
