

-Buried by silence, reborn through courage.

Naila

WHAT
THEY BURIED
WAS NOT HER

A Novel by
ANJUM J PARVEEN



BlueRoseONE.com
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Anjum J Parveen 2026

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRose ONE .com
S t o r i e s M a t t e r
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-684-8

Cover Design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Namrata Saini

First Edition: September 2026

Dedication

To My Mother, and each and every woman in my life. ♥

Contents

Prologue.....	1
Chapter One: The Girl Called Naila.....	10
Chapter Two: A Promise of Love	16
Chapter Three: When Love Turned to Chains	22
Chapter Four: The Price of Her Silence	29
Chapter Five: The First Flicker of Dawn	37
Chapter Six: The Darkness Before Dawn	45
Chapter Seven: Rising from the Ashes	52
Chapter Eight: Becoming Her Own Morning	59
Chapter Nine: The Unfolding Dawn.....	65
Chapter Ten: The Radiance Beyond Night	71
Epilogue: The Morning That Remained.....	78
Author's Note	84

Prologue

The world remembers stories of queens, of kings, of battles fought and empires built. But rarely does it remember the quiet wars fought inside the walls of homes, the wars no soldier writes about, the wars no monument is built for. Naila's story was one such war.

Before her name carried weight, before her body bore bruises, before her eyes carried grief that refused to leave, she was just a girl, delicate, hopeful, laughing freely in the dusty lanes of her small village. Nobody then could have imagined the kind of storms that would try to silence her.

She was fourteen when the world began shaping her into something she never chose to be. Petite, her rosy cheeks always flushed with life, she was the kind of girl people noticed. When she laughed, the walls seemed to soften. When she ran across the fields with her dupatta flying behind her, even the wind felt jealous. In the lanes of the village, whispers often followed her, "Such beauty, such innocence... she will be a bride soon."

But her father, an aging man with worn hands and a heart bigger than his pocket, always shook his head at such talk.

"My daughter will study," he would tell the men at the tea stall. "She will grow to be more than someone's wife. Allah has given her a mind, and I want it to shine."

For Naila, her father's words were a shield. She never dreamed of early marriage or the heavy jewellery other girls envied. She dreamed of blackboards, of books, of sitting in a

classroom where her name would be called not as a wife, but as a student.

But fate is never as gentle as a father's dream. Fate arrived in the shape of a boy named Junaid.

He was eighteen, tall, with the arrogance of youth in his eyes. He came from a distant branch of their family, and when he looked at Naila, he did not see a child still clinging to her schoolbooks. He saw a possession. A prize. Something that would belong to him, whether she wanted it or not.

At first, Naila thought little of it. He was just another older cousin who lingered too long when she poured tea, who asked questions that made her cheeks burn. But slowly, his eyes began to haunt her. His words grew bolder, and before long, the whispers of his desire reached her father.

Her father refused.

"She is a child," he said. "She has a life ahead of her. I will not cut her wings just because someone has a liking for her."

But Junaid's want was not gentle. It turned into obsession, then into threat. He cornered Naila one evening, his voice low and dangerous.

"If you don't become mine," he said, "I will end my life. And it will be your fault. The blood will be on your hands, and your father will never live down the shame."

A girl of fourteen does not know how to fight such darkness. She trembled, she wept, and she prayed. When her father heard of the threats, his heart clenched with fear. Honor in their village was fragile. One scandal could break a family forever. And so, against every instinct, against every dream he held for her, he gave in.

The wedding was small, hurried, more like a burial of childhood than a celebration. The bangles slid onto Naila's

wrists, heavy and cold. The henna on her hands smelled of endings, not beginnings. As the village women sang wedding songs, Naila's eyes searched for her father's. They were wet, clouded, full of regret.

She wanted to scream, Abbu, don't let them take me. Don't let them end me before I've even begun. But her voice never came out.

And so, the girl who once ran free in the fields was led into a house where walls became her cage.

Junaid's family were not people of warmth. From the first day, they made their disdain clear.

"She brings nothing," one aunt muttered.

"Her family is poor. What use is this girl?" another said.

"She is too young, too pampered. She will learn," his mother added, her eyes sharp as blades.

Naila stood in the center of the courtyard, her head bowed, her henna-stained hands trembling. She did not understand why her smile, her innocence, her very being, things that had made her father so proud, suddenly became weapons others used to wound her.

The nights were worse. Junaid, who had threatened death if he did not have her, became a stranger in her room. He did not speak of love, of promises, or of partnership. His hands demanded, his voice commanded, his eyes carried only hunger. For him, she was not a wife. She was a body. A body to use, a body to claim, a body to silence.

She lay awake after each night, her face turned to the wall, her body aching in ways she did not have the words for. She wanted to tell her father, but how could she? The shame would crush him. So, she swallowed her pain in silence, carrying it like a hidden wound no one cared to see.

Her days became endless chores, her nights became endless torment. The laughter that once filled her lungs now felt like a forgotten language.

But it was not just her marriage that broke her. It was the venom of her in-laws.

They taunted her father's poverty.

"They are so poor they would rob from our house if given the chance."

"They sent us this girl because they had nothing else to give."

Each word was like a dagger. And when those words reached her father's ears, when he heard the insults hurled at him because of her, his heart could not bear it. He returned home that night, his chest heavy, his breath shallow. At the hour of Fajr, while the world prayed, his heart gave way.

He was gone.

Naila did not just lose a father that day. She lost her only protector, her only ally, the one person who saw her not as a burden, not as a possession, but as a soul deserving of love and light.

From that day, something in her shifted. She realized the world would not save her. She realized she was alone.

And yet, somewhere deep within her breaking heart, a tiny ember glowed. An ember of defiance. An ember of survival.

Because if the world would not give her dignity, she would carve it out of the darkness herself.

This was only the beginning of Naila's story. A story not of pity, but of power. A story of how a girl sold to silence would rise to speak. A story of how a woman broken in body would

heal in spirit. A story of how she would one day look at the morning sky and whisper, "I am my own dawn."

The morning after her father's death was unlike any other morning she had known.

Usually, dawn has been a quiet moment of promise. The azaan echoing through the village used to feel like a gentle call to rise, a reminder that the world was still alive, that somewhere, hope still existed. But that morning, the azaan sounded like a lament, as though the village itself was mourning with her.

Naila sat at the edge of her bed in her in-laws' house, her body cold, her hands trembling, her mind refusing to believe what she had been told the night before. Her father, her shield, her only refuge, was gone.

She wanted to scream, to collapse on the floor, to wail until the skies broke open, but she couldn't. Her tears were unwelcome in this house.

Her mother-in-law's voice had been sharp the moment the news arrived.

"Your father has died, and already tongues will wag. They will say his poverty killed him. They will say he couldn't bear the shame of marrying you into our house. And all of it will be true."

The words seared through Naila like fire. She wanted to run, to reach her father's body, to kiss his forehead one last time, but she was not given permission. Her husband, Junaid, stood at the doorway, his arms crossed, his expression unreadable.

"You are not going," he said flatly. "You belong here now. The dead are gone. The living must stay where they are needed."

Her knees nearly buckled. "Please," she whispered. "Just once. Please let me see him."

But Junaid's eyes hardened. "No. Do not argue."

And that was it. Naila never got to say goodbye. She never saw the father who had once carried her on his shoulders, who had dreamed of sending her to school, who had defended her laughter when the world tried to silence it. She never placed her hand on his still chest, never whispered her love into his lifeless ear.

Instead, she mourned in silence, her sobs muffled by her pillow, her tears soaking into sheets that smelled of her captivity.

It was then she realized a terrible truth: her grief was hers alone.

Days blurred into weeks, and weeks into months.

Naila's world shrank further. The cruelty in her in-laws' words sharpened, their demands grew heavier, their disdain deeper. She became a servant in her own home, scrubbing floors, fetching water, kneading dough until her fingers blistered. If she faltered, the lash of their tongues, or worse, the sting of her husband's hand, reminded her of her place.

At night, the torment was different. Junaid's touch was never gentle, never born of love. He treated her body like an entitlement, a place to dump his hunger, his anger, his frustration. There were nights when she bit her own wrist to stop her screams from escaping, nights when she lay broken in the dark, wishing she could peel her skin off and escape it.

And yet, every time dawn came, she rose. Broken, but not destroyed.

There was a secret in her heart she carried even in the darkest nights: the memory of her father's voice.

"You are my brave one," he used to say. "Even if the world burns, you must not let the fire touch your soul."

Those words were her hidden armor. She clung to them when she felt like drowning, whispered them under her breath when her body felt like it no longer belonged to her.

But the world was not done testing her.

Soon, whispers began again in the courtyard.

"She has not given him a child."

"What use is a wife who cannot be a mother?"

"She brings only bad luck, her father is dead, her womb is empty."

The words clawed at Naila, not because they were true, how could anyone decide such things so quickly? but because they echoed every insecurity that lived in her already wounded heart.

When Junaid's mother spat those words at her face one morning, Naila's silence was mistaken for guilt. Her husband's temper erupted. That night, his fists rained down on her, fueled by the poisonous chorus of his family.

"You are worthless!" he shouted, striking her. "Even God does not want you to bear my child!"

Her lip split. Her ribs ached. Her body curled into itself on the cold floor. But something inside her rose that night, a tiny flame, faint but real.

As she lay bleeding, she realized: if she kept living like this, her spirit would die long before her body ever did.

It was not a rebellion at first. It was survival.

She began to notice the small ways she could resist. When they hurled insults, she stopped crying in front of them. When

her husband's fists rose, she learned to swallow her screams, denying him the satisfaction of her fear. When the house demanded her labor, she did it silently, but inside, she whispered to herself: I am more than this. I am more than their words. I am more than their cruelty.

At night, after Junaid finally fell into his restless sleep, she would sit by the small window of their room, staring at the stars. Sometimes, she imagined her father sitting among them, watching her, sending her strength through their glow.

One night, she whispered into the sky: "Abbu, I don't know how long I can survive this. But for you, I will not give up. For you, I will not let them break me."

Her voice cracked, but her resolve hardened.

By the time Naila turned sixteen, the girl who had once been full of innocence was gone. In her place stood someone harder, quieter, but also sharper. Her body carried scars, but her spirit carried steel.

Her in-laws still mocked her, her husband still bruised her, the world still turned a blind eye, but something in her had shifted. She had begun to see herself not as a victim, but as a survivor.

And slowly, deep within her, a seed of defiance began to grow.

It would be years before that seed bloomed, years before she found the courage to walk away, years before she discovered the power of her own name. But already, the soil of her soul had begun to crack open, making way for roots of resilience.

This was the hidden truth of Naila's life, the truth so many women in her world carried silently. Behind every closed door, behind every polite smile in the market, behind every

lowered gaze in the courtyard, there were wars being fought. Wars of dignity, wars of survival, wars of spirit.

And though Naila did not yet know it, her war would one day become her victory.

For within her suffering lay the foundation of something the world could not yet see: the rise of a woman who would no longer beg for freedom, but claim it.

The day would come when she would no longer whisper her father's words, but live them.

The day would come when she would no longer be just Naila, the broken wife, the grieving daughter.

She would be Naila, the dawn.

Chapter One

The Girl Called Naila

The sun rose slowly over the small village of Bhurhanpur, painting the mud huts, neem trees, and rice fields in soft gold. It was a morning like every other, buffaloes snorted lazily under thatched sheds, roosters crowed from muddy courtyards, and women swept their verandahs with stiff jhaarus, raising little clouds of dust that danced in the light.

But inside one particular house, built from clay bricks and painted with a thin layer of lime, lived a girl whose laughter woke up the dawn itself. Her name was Naila.

At fourteen, Naila was a vision of delicate beauty and quiet grace. Petite and slender, with skin as fair as fresh cream and cheeks tinted in natural rose, she looked like a doll carved out of the village's secret dreams. Her almond-shaped brown eyes glowed with childish mischief and softness. Long black hair framed her innocent face, tied loosely in a braid that swung down her back as she walked barefoot across the cool earthen floor every morning.

She was her father's pride, her mother's silent joy, and the village's soft admiration. Elderly women often paused at the well to watch her fill water pots with practised ease, her movements graceful and patient.

"Look at her, Mashallah," they would whisper to each other, adjusting their cotton dupattas over their heads. "Such beauty at such a young age. She will bring honour to whoever marries her."

But if anyone ever suggested her marriage, her father, Ibrahim, a tall thin man with a greying beard and tired brown eyes, would smile softly and shake his head.

“No,” he would say gently. “My Naila will study first. She will write her name on paper, read books, and learn the world beyond these rice fields. Marriage can wait. Let her be a child for now.”

Ibrahim worked as a carpenter in the neighbouring town, leaving home at dawn on his rickety bicycle and returning only after sunset, his kurta stained with sawdust and sweat. His wife, Razia, was a quiet woman with dark circles under her eyes, but they softened each time she looked at her daughter.

Naila woke up before sunrise every day. The chill of dawn clung to her bones as she stepped out to brush her teeth with neem twigs, her bare feet pressing into cold mud, sending shivers up her spine. She washed her face with water drawn from the well, the icy drops making her giggle softly. Birds chirped in the neem tree above her, their wings fluttering in morning prayer.

She wore a simple yellow cotton frock, faded and torn near the hem, but it still looked beautiful on her petite frame. Razia oiled and combed her long hair, braiding it neatly while Naila winced each time the comb caught a stubborn knot.

“Stay still, silly girl,” Razia would scold softly. “Your hair is your honour. Keep it clean and neat.”

After sweeping the courtyard, cleaning the mud stove, and washing the dishes from last night’s dinner, she sat cross-legged on the chatai mat under the neem tree, reading from her tattered Urdu textbook. Her small index finger traced each alphabet carefully, her lips moving soundlessly.

Her father had bought that book from a second-hand market in town. It had a faded blue cover with corners torn off,

but to Naila, it was her treasure chest. She read it every morning before the household woke fully and chores swallowed her day.

Sometimes, she dreamed of wearing a clean white uniform and going to the village school with the other girls. But her father couldn't afford the fees or books for her formal schooling. Still, he sat with her each night, teaching her alphabets and simple words under the flickering lantern light.

"Naila," he would say, his voice tired but loving, "read this line again."

She would repeat the sentence shakily, and each time she got it right, he smiled, his eyes crinkling with pride. "Mashallah, meri beti. You will go further than any girl in this village."

Those words were her secret prayer. Each dawn, as she read her textbook under the neem tree, she repeated them silently to herself. "I will go further... I will learn... I will become something."

After studying, she helped her mother prepare breakfast. The kitchen was a small corner of their mud house with a chulha built from clay. She rolled dough into uneven rotis, laughing each time her mother scolded her for burning the edges on the open fire.

When breakfast was ready, her little brother, Zain, would run into the kitchen, rubbing sleep from his eyes. At six, he was a mischievous boy with wild hair and an infectious laugh. He sat cross-legged, waiting impatiently as Naila placed a roti with sugar and ghee in front of him.

"Eat slowly," she scolded gently, wiping his sticky fingers with her dupatta. He stuck out his tongue at her, making her laugh so loudly that her mother shook her head with a helpless smile.

After breakfast, she carried the empty pots to the well again, washing them with cool water. Her bangles clinked softly against the steel, their music blending with the rustling neem leaves. Sometimes, as she washed dishes, she hummed old film songs she heard from neighbour's radios in the evenings.

“Mere sapno ki rani kab aayegi tu...”

Her soft voice floated through the morning air, mingling with birdsong. She felt the lyrics fill her chest with a strange longing, for what, she did not know yet. She only felt her heart expand with dreams she could not name.

At noon, after the day's chores, she ran barefoot to the fields where other girls her age gathered under the banyan tree. They plucked tiny wildflowers, wove them into thin garlands, and placed them on each other's hair, giggling and admiring themselves like little brides.

“Naila, when will you get married?” asked Ruksana, her neighbour's daughter with dark curly hair.

Naila shrugged, braiding a pink wildflower into her friend's hair. “Abbu says after I finish studying.”

The girls laughed softly, covering their mouths shyly. “Study? What will you become, a madam from the city?” teased Ruksana.

Naila smiled faintly, her eyes turning distant. “Maybe... maybe a teacher. Or a nurse... or someone who reads big books.”

They laughed again, their voices ringing like windchimes. But Naila's smile lingered, dreamy and soft. In her secret heart, she saw herself walking down a city road, holding books to her chest, wearing sandals and clean clothes, her hair tied neatly with a white ribbon.

When the sun dipped westward, she ran back home to sweep the courtyard again, fill water pots for the evening, and feed the goats their leftover rotis. At dusk, she lit the clay lamp near their small shrine, bowing her head in silent prayer.

“Allah, keep Abbu safe. Keep Ammi strong. Make Zain a good boy. And... Please let me study more.”

Her prayers were always simple, unselfish, filled with gratitude. She never asked for riches, jewellery, or even new clothes. All she wanted was to keep learning. That was her only dream.

Each evening, as her father returned from town, she ran to greet him, taking his tool bag from his trembling hands. His cracked feet were covered in sawdust and mud. She helped him wash them in a steel tub, rubbing them gently with soap as he closed his eyes in tired relief.

“You are my strength, Naila,” he whispered each time, placing his rough palm on her head. “I want you to become someone strong... someone respected.”

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I will, Abbu. I promise.”

After dinner, she sat beside him under the lantern, reading from her Urdu textbook as he corrected her softly. The quiet courtyard filled with their hushed voices, the soft rustle of neem leaves, and distant cricket songs. Her mother sat beside them, sewing old clothes under the dim light, her eyes stealing glances at them with silent joy.

That night, after everyone slept, Naila lay awake on her thin mattress, staring up at the cracked mud ceiling. The moonlight streamed in through the small window, painting her face in silver glow. She closed her eyes, imagining the world beyond Bhurhanpur – tall buildings, city lights, clean roads, libraries, and hospitals.

She imagined herself walking those roads, wearing ironed clothes and polished shoes. In her dream, people called her “Naila madam,” and her heart filled with a quiet pride. She slept with a small smile on her lips, her fingers curled around her Urdu textbook, as the neem branches swayed softly in the warm summer breeze outside.

She did not know then that life was waiting to pull her into its darkest alleys. That before she would ever write her name on a form proudly, her name would be whispered with shame in silent streets. That before she would wear clean sandals, her feet would bleed walking roads no girl should ever walk.

But that night, under the quiet moon, she was still just Naila – a girl with rosy cheeks, soft dreams, and a heart untouched by darkness.

Chapter Two

A Promise of Love

The rains arrived late that year. The parched rice fields cracked under the relentless sun until grey monsoon clouds finally rolled across the horizon, casting the village in trembling anticipation. The smell of wet earth rose like prayer as the first drops fell, soaking the dusty lanes, dripping from banana leaves, and filling the empty ponds where frogs croaked their welcome songs.

For Naila, rain was a secret joy. She ran barefoot across the courtyard, her yellow cotton frock sticking to her thin frame as water soaked her hair and dripped from her long lashes. She spun slowly under the downpour, giggling softly, her laughter merging with the pattering rain. Her little brother, Zain, squealed and ran after her, slipping in muddy puddles, his knees stained brown.

“Naila, stop!” her mother shouted from the kitchen door, trying to hide her smile. “You will catch a fever, silly girl.”

Naila only laughed louder, pulling Zain into her arms as they danced under the dark sky. For a few moments, she forgot the weight of chores, hunger, and poverty. The rain washed away her worries, leaving her clean and free.

After the rains passed, the village smelled of wet neem bark and freshly sprouted grass. It was during this monsoon that Junaid arrived.

He was the son of her distant relative, visiting from the neighbouring town to help his uncle harvest rice. Tall and well-built, with broad shoulders and wheatish skin, Junaid had thick hair falling over his forehead and dark eyes that always seemed to search for something unspoken. At eighteen, he was already stronger than most village boys, his arms used to lifting sacks of grain and digging soil under the blazing sun.

The first time Naila saw him, she was carrying pots of water on her head from the well. Her thin arms trembled under the heavy steel weight, her dupatta slipping off one shoulder. Junaid was standing near the neem tree, talking to the village shopkeeper. Their eyes met for a moment – her wide with startled innocence, his deep and unreadable.

She lowered her gaze quickly, adjusting her dupatta and walking past him with hurried steps. Her cheeks burned as she felt his eyes following her until she disappeared into the narrow lane leading to her house.

That evening, while shelling peas with her mother, Naila kept replaying the brief moment in her mind. She could still see the way his eyes lingered on her, quiet and intense, without the usual arrogance she saw in village boys. It made her chest flutter with a strange, trembling feeling she could not name.

In the following days, their paths crossed often. When she washed clothes by the pond, he walked past with bundles of harvested rice on his shoulders. When she carried vegetables from the market, he stood near the blacksmith's shop, rubbing sweat off his forehead with his kurta sleeve. Each time their eyes met, she felt her knees weaken. Sometimes, he smiled softly, a small smile that lit up his entire face and her heart would pound so loudly she feared he would hear it across the lane.

One afternoon, as she sat under the neem tree reading her Urdu textbook, Junaid walked up to her quietly, holding a fresh guava in his calloused hand.

“Here,” he said softly, his voice deep but hesitant. “It’s from our orchard.”

She looked up at him, her fingers frozen over the page. The guava was plump and green, tiny raindrops still clinging to its smooth skin. She hesitated, glancing around to see if anyone was watching. No one was nearby except a stray goat nibbling dry leaves.

Slowly, she reached out and took it from his hand, her fingers brushing his rough palm. A jolt of heat shot up her arm, making her gasp softly. He smiled, sitting down on the mud bench a few feet away, his long legs stretched out casually.

“You read Urdu well,” he said, nodding towards her book.

She blinked at him, surprised. No boy had ever spoken to her about reading before. They only talked about cooking, marriage, or teased her beauty. Embarrassed, she closed the book, holding it to her chest.

“My Abbu teaches me at night,” she whispered shyly.

He looked away towards the rice fields, his dark eyes narrowing against the afternoon sun. “That’s good. Girls should study. My Ammi couldn’t even write her own name before she died.”

His voice broke slightly on the last word, and she felt an ache bloom in her chest. Before she could reply, he stood up, dusting off his kurta. “I’ll see you around, Naila,” he said, walking away with long, easy strides.

That night, as rain fell softly on their thatched roof, she lay awake on her thin mattress, staring at the moonlit cracks in the ceiling. Her cheeks burned with the memory of his smile,

his eyes, and the way he said her name so softly, as if it was a secret prayer on his lips.

Over the next few weeks, they spoke whenever they found a quiet moment alone. He told her about his childhood, about helping his father sell vegetables in the town market, about his dream of buying an auto rickshaw one day to drive passengers instead of carrying sacks of rice.

She told him about her Urdu textbook, her father's dreams for her, and how she wanted to study more. Each word they shared felt like weaving invisible threads between their hearts, threads no one else could see but which bound them closer with each meeting.

One evening, as the sun set in fiery orange behind the neem tree, Junaid whispered softly, "I want to marry you, Naila."

Her heart froze. She looked at him, wide-eyed and trembling. "But... Abbu wants me to study first."

He reached out and took her small hand in his large rough one, holding it tightly. "I promise I will let you study. I will work hard, earn money, buy you books, everything. Just say yes."

Tears welled up in her eyes as she looked down at their joined hands. The thought of being his wife – of waking up every morning beside him, cooking his meals, raising children with his gentle eyes – made her chest ache with a painful sweetness.

But when her father learnt of their growing closeness from neighbours' whispers, he was furious.

"I did not raise you to fall in love like shameless city girls," he scolded, his voice shaking with rage. "He is a good boy, yes, but you are still a child. Fourteen is no age for marriage."

Naila cried silently that night, her tears soaking her pillow as the rain thundered outside. Her dreams felt like broken glass scattered across her chest.

The next morning, Junaid came to their house early, his eyes red and swollen. He stood before Ibrahim with trembling hands folded against his chest.

“Please, Chacha, marry her to me,” he begged, his voice hoarse. “If you don’t, I swear to Allah I will drink poison. I cannot live without her.”

Ibrahim felt his heart pound painfully against his ribs. He looked at his daughter, sitting in the corner with her dupatta covering her tear-streaked face. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs.

Razia clasped her hands together, her eyes brimming with tears. “Don’t do this, Junaid beta. She is only fourteen. She has dreams to study.”

But Junaid fell at Ibrahim’s feet, weeping uncontrollably. “I love her, Chacha. I will die without her.”

That evening, Ibrahim sat silently under the neem tree, watching the sky darken with approaching rain clouds. His heart felt heavy with helplessness. He knew his daughter’s dreams, her quiet longing to study, to become something beyond marriage and motherhood. But he also knew the world’s cruelty towards girls who loved before marriage, towards fathers who failed to guard their daughters’ honour.

He closed his eyes, tears slipping down his lined cheeks as he whispered to the silent sky, “Forgive me, Allah. I am only doing what I think will save her.”

And so, within two days, Naila was married to Junaid in a small ceremony under the neem tree. She wore a faded pink saree borrowed from her cousin, her hair braided with wilting

jasmine flowers. Her father's eyes stayed lowered throughout the nikah, his heart aching with silent guilt.

As the maulvi recited verses from the Quran, Naila felt her dreams slip from her fingers like grains of sand. Her eyes blurred with tears as she repeated the words after him, sealing her fate with trembling lips.

That night, as she sat silently on the torn bedsheet spread over the mud floor of Junaid's small house, she stared at her henna-stained palms, the smell of turmeric and jasmine making her stomach turn. Her childhood ended in those quiet moments, her dreams folded away like old clothes kept in rusted trunks.

She did not know then that the boy she loved with innocent devotion would one day become her worst nightmare. That his promise to let her study was just a fleeting lie spoken under mango trees and summer sunsets. That the life ahead would strip her of dignity, innocence, and hope, leaving her with nothing but silent screams buried in her chest.

But that night, as rain fell gently outside their window, Naila closed her eyes and whispered softly to her heart,

"Be strong... for Abbu... for Ammi... for yourself."

She did not yet know that strength would become her only way to survive.

Chapter Three

When Love Turned to Chains

The morning sun streamed into the small mud house, filling it with soft golden light. Naila woke before Junaid, her body aching from sleeping on the hard floor with only a thin cotton quilt between her and the cold earth. She sat up slowly, rubbing her swollen eyes, and looked around the room that was now her world.

The walls were bare except for a torn calendar featuring a Hindu goddess, left by previous tenants. Their metal trunk stood in one corner, locked with an old rusty padlock. A plastic bucket, a cracked mirror, and a wooden comb missing two teeth were the only other belongings scattered around. The smell of damp earth mixed with stale smoke from last night's chulha fire.

She turned to look at Junaid, lying on his back, snoring softly. In sleep, he looked almost like the boy she fell in love with peacefully, vulnerable, his thick eyelashes resting gently against his skin. Her heart twisted painfully. She wanted to brush his hair back from his forehead, to wake him with a kiss the way she had once imagined. But fear kept her frozen. She remembered his words from last night, spoken with drunken slurs and anger.

"Don't wake me before I want to get up... or you will regret it."

His threats still echoed in her ears as she quietly stood up, careful not to let her anklets jingle. She wrapped her faded

dupatta tightly around her thin shoulders and walked barefoot to the courtyard to start her chores.

As she swept the dusty courtyard, her mind drifted back to her wedding day. She remembered the way her father avoided meeting her eyes while tying the small golden locket around her neck. The way her mother's shoulders shook with silent sobs as she placed her trembling hands on Naila's head in blessing. The way Junaid held her wrist tightly as he led her away from her childhood home, his grip painful even in that tender moment.

That night, after everyone left, he had pulled her roughly towards him, the smell of tobacco and sweat filling her senses as tears streamed down her face silently. His kisses were harsh and rushed, his hands rough on her soft skin. She closed her eyes tightly, praying it would end quickly, praying she could return to her dreams of reading and writing, of running barefoot under the neem tree, of being her father's little girl again.

But each day since then had only deepened her wounds.

Junaid worked at a grain merchant's godown in the town, loading and unloading sacks of rice and wheat for daily wages. He left home after noon and returned late at night, reeking of country liquor and sweat. In the mornings, he woke up angry and irritable, kicking buckets or throwing her books across the room if he found them near her pillow.

"Why do you keep reading this nonsense?" he snarled one morning, flinging her Urdu textbook out into the muddy lane. "What will you become by reading? My slave or a madam? Get up and cook food, useless girl."

Her eyes burned as she picked up the wet book later, its pages torn and stained with mud. She pressed it to her chest, silent tears streaming down her cheeks. She could still hear her

father's voice echoing in her mind. "You will go further than any girl in this village."

How far she had come, she thought bitterly. From reading under the neem tree to cooking roti after roti over a smoky stove, from dreaming of becoming a teacher to washing her husband's filthy clothes stained with liquor and sweat each night.

His family lived two houses away, and they visited often. His mother, an obese woman with yellowed teeth and eyes filled with cunning calculation, treated Naila like a servant. She criticised her cooking, mocked her torn clothes, and humiliated her about her father's poverty.

"Your father couldn't even give you proper wedding clothes," she sneered one evening, picking food from her teeth with a matchstick. "Poor people should never have daughters. They become a burden on others. Robbers, that's what they are. He must have stolen half our utensils to send with your dowry."

Naila's heart burned with silent pain as she folded her hands and stood silently, her eyes lowered to the floor. She wanted to scream that her father was an honourable man who worked all day under the hot sun to feed his family, that he loved her more than his life. But words choked in her throat as her father-in-law, a thin man with tobacco-stained lips, joined in mockingly.

"Yes, they are beggars. That's why they sold their daughter to us. It's a charity for them."

The words felt like acid poured into her ears. That night, she cried until her chest hurt, biting down on her dupatta to muffle her sobs as Junaid snored beside her, drunk and unaware.

But life's cruellest blow came a month later when her father visited her.

It was a cold winter morning. The village pond shimmered in the pale sun as Ibrahim walked down the narrow lanes to his daughter's house, his old chappals slapping against cracked heels. He wore his faded grey kurta and a thin cotton shawl draped over his shoulders. In his hands, he carried a small bag of oranges – her favourite fruit since childhood.

When Naila saw him standing at her door, tears sprang to her eyes. She rushed to touch his feet, sobbing into his kurta as he placed a trembling hand on her head.

"How are you, meri jaan?" he asked softly, his voice cracking with emotion.

Before she could answer, Junaid stepped out, yawning loudly. His hair was uncombed, his eyes bloodshot with a hangover.

"Oh, look who's here," he sneered, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "The honourable father-in-law. What did you bring today? More loans to beg off me?"

Ibrahim's thin shoulders stiffened, but he said nothing. He handed the oranges to Naila and folded his hands respectfully. "I came to see my daughter. I will leave soon."

Junaid laughed coldly, lighting a cheap bidi. "Yes, go quickly. We have no time for beggars here."

Naila watched as her father's eyes filled with tears. His lips trembled as he blessed her softly, turned around, and walked away without looking back. That image of his frail back wrapped in the thin cotton shawl, stooped under the weight of humiliation burned itself into her soul forever.

He returned home that afternoon, praying his Dhuhr namaaz silently, tears falling onto the prayer mat as he bent

his forehead down to the cold earth. When he rose from sujud, his heart clenched tightly. Pain shot down his left arm. His breathing became ragged and shallow. Before his wife could run to hold him, he collapsed to the floor, clutching his chest, his eyes wide open in silent agony.

By Fajr, he was gone.

When the news reached Naila, her body went numb. The world around her spun into darkness. She fell to her knees on the cold mud floor, her screams echoing off the bare walls as Junaid stood quietly, his expression blank. For days, she did not eat or speak. Her eyes remained swollen and red, staring unseeingly at the cracked ceiling above her.

In her mind, she replayed her father's last visit over and over – his tired eyes filled with love, his trembling lips blessing her, his stooped shoulders walking away in silent shame. The pain clawed at her heart until it felt like bleeding from within.

Junaid showed no sympathy. Instead, he became crueler. He slapped her if the roti edges were burnt, kicked her if she spilled water on the floor, pulled her hair if she ever mentioned her father's name again.

"Your father is dead because he was weak, just like you," he spat at her one night, his breath heavy with liquor. "If you want to live, learn to shut your mouth."

Soon after, she discovered she was pregnant.

For a brief moment, a flicker of light entered her dark world. She imagined a tiny child with her father's eyes and gentle smile. She imagined holding him in her arms, singing old folk songs under the neem tree, watching him run barefoot through the village lanes like she once did.

But pregnancy brought no joy from Junaid. He cursed her swollen belly, calling it a burden he never asked for. His

mother mocked her weakness, saying she would die in childbirth like worthless village girls do.

The day her labour pains began, Junaid was drunk, playing cards with neighbours. She lay writhing on the cold mud floor, clutching her dupatta between her teeth to keep from screaming as her mother-in-law shouted insults from the kitchen.

“Don’t scream like a dying goat,” she barked. “Women give birth every day. Stop acting like a queen.”

But when Noor was born just before dawn, his first cries piercing the silent house, Naila felt a strength rise within her like never before. She pressed his warm tiny body to her chest, tears streaming down her face as she whispered shakily,

“You are my light, my Noor. I will keep you safe. I promise.”

For a few months, motherhood gave her quiet purpose. She woke at dawn to wash his small clothes, cooked and cleaned with him tied to her chest in a cloth sling, and sang him lullabies each night under the flickering lantern.

But Junaid’s anger only grew. He began spending his nights in nearby towns, drinking heavily, returning at dawn with lipstick stains on his collar and perfume smells clinging to his kurta. Each time Naila questioned him, he beat her until her arms turned purple and her lips bled. Noor cried helplessly, his tiny fists beating against her chest as she lay curled up, her body shaking with silent sobs.

Then, one evening, as she was bathing Noor in a small steel tub, Junaid came home unexpectedly early. He sat down heavily on the charpoy, watching her with bloodshot eyes. After a long silence, he spoke in a voice so cold it made her skin crawl.

“Pack your things. We’re leaving tomorrow.”

She looked up at him in confusion. “Where... where are we going?”

“To the city,” he said, lighting a bidi. “There’s no money here. I’ve arranged something better.”

Hope bloomed in her chest. The city. Maybe there she could find work as a tailor or house help, save enough to send Noor to school, buy books again, rebuild her broken dreams.

But she did not know that his idea of ‘better’ would strip her of every last shred of dignity she still clung to.

That night, as she lay beside Noor, listening to his soft breathing and the distant croak of frogs outside, she pressed her lips to his tiny forehead and whispered shakily,

“I don’t know where life is taking us, my Noor. But I promise you... I will not let the world break you the way it broke me.”

Outside, the monsoon rain fell steadily, washing the dusty lanes and rusted tin roofs. And within the small mud house, a girl who once danced barefoot under rain clouds lay awake, tears soaking her pillow, wondering if the skies would ever pour hope over her life again.

Chapter Four

The Price of Her Silence

Morning broke with the sound of azaan rising faintly from a distant mosque. The sky outside their narrow window glowed grey-blue as dawn painted the city in quiet melancholy. Naila sat beside Noor, her back leaning against the damp wall, staring blankly at the cracked ceiling above. Her thin cotton dupatta was damp with tears, her hair uncombed, eyes red and swollen from the night before.

Junaid lay sprawled on the mattress, snoring loudly. Empty beer bottles rolled near his feet, their glass clinking softly each time he moved. The stale smell of alcohol and sweat hung heavy in the small room.

Naila turned her gaze to Noor. He was curled against her thigh, his tiny chest rising and falling with innocent sleep. Even in slumber, his brows were knitted, his lips pursed into a tiny frown as if the weight of their life pressed upon his dreams too. She stroked his soft hair gently, tears welling up in her eyes.

“Forgive me, my son,” she whispered shakily. “Forgive me for bringing you into this world of pain.”

Her body ached from the beatings Junaid had given her the previous night. Purple bruises bloomed on her arms, her lips were cracked and bleeding, and her left cheek burned with the imprint of his slap. She closed her eyes, her mind replaying his words from last night, each syllable like a blade slicing through her soul.

“You think you’re better than me, don’t you?” he snarled, grabbing her hair and pulling her face close to his. “You think your tears will make me pity you? You’re nothing, Naila. Nothing. Just a burden. I wish I’d never married.”

Then his fists had rained down upon her, each blow filled with years of his failures, his regrets, his cruelty. She did not scream. She had learned long ago that screaming only fed his rage. Instead, she let her mind drift far away, to a place where neem trees swayed in gentle winds, where her father’s kind eyes smiled down at her, where her mother sang lullabies under the starry sky. There, in that memory, no one could touch her. No one could hurt her.

When he finally passed out drunk beside her, she crawled to the bathroom, vomiting blood and bile into the cracked sink. Her knees shook with weakness as she washed her face, staring at her reflection in the broken mirror. The girl staring back at her looked older than her years. Her once rosy cheeks were hollow now, her wide innocent eyes dimmed with silent grief.

“Who are you?” she asked her reflection softly. “Where did you go, Naila?”

But the girl in the mirror did not answer.

The day Junaid took her to the city’s red-light lane remains etched in her memory like acid burns on skin. It was early evening. The sky outside glowed with hues of orange and crimson as the sun dipped behind grey apartment buildings.

She was cooking rice on the small gas stove when he entered, his eyes bloodshot, lips twisted in a drunken sneer.

“Wear that red saree I bought you,” he ordered coldly.

She turned to him, confusion and fear mingling in her chest. “Why? Where are we going?”

He ignored her question, lighting a bidi and exhaling smoke into her face. "Do as I say."

Trembling, she obeyed. The saree was cheap synthetic, its golden border scratching her skin. She wore the plastic bangles he threw at her feet, tied her hair in a bun, and lined her eyes with kajal. As she dressed, Noor clung to her leg, his tiny fingers gripping her saree pallu.

"Maa, where are you going?" he asked softly, his voice trembling.

She knelt down, hugging him tightly, inhaling his baby scent deeply into her chest as if to carry it within her forever. "I'll be back soon, meri jaan," she whispered, kissing his forehead. "Stay here and don't cry."

She walked behind Junaid down narrow lanes lined with flickering yellow bulbs. The red-light street buzzed with men's laughter, lewd whistles, and the clinking of bangles as women in gaudy sarees sat outside their rooms, their faces caked with powder, their lips painted crimson. They watched her with empty eyes as she walked past them, their gazes following her like ghosts trapped within those crumbling walls.

He led her into a small dark room smelling of sweat, cheap perfume, and rotting dampness. A middle-aged man sat on a plastic chair, counting crumpled notes with thick hairy fingers. When he saw Naila, his eyes widened with greedy lust.

"Fresh meat, eh?" he chuckled to Junaid, licking his cracked lips. "How old is she?"

"Eighteen," Junaid lied smoothly, lighting another bidi.

The man laughed, slapping his thigh. "Good. Younger ones earn better."

Naila's knees went weak as realisation crashed upon her. "No... no, please..." she whispered, turning to Junaid with

tears streaming down her face. "Don't do this. I am your wife..."

He slapped her so hard across the face that her vision blurred. The room spun around her as she tasted blood in her mouth. "You are mine to do as I say," he spat, grabbing her hair and yanking her up. "If you want your son to eat tonight, shut up and do your work."

That night was the beginning of her living death.

She became what society calls "a fallen woman." Men came and went, each leaving behind the stink of sweat and semen, each taking a piece of her soul with them. Some were gentle, whispering lies in her ears as they used her trembling body. Some were cruel, biting her until she bled, slapping her if she cried too loudly. All of them left, zipping up their trousers and tossing a crumpled note onto the mattress before disappearing out into the night.

Junaid stood outside each time, collecting money from them before sending in the next. She stopped counting how many came each day. Five, ten, fifteen, her body blurred under their rough hands, her mind drifting far away to the neem tree under which she once read her Urdu books, to her father's soft voice calling her "meri jaan," to the scent of wet earth after monsoon rain.

She never saw that girl again. That girl died the day Junaid sold her body to strangers. What remained was only flesh, to be touched, used, and discarded like waste.

At night, she returned to their dingy room, her body aching with bruises, her chest burning with silent sobs. Noor clung to her, his tiny fingers wiping away her tears with trembling innocence.

"Don't cry, Maa," he whispered softly. "Don't cry."

But how could she not cry? Each day felt like dying a thousand deaths. Each night she prayed for sleep to take her forever. But dawn came cruelly, dragging her back into the living hell that had become her life.

Neighbours began whispering about her. Women spat as she walked past with Noor's small hand in hers.

"Look at her, shameless whore," they sneered. "May Allah curse women like her."

Men whistled and groped her on narrow lanes. Children pointed and laughed, repeating the filthy words they heard their fathers use about her. She kept her eyes lowered, walking quickly, clutching Noor's hand tightly.

At home, Junaid drank day and night, bringing other women to their room, sleeping with them on the same mattress where Noor lay trembling under the thin quilt. If Naila protested, he beat her until her vision went black, until blood poured from her nose onto the dusty floor.

"You are nothing," he spat each time. "Nothing. Just a body to feed me."

She believed him. Her worth became the money she earned for him. The bruises she hid under her saree became her jewellery. The silent tears she swallowed became her prayers.

One evening, after being with four men back-to-back, she sat on the cold cement floor of her room, her knees pulled to her chest, her forehead resting on her arms. Noor sat beside her silently, playing with the torn hem of her saree.

"Maa," he said softly, "why do you cry so much?"

She looked at him, tears streaming down her swollen cheeks. His innocent brown eyes stared at her with confused love. She cupped his small face in her trembling palms, kissing his forehead again and again.

“Because life hurts, my jaan,” she whispered shakily. “Life hurts so much.”

That night, after Noor fell asleep, she lay awake beside him, staring at the cracked ceiling above. The bulb flickered with each passing truck outside, casting trembling shadows on the damp walls.

She thought about her father. His kind eyes. His gentle voice. His dreams for her.

“You will study, Naila,” he had said once, brushing her hair back as she read under the neem tree. “You will become someone. You will not live this life of helplessness like your mother.”

She closed her eyes, silent sobs shaking her thin shoulders. “I’m sorry, Abbu,” she whispered into the darkness. “I failed you. I became everything you feared. I became nothing.”

Outside, the city roared with sirens, rickshaw bells, and drunken laughter. Inside, a young woman lay dying silently, her soul bleeding tears no one could see.

One rainy evening, Junaid returned home drunk and angry. The day’s earnings were less because Naila had been too ill to work beyond three customers. Fever burned her body, her clothes soaked with sweat as she lay curled up on the mattress.

He kicked her hard in the stomach. She cried out in pain, clutching her belly as tears poured down her cheeks.

“Get up and work, you useless whore,” he spat, slapping her across the face. “You think I’ll feed you for free?”

She vomited bile onto the floor, her vision blurring as the fever burned through her veins. Noor cried out in fear, trying to push Junaid away with his tiny hands.

“Don’t hit Maa!” he screamed. “Please don’t hit her!”

Junaid shoved him aside roughly, sending him crashing into the wall. Naila screamed, crawling to her son and pulling him into her trembling arms. Blood trickled down from a cut on his forehead. She pressed her lips to his wound, sobbing uncontrollably.

“Leave us alone, Junaid,” she begged, her voice breaking. “Please... leave us alone.”

But he only laughed coldly, lighting another bidi as he watched them curled together on the floor.

“You will die here, Naila,” he said softly, his voice slurred with liquor. “You will die like the worthless dog you are. And no one will even notice.”

That night, as Noor slept with his head in her lap, she sat awake, staring out the small barred window at the rain falling endlessly onto the dirty street below. Each drop shimmered under the streetlight before dissolving into the mud.

“That is me,” she thought numbly. “A drop that falls and disappears. Forgotten.”

She closed her eyes, pressing her forehead to the cold wall as silent tears streamed down her cheeks. Her body burned with fever. Her heart burned with pain. Her soul burned with the memory of who she once was.

“I was Naila,” she whispered softly to herself, as if reminding her spirit before it left her forever. “I was Naila. I was my Abbu’s jaan. I was a girl who danced under monsoon rains. I was loved. I was alive.”

But life had killed her slowly each day, leaving behind only a body that breathed and bled but never lived.

Outside, dawn approached silently, lighting the world in pale blue hues. Inside, a young woman sat with her dying

spirit, praying for the sun to rise within her again – a sun she had not felt in years.

She did not know if she would ever see it. But for Noor, she decided to keep breathing. Even if her breath was only made of silent screams.

Chapter Five

The First Flicker of Dawn

For days after the fever, Naila felt like a ghost drifting through her own life. Her body moved with mechanical numbness, cooking watery dal for Noor, washing Junaid's filthy clothes with trembling hands, and dragging her bruised flesh to the narrow red-light lanes each evening. But inside, her soul felt absent. She no longer felt the stinging humiliation of men's eyes crawling over her body, no longer flinching when their rough hands grabbed her in dark rooms reeking of sweat and cheap perfume. It was as if the pain had numbed her spirit so completely that even tears refused to come anymore.

But life has a strange way of planting seeds of light in the darkest soils.

One late afternoon, as she sat outside her dingy room peeling potatoes for dinner, Noor playing with bottle caps beside her, an old woman selling green bangles approached. She wore a faded orange saree, her grey hair tied in a neat bun, a large silver nose ring gleaming against her wrinkled skin.

"Bangles, beti?" she asked softly, shaking the small basket of glittering green and red circles. "Buy a pair. They will look beautiful on your hands."

Naila looked up at her tiredly, shaking her head. "No, Amma. I have no money for bangles."

The woman studied her silently for a moment, her old eyes wise and gentle. She sat down beside Naila on the narrow

cement corridor, ignoring the filth and flies buzzing around. She pulled out a pair of tiny green bangles and slipped them onto Noor's thin wrists.

"Here," she said softly, smiling at the boy. "My gift to you."

Noor's face lit up, his eyes sparkling with innocent delight. "Thank you, Dadi!" he squealed, shaking his hands to hear the clinking sound.

The old woman turned to Naila, her gaze gentle but piercing. "You are too young to have such dead eyes, beti," she said quietly. "Your soul is screaming inside you. Don't let it die completely."

Naila felt tears sting her eyes for the first time in weeks. She blinked them back quickly, her lips trembling. "There is nothing left in me, Amma," she whispered hoarsely. "Nothing."

The woman placed a wrinkled hand on her head in silent blessing, her bangles clinking softly. "You think you are alone," she said. "But Allah sees your tears. Even if the world spits on you, He is still watching. He will open a door for you. Wait for it."

She rose and walked away slowly, her basket of bangles swaying gently at her hip. Naila watched her go, tears streaming silently down her cheeks. For the first time in years, she felt a tiny flicker of something she could not name. Was it hope? Or was it merely a memory of what hope once felt like?

That night, Junaid came home drunk, his shirt stained with sweat and paan. He kicked open the door, startling Noor awake from his sleep.

"Get up, bitch," he slurred, grabbing Naila's hair and pulling her up roughly from the mattress. "Today you will work double. Understand?"

She tried to speak, her voice trembling. "Please... I am sick... my body is not healing..."

Before she could finish, his fist crashed into her cheek. She fell onto the cold floor, her vision swimming with tears and pain. Noor screamed, clutching her arm, but Junaid shoved him away roughly.

"Don't make me repeat myself," he growled, lighting a bidi. "Get ready."

That night, three men used her back-to-back. Each left her body bruised and her mind hollowed out a little more. As the last one zipped up his trousers, his eyes crawling over her naked shivering body one final time, he threw a crumpled hundred-rupee note onto the filthy mattress.

"Tell your pimp to buy you soap," he sneered, slamming the door behind him.

She lay there for hours afterwards, unable to move, staring at the flickering bulb above as tears blurred her vision. In her mind, her father's gentle eyes stared back at her.

"You were born to be someone, Naila," his voice whispered softly.

She sobbed silently, pressing her trembling fingers to her lips to muffle her cries so Noor would not wake up and see his mother broken again.

The next morning, Junaid woke with a hangover, cursing and kicking empty beer bottles across the room. He demanded tea, but there was no milk left. Naila sat silently, sewing a tear in Noor's only shirt with trembling fingers.

"Why is there no tea?" he barked.

She did not answer. Her silence burned him with humiliation. He grabbed the shirt from her hands and tore it apart with one rough pull, throwing it into her face.

“Useless woman,” he spat. “You can’t even feed me properly. Why are you alive?”

For the first time, Naila felt anger flicker within her chest like a tiny flame. She stood up slowly, her knees trembling, her heart pounding so loudly she thought it would burst from her ribs.

“I am alive for him,” she said softly, pointing to Noor, who cowered in the corner, tears streaming down his small face.

Junaid’s eyes widened with drunken fury. He raised his hand to slap her, but she did not flinch. She looked into his eyes steadily, her own eyes burning with a silent strength that startled him.

“I am alive for him,” she repeated quietly. “And I will not die until I save him from you.”

For a moment, Junaid froze, his hand hovering in mid-air. Then he laughed bitterly, dropping his arm to his side. “Save him from me?” he sneered, lighting another bidi. “You can’t even save yourself, whore.”

But inside her, something shifted. The flame of anger did not die. It burned brighter, warming her numb soul for the first time in years.

That evening, when she walked to the red-light lane with trembling legs, two older sex workers sat outside on plastic chairs, chewing paan and chatting softly. They were both in their forties, their lined faces painted with heavy makeup, their bangles clinking with each hand gesture.

When Naila walked past, one of them called out to her gently. “Beti, come sit for a minute.”

She hesitated but sat down on the broken step beside them, pulling her dupatta tightly around her thin shoulders.

“You are new here,” the woman said, her kajal-lined eyes studying Naila’s bruised face and hollow eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Naila,” she whispered softly.

The women exchanged a look of silent understanding. “We are Reshma and Parveen,” the other said, placing a wrinkled hand on Naila’s knee. “Don’t worry. You are not alone here.”

For the first time, Naila felt a faint warmth spread through her chest. They spoke for a while – about their lives, about their children sent to live with relatives far away from this filthy street, about the pain of being used every day by men who never saw them as human. They spoke of lost dreams and the silent dignity they still clung to despite everything.

“Don’t ever let him touch your spirit, beti,” Reshma said softly, her bangles clinking as she lifted Naila’s chin to meet her eyes. “He can touch your body, but your soul is yours alone. Don’t give it to him.”

Tears streamed down Naila’s cheeks silently as Parveen pressed a small talisman into her trembling hand. “Keep this with you,” she whispered. “Pray. Even if no one listens, it will keep you alive.”

That night, after the last customer left, she returned home silently. Noor was asleep, curled up in a thin quilt with his thumb in his mouth. Junaid was passed out drunk on the mattress, his bidi still burning between his fingers.

She took the bidi from his hand and crushed it under her foot, tears filling her eyes. In that moment, she felt no hatred for him – only a hollow emptiness where love had once bloomed. She changed Noor’s shirt, wiped his sweaty forehead with her dupatta, and sat beside him, stroking his hair gently.

“Ya Allah,” she prayed softly, her voice trembling with silent grief. “I don’t know what I have done to deserve this life. But please... Please keep my son safe. Let him become someone better. Someone good. Someone who does not beat his wife or sell her body for liquor. Let him be kind. Let him be strong.”

Her tears fell onto his sleeping face, and he stirred slightly, his tiny fingers gripping hers even in sleep. She kissed his forehead, whispering shakily,

“You are the only reason I am still breathing, my Noor. You are my dawn. My morning.”

Outside, the city roared with its drunken laughter, honking buses, and barking stray dogs. But inside, in a dimly lit room smelling of sweat and damp cement, a woman sat with her dying spirit, praying for her son’s life with a love so fierce it could burn the world if it chose to rise.

And that night, for the first time, she felt something awaken within her. A silent determination. A whisper in her soul that said:

“This is not the end. This is the beginning.”

The next morning, when Junaid woke and demanded tea, Naila served it silently. When he spat it out, cursing her cooking, she did not flinch. When he threw the cup against the wall, she only bent down calmly to pick up the broken pieces, her movements graceful and unhurried.

He watched her, confused by her silent composure. The more he cursed her, the calmer she became. The more he beat her, the quieter she grew. Her eyes no longer showed fear, only an unspoken promise to herself.

That evening, as she walked to the red-light lane, Reshma called out to her with a smile. “Look at your eyes today,” she said softly. “There is fire in them.”

Naila smiled faintly, her lips trembling. "I will leave this place someday, Reshma Apa," she whispered, her voice shaking with emotion. "I don't know how... but I will. For Noor. For myself."

Reshma patted her cheek gently. "You will, beti. You will."

The Strength of Broken Women

Over the next few weeks, she began speaking with other women on the lane, learning from their stories of survival. She listened to Pari, who had saved enough to send her daughter to a hostel in another city. She learned from Zeenat, who secretly taught sewing to other girls trapped in their brothels so they could earn money without selling their bodies. She helped Ayesha, a young girl trafficked from Bangladesh, escape with the help of an NGO worker who visited their area weekly.

Each story became a brick in the foundation of her silent strength. Each woman's pain became a mirror to her own. And slowly, Naila began to rise within her spirit, even if her body remained chained in that hell.

One late evening, after serving four customers, she returned home to find Junaid drunk and violent again. He grabbed Noor by the arm, shaking him roughly for spilling water on the floor.

Before she realised what she was doing, Naila lunged forward, grabbing Noor and pulling him behind her protectively. Her eyes burned with rage as she faced Junaid squarely for the first time.

"Don't touch him," she said in a low, trembling voice.

He slapped her hard across the face. But this time, she did not fall. She stood rooted to the floor, her cheek burning with pain but her eyes blazing with a new strength.

“Don’t. Touch. Him.” she repeated, each word punctuated with silent fury.

For a moment, he froze, startled by her defiance. Then he laughed coldly, shoving her aside and stumbling out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

She sank to the floor, sobbing silently as Noor clung to her, his tiny arms wrapped around her neck.

“It’s okay, Maa,” he whispered softly, wiping her tears with his small hands. “I’ll protect you when I grow big.”

She pressed her forehead to his, tears streaming down her face as her heart ached with fierce love and pain.

“You already protect me, my jaan,” she whispered shakily. “You are the only reason I’m still alive.”

That night, as she lay awake beside Noor, listening to his soft breathing, she closed her eyes and prayed once more.

“Ya Allah, You have taken everything from me. My father, my childhood, my dreams, my dignity. But You gave me him. My Noor. My light. Please... please show me a way out. Not for me. For him.”

Outside, the moon rose slowly over the silent slums, its silver light falling onto broken tin roofs and dark narrow lanes. And within a dimly lit room smelling of sweat, dampness, and silent prayers, a woman lay awake with a new flame burning in her chest.

She did not know how or when she would break free. But for the first time in years, she knew with certainty that she would.

Because even the longest night cannot stop the dawn from rising.

Chapter Six

The Darkness Before Dawn

The morning azaan rose from the mosque minarets as if the earth itself was sighing out its grief. Naila sat by the tiny window, watching the faint blush of dawn spread across the sky like a wound slowly healing. Noor slept beside her, curled up in the tattered quilt, his little mouth half open, a soft whistle escaping with each breath.

She sipped black tea from a cracked steel cup, her eyes tired but alert. For weeks now, sleep had abandoned her. Each night, she lay awake listening to Noor's breathing, watching shadows creep across the damp walls, thinking, planning, praying.

"How do I leave this hell?" she asked herself again and again. "Where do I go with a child and no money?"

But beneath her fear pulsed a quiet certainty. I will leave. I will. The flame lit within her would not die now. It burned with silent, stubborn hope.

It was late evening when Junaid returned home reeking of liquor and stale sweat. His eyes were bloodshot, his beard matted with dried paan. Naila saw the emptiness in his gaze – a darkness so deep it could swallow the world whole. She tightened her grip on Noor's tiny hand.

"Get ready," he slurred, tossing her a flimsy yellow saree. "You have five clients tonight."

She swallowed the nausea rising in her throat. Fever still burned her body, her knees trembled with weakness, but she stood up silently and changed her clothes behind the thin curtain. Noor watched her with tearful eyes.

“Maa, don’t go,” he whispered, clutching her leg. “Please don’t go today.”

She knelt down, hugging him tightly, inhaling his baby scent to strengthen her breaking spirit. “I have to, meri jaan,” she whispered shakily. “For you.”

But that night, as Junaid dragged her down the filthy lanes, she felt a new kind of rage rise within her. The men waiting outside the tiny room eyed her hungrily, their teeth stained with tobacco, their breaths reeking of cheap country liquor.

She felt her stomach churn as the first man entered, slamming the door behind him. His rough hands tore at her blouse as she stared blankly at the cracked ceiling, counting each breath to survive his weight crushing her ribs.

The second and third men came and left, leaving behind sweaty fingerprints on her bruised skin. By the time the fourth arrived, her mind floated far away from her body. She no longer felt pain, only a hollow emptiness where her spirit used to live.

After the fifth man zipped up his trousers and left, she lay curled up on the mattress, tears dripping silently onto the damp sheet. She dressed quickly, her limbs shaking with exhaustion. Junaid waited outside, counting the money with greedy eyes.

“You earn well today,” he said coldly, shoving the crumpled notes into his pocket. “Tomorrow, you will work with Reshma Apa’s clients too.”

She looked at him, her eyes burning with silent fury. “I am not your slave.”

Before she realised it, his fist smashed into her face, splitting her lower lip open. Blood poured down her chin as he grabbed her hair and pulled her close.

“You are mine to do as I say,” he hissed, his breath sour with liquor. “Don’t ever forget that.”

She did not flinch. She did not cry. She only looked into his eyes, her voice trembling with rage as she whispered, “One day, Junaid, you will lose everything. Because a man who treats his wife like dirt is already cursed.”

He slapped her again, harder this time, sending her crashing into the mud. She tasted blood and earth in her mouth, the bitter flavour mingling with her tears.

The next morning, as she washed Noor’s torn shirt under the community tap, Reshma Apa approached quietly, her face solemn.

“Beti,” she said gently, touching Naila’s shoulder. “Your mother sent a message from the village. Your father... he passed away two nights ago.”

For a moment, the world fell silent. The sound of crows cawing, rickshaw bells jingling, and children playing faded into a distant echo. She felt her chest tighten painfully as tears blurred her vision.

“How... how did he...?” she whispered hoarsely.

“Heart attack,” Reshma said softly, squeezing her trembling shoulder. “After Junaid threatened him for more dowry last week. He could not bear the shame, Naila.”

Naila sank to the ground, pressing her forehead to her knees as silent sobs shook her thin shoulders. Images of her father’s gentle smile, his tired eyes, his calloused hands holding hers as they walked to the mosque – each memory pierced her like glass shards under skin.

“I am sorry, Abbu,” she cried silently. “I couldn’t be your pride. I couldn’t even come to see you one last time...”

When she returned to her room that evening, Junaid was drinking again, laughing loudly with two of his friends. She stood before him, tears streaming down her swollen face.

“My father died,” she whispered.

He looked up lazily, his bloodshot eyes flickering with cruel indifference. “Good. One less mouth to feed in this world.”

She slapped him. The sound echoed through the small room like a gunshot. His friends fell silent, staring in shock.

For a moment, Junaid froze. Then, with a roar of drunken rage, he lunged at her, grabbing her by the throat and slamming her against the wall. She gasped for air, her feet kicking helplessly as his fingers dug into her windpipe.

Noor screamed, pulling at his father’s kurta, crying loudly, “Leave Maa! Please leave Maa!”

Finally, Junaid threw her to the floor, cursing and spitting on her face. He stormed out of the room, slamming the door so hard the rusted hinges creaked in protest.

She lay there for hours, coughing and sobbing, Noor cradling her head in his tiny lap, wiping her tears with his little hands.

That night, as the rain fell relentlessly outside, dripping through the holes in their tin roof, she held Noor close to her chest, her heart pounding with a new determination.

“I will not die here,” she whispered into his hair, tasting the salt of her tears. “I will not let you grow up in this hell.”

The next morning, when Junaid woke up with a hangover and demanded tea, she served him silently. He did not notice

the small bag hidden under Noor's torn quilt – a change of clothes, her prayer mat, and the two hundred rupees she had saved secretly from her earnings over the months.

That afternoon, while Junaid slept drunkenly, she took Noor's hand and walked out of the room for the last time.

They walked for hours under the blazing sun, their feet blistered from the hot asphalt roads. Noor cried with exhaustion and hunger, his tiny hand gripping hers weakly. Finally, she found an old mosque with a shady neem tree in the courtyard. She sat under it, pulling Noor into her lap, rocking him gently as he slept.

Her stomach ached with hunger, but she ignored it. Her mind raced with silent prayers.

“Ya Allah, I left his house. I left his cruelty. Now where do I go? Show me the way...”

As evening descended, an old maulana walking past noticed her sitting under the tree. He paused, studying her tear-streaked face and Noor's sleeping form.

“Daughter, where is your home?” he asked softly.

She looked up at him, tears brimming in her swollen eyes. “I have none,” she whispered brokenly. “My husband... he sold me. Beat me. I left him today.”

The old man sighed, shaking his head sadly. “This world is cruel to women like you. Come inside. Pray. Rest for tonight.”

He led her to a small women's shelter attached to the mosque where three other women and their children lived. A kind old woman named Razia cooked them rice and dal. Noor ate greedily, tears rolling down his cheeks as he tasted food after two days of hunger.

That night, Naila sat on a thin mattress in a dimly lit corner, whispering her prayers with trembling lips. For the first time in years, she felt a faint sense of peace settle over her weary heart.

“Thank you, Allah,” she whispered shakily. “Thank you for giving me the courage to leave.”

Over the next weeks, Razia Apa taught her to sew blouses and kurtas, paying her a small wage from local orders. Naila worked from dawn to dusk, her fingers blistered but her chest swelling with a new pride each time Razia handed her a hundred-rupee note.

“You are strong, beti,” Razia said softly one evening, watching her rock Noor to sleep. “Stronger than most men I’ve seen.”

Naila smiled faintly, tears filling her eyes. “I am only surviving, Apa.”

“No,” Razia corrected gently, “you are living now. There is a difference.”

Two months later, as she returned from the market with Noor, she saw Junaid waiting outside the shelter gate. He was drunk, his eyes bloodshot with fury.

“Come back home,” he slurred, grabbing her arm roughly. “Who will earn for me if you’re gone?”

She pulled her arm away, her heart pounding with terror but her voice steady. “I will never return to you, Junaid. Never.”

He raised his hand to slap her, but Razia and two other women came running out, shouting angrily. Within minutes, the mosque guards arrived and dragged Junaid away, cursing and screaming threats into the dusty evening air.

Naila collapsed onto the ground, trembling with relief as Noor hugged her tightly.

That night, as she lay under the same neem tree, watching the moon rise in silent grace, she felt something shift within her chest. For the first time, she allowed herself to believe:

“I am free.”

She pressed her palm to her chest, feeling her heart beat strong and steady under her thin ribs. Tears streamed down her face as she whispered shakily,

“Abbu, can you see me? Maa, can you hear me? I am not a prostitute anymore. I am not his property anymore. I am Naila. Your Naila.”

Beside her, Noor slept peacefully, his small fingers curled around her dupatta as if to anchor himself to her love.

She looked at him through her tears, her lips trembling with a fierce smile.

“You will study, my son,” she whispered into the quiet night. “You will become someone good. Someone kind. Someone who will make this world better. I promise you.”

And that night, under the moonlit neem tree, as the wind rustled its leaves in soft lullabies, a young woman who had been raped by life a thousand times found her first taste of dignity.

The journey ahead was still long and uncertain. But for now, she allowed herself to rest.

Because she knew, deep in her soul:

Even the darkest night must end. Even the longest sorrow must find its dawn.

And she, who had been broken into a million pieces, was slowly gathering herself again – becoming her own morning.

Chapter Seven

Rising from the Ashes

Morning came softly over the city's slums, golden light brushing tin rooftops, stray dogs curling under broken carts for warmth, and roosters crowing their tired cries. Naila sat under the neem tree, her back resting against its rough trunk, watching Noor sleep curled up beside her, his thin chest rising and falling in peaceful rhythm.

She closed her eyes and let the quiet wind touch her face. For the first time, her heart felt light, like a bird that had been caged too long and could not believe it was free.

"I am still breathing," she whispered to herself. "And that is enough for today."

Razia Apa woke early to cook breakfast for the women at the shelter. The smell of frying onions, cumin, and parathas wafted through the small courtyard, waking the children one by one. Noor ran to the kitchen, rubbing his eyes, grinning at Razia.

"Dadi, what are you making today?"

"Your favourite, beta," she smiled warmly, placing a soft paratha on his plate. "Eat and grow strong. Your Amma will need you when she becomes old."

Naila came in behind him, wiping her wet hair with a towel, her eyes shining with quiet hope. "Apa, do you need help with the dishes?"

Razia turned to look at her, taking in her bright dupatta, the way her cheeks had begun to fill out again, her eyes no longer hollow and dead. She smiled softly, tears filling her old eyes.

“No, beti,” she said, touching Naila’s cheek gently. “Today you eat first. You have earned it.”

The First Dream

After breakfast, Naila sat in the sewing room, working on a maroon silk blouse order from a wealthy woman in town. She sewed each bead carefully, her fingers trembling with exhaustion, but her heart alive with purpose.

As she worked, she thought of her childhood – running barefoot through mustard fields, her father’s voice calling her in for dinner, her mother oiling her long black hair with loving hands.

“I want Noor to have memories like that,” she whispered to herself. “Not of dark rooms and men’s filthy smells.”

She paused, tears falling onto the fabric in her lap. Her chest ached with grief for all she had lost, her dignity, her childhood, her father’s love, her mother’s warm embrace. But within that ache burned a new determination.

“I will give him a life worth remembering.”

That evening, as the sun dipped low in crimson surrender, Junaid came back. He stood at the shelter gate, swaying with drunken rage, his shirt stained with liquor and paan, his eyes bloodshot with fury.

“Naila!” he bellowed, slamming his fist against the iron bars. “Come out now!”

The women gathered silently in the courtyard, children hiding behind their mothers. Razia stepped forward, her old eyes flashing with steel.

“Leave this place, Junaid,” she said coldly. “You have no right here.”

He laughed bitterly, spitting red paan juice onto the ground. “She is my wife! Who are you to keep her away from me?”

Naila stepped out from behind Razia, her hands trembling but her back straight. Noor clung to her kurta, his small fingers gripping her tightly.

“I am not your wife anymore,” she said softly, her voice shaking but clear. “I am not your slave. Leave us alone.”

His eyes narrowed with drunken rage. “You think you can survive without me, whore?” he snarled, lunging at her through the gate. The iron bars rattled with his force, but Razia and two guards stepped forward, blocking his reach.

“I will kill you if you don’t come back!” he screamed, spittle flying from his mouth. “You hear me, Naila? You are nothing without me!”

She looked at him, tears blurring her vision. But she did not flinch. She only shook her head slowly.

“You are wrong, Junaid,” she whispered. “I was nothing to you. Now, I am everything for my son.”

He screamed curses at her until his voice cracked, his fists pounding uselessly against the locked gate. Finally, exhausted and defeated, he stumbled away into the gathering dusk, cursing her name into the empty streets.

That night, after Noor fell asleep, Naila sat by the window, staring at the moon glowing softly over silent rooftops. Her body ached with exhaustion. Her heart felt heavy with grief and relief in equal measure.

Razia came and sat beside her, wrapping a shawl around her thin shoulders.

“You did well today, beti,” she said softly. “You stood up for yourself.”

Naila buried her face in her hands and sobbed silently, her shoulders shaking with unspoken pain.

“I don’t know how to live without fear anymore, Apa,” she whispered brokenly. “I am so tired of fighting.”

Razia held her close, rocking her gently like a child. “That is how freedom feels at first,” she whispered. “Heavy. Unfamiliar. But soon, it will feel like breathing.”

The next morning, Naila woke with a silent clarity burning in her chest. She dressed Noor in his cleanest shirt, braided his hair neatly, and took him to the madrasa near the mosque.

The old maulana smiled kindly at her. “You wish to admit him to the morning classes?”

She nodded, tears filling her eyes. “I don’t have much money yet. But I will pay each week, whatever I earn from stitching.”

He placed a gentle hand on her head. “Allah will provide, beti. Let him study. He will become your light.”

Days passed into weeks. Naila worked from dawn to dusk, sewing blouses, kurtas, and children’s frocks. Each stitch carried her silent prayers. Each completed order added a brick to the foundation she was building for Noor’s future.

She sat in the sewing room with five other women, each with their own scars and stories. They became her sisters, her family. They laughed together, cried together, held each other on days when the memories threatened to drown them.

One late evening, as Naila folded a stack of finished blouses into brown paper, a young man entered the shelter

courtyard. He wore a crisp white kurta, his hair oiled and combed neatly, a quiet dignity in his gaze.

“Is there a seamstress here named Naila?” he asked gently.

She stepped forward hesitantly, wiping her hands on her dupatta. “I am Naila.”

He smiled softly, bowing his head respectfully. “My sister recommended you. She loved the blouse you stitched for her wedding. I was wondering... would you sew clothes for my store on a commission basis?”

For a moment, she could not speak. Her heart pounded in disbelief. She pressed her trembling hand to her chest, tears filling her eyes.

“Ji... ji... yes, I would be honoured.”

He smiled kindly, handing her a cloth bag full of fabric samples. “Come to the store tomorrow. We will discuss rates.”

As he left, Razia came and hugged her tightly, tears streaming down her wrinkled cheeks.

“Allah has opened a door for you, beti,” she whispered. “Didn’t I tell you? He never forgets His daughters.”

That night, as Noor slept curled up against her chest, Naila stared at the moon, feeling a quiet rebellion rise within her weary bones.

“I will never let any man own me again,” she whispered fiercely. “I will build a life with my own hands. I will stand with dignity and show my son what it means to live with honour.”

Tears fell down her cheeks, but they were not tears of grief. They were tears of healing. Of a soul beginning to reclaim itself after years of silent rape by the world.

Weeks turned into months. Naila woke each morning before dawn, praying Fajr namaaz with Noor by her side. She cooked him hot roti and potato curry before walking him to madrasa, her heart swelling with pride each time his teacher praised his reading.

She spent her days sewing for the young man's store, earning enough to pay for Noor's school fees, milk, vegetables, and new clothes. Each evening, she taught other women in the shelter how to stitch neat seams and bead embroidery so they too could earn with dignity.

Razia watched her with quiet pride. "You are no longer surviving, beti," she said softly one night. "You are living. Breathing. Becoming who Allah created you to be."

Naila smiled through tears, pressing Razia's hands to her forehead. "Whatever I become, Apa, it is because of you."

One morning, Noor came running home from school, his face flushed with excitement.

"Maa, my teacher says I am the best in Urdu class!" he squealed, wrapping his arms around her waist. "He says I can become a teacher or doctor one day if I study hard!"

She knelt down, holding his face in her trembling hands, tears streaming down her cheeks as she whispered shakily,

"You will become whatever you want, meri jaan. You will never be trapped like I was. I promise you."

But darkness always tests those who choose light.

Late one evening, as she returned from delivering a stitched order to the store, she saw Junaid waiting outside the shelter gates. He looked different – thinner, broken, his eyes sunken with alcohol and regret.

"Naila," he called out hoarsely, reaching for her. "Please... come back. I have no one left. I need you."

She looked at him silently, her chest tight with old wounds. He began to sob, falling to his knees on the dusty road.

"I was wrong, Naila," he wept. "I destroyed everything. Please... forgive me. Come back. I will change."

She felt a hollow ache in her chest – grief for the boy he once was, rage for the man he became, and pity for the beggar kneeling before her now.

But she shook her head slowly, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"No," she whispered softly. "I forgive you. But I will never return to you."

He looked up, his tear-streaked face crumpling in despair. "Why, Naila? Why can't you give me one more chance?"

She looked at him, her eyes clear and calm, her voice trembling with finality.

"Because I have finally given myself a chance. And I will never give that up for anyone."

That night, as she sat under the neem tree watching the moon rise above the slum rooftops, Noor slept peacefully in her lap. She closed her eyes and let the breeze touch her tear-streaked face.

"Abbu," she whispered softly into the silent sky, "today, I lived with dignity. Today, I gave Noor a future. Today... I became my own morning."

And far away in the silent heavens, where stars watched over broken daughters with quiet pride, her father's soul smiled softly, finally at peace.

Chapter Eight

Becoming Her Own Morning

The dawn sky turned from dark indigo to dusty rose as Naila sat by the small window, sewing beads onto a royal blue kurta. Noor still slept curled under the thin quilt, his breathing slow and even. A quiet peace settled over the room, interrupted only by the distant azaan calling the faithful to prayer.

She closed her eyes and let the sound wash over her like rain after years of drought.

“Thank you, Allah,” she whispered silently, “for giving me this new life. For giving me courage to endure and strength to begin again.”

Her days fell into a rhythm, waking before sunrise, cooking simple meals for Noor, walking him to madrasa, then working in the sewing room until dusk. Each stitch carried a prayer. Each completed garment brought her closer to a life where dignity was no longer a dream but a daily reality.

In the evenings, she taught stitching to the other women at the shelter – Nasreen, who escaped her husband’s acid attack; Shabana, who ran away from her traffickers; and little Fareeda, only fifteen, pregnant with her rapist’s child.

They sat in a circle, their hands working with silent intensity as Naila guided them with patience and kindness. Sometimes they shared their stories in quiet voices, tears falling onto colourful fabrics. Other times, they sewed in

silence, letting their grief pour into the threads between their fingers.

One evening, as she sewed a pink frock for a wealthy client's daughter, Noor came running into the sewing room, his eyes wide with tears.

"Maa!" he sobbed, throwing himself into her lap. "My classmates said I have no father. They laughed at me. Why don't I have a father like them?"

Her hands trembled around his tiny shoulders. She held him close, her tears falling into his hair.

"You have me, Noor," she whispered brokenly. "And you have Allah. That is enough."

But that night, as he slept with tear-streaked cheeks, she sat awake by the window, staring at the moon through blurred vision.

"Will my son always carry my shame?" she whispered to the silent sky. "Will the world never let him live with dignity because of my past?"

The next morning, she woke before dawn, her chest tight with a fierce determination.

"No," she told herself as she prayed, tears streaming down her face. "I will give him a life where no one can ever call him fatherless. Where his mother's dignity will be his pride."

That day, she took Noor to the sewing store owner, a kind man named Imran who had given her work on commission.

"Bhai," she said softly, her voice trembling with nerves, "can Noor help here after his madrasa classes? Clean or fold clothes? He wants to learn."

Imran looked at Noor's wide, hopeful eyes and smiled gently. "Of course, beti. He can come every afternoon. I will

teach him how to read store invoices and measure cloth. He will learn business.”

That evening, Noor skipped home beside her, his small hand gripping hers tightly, eyes shining with pride.

“Maa, I will become like Bhaiya one day!” he said excitedly. “I will earn money and buy you a big house.”

She smiled, tears filling her eyes. “And I will sew beautiful clothes for your wife one day,” she teased softly.

He giggled and hugged her leg. “I will marry only someone like you, Maa.”

Weeks turned into months. Life settled into a fragile peace. But peace is a delicate thing in a world determined to break women like Naila.

One evening, as she walked home from the store, Noor skipping ahead, she saw a familiar figure waiting near the alley. Her heart stopped.

It was Junaid.

He looked thinner, his eyes sunken with hunger, beard unkempt, clothes filthy. He stumbled forward, his voice slurred with drunken desperation.

“Naila... please... forgive me,” he begged, falling to his knees on the dirt path. “I have nothing left. No one will give me work. Please come back... please.”

She stood frozen, memories of his beatings, his betrayals, his cruelty crashing through her like a storm. Noor clung to her kurta, trembling with fear.

She looked down at the man she once loved, once feared, once hated with every fibre of her soul. Her eyes filled with tears, but her voice was steady.

“No,” she whispered softly. “I forgave you long ago. But I will never return to you. Ever.”

He began to sob, clutching at her feet, but she pulled away, holding Noor’s hand tightly as she walked past him into the gathering dusk.

That night, she sat with the other women in the shelter courtyard under the neem tree, sipping hot tea as they shared their silent griefs under the moonlit sky.

Nasreen told them how her husband threw acid on her face because she could not bear a son. Shabana wept as she recalled the men who raped her in a locked warehouse for weeks before she escaped. Fareeda stared at her pregnant belly with empty eyes, her tears silent as stars.

Naila listened quietly, her own tears falling into her tea. She reached out and held their hands tightly.

“We will survive this,” she whispered fiercely. “We will build a life together. No man will ever own us again.”

They sat there in silence, their hands intertwined, their grief woven into an unbreakable bond of sisterhood.

A week later, Fareeda went into labour. Her screams pierced the silent dawn as the women gathered around, praying feverishly. Naila wiped her sweating face, holding her trembling hand, whispering verses from the Holy Quran to soothe her pain.

After hours of struggle, Fareeda gave birth to a tiny girl with thick black hair and eyes that blinked in sleepy confusion at the world.

The women laughed and cried together, their tears washing away years of silent sorrow.

“She is your morning, Fareeda,” Naila whispered, kissing the baby’s soft cheek. “Your dawn after a long dark night.”

Two months later, Imran Bhai called her to the store office. She sat nervously, wondering if there was a complaint about her stitching.

Instead, he smiled warmly and slid a small brown envelope across the table.

“This is your advance payment,” he said gently. “I want you to start your own stitching unit for our store orders. You can employ other women from the shelter too. I will give you work every month.”

She stared at him in shock, her hands trembling as she picked up the envelope. Tears blurred her vision as she whispered shakily,

“Why... Why are you helping me?”

He smiled softly. “Because my mother was like you. She raised me alone after my father left her. She sewed blouses for rich women in our village until her hands bled. But she taught me dignity is earned by honest work. You remind me of her.”

Naila broke down in silent sobs, pressing her forehead to his feet in gratitude. “May Allah bless you with the highest Jannah,” she whispered through her tears.

That evening, as the women gathered under the neem tree, Naila announced the news. They sat in stunned silence before erupting into tears and laughter.

“Finally, we will work with dignity,” Nasreen wept, hugging Naila tightly. “Finally, we will feed our children with honour.”

They prayed together under the stars, their whispers rising into the night like the first azaan after centuries of silence.

The next morning, as Naila walked Noor to madrasa, the sun rose behind them in a blaze of gold and crimson. She held his hand tightly, her heart swelling with fierce pride.

For the first time in her life, she felt whole. Not because a man loved her. Not because society accepted her. But because she had finally accepted herself.

She was no longer Junaid's wife. No longer her in-laws' punching bag. No longer society's whore.

She was Naila, daughter of a poor farmer, mother of a bright boy, sister to broken women who now sewed their dignity back together one stitch at a time.

She was her own dawn. Her own prayer. Her own morning.

As she kissed Noor's forehead and sent him running into the madrasa courtyard, she stood under the golden light, closing her eyes with a trembling smile.

"Abbu," she whispered softly into the rising sun, "I have become the girl you raised me to be. And today, I know you are proud."

Chapter Nine

The Unfolding Dawn

The azaan rose through the early darkness, echoing off the rooftops and narrow lanes. Naila lay awake on her thin mattress, eyes open, watching shadows dance across the damp walls. Noor slept beside her, his breath soft and warm against her arm.

She turned her face towards the cracked ceiling and whispered, “Allah, thank you for keeping us alive one more day.”

That single sentence carried her life’s entire truth. Survival. Gratitude. And a flicker of hope.

By dawn, she was in the shelter courtyard, folding cloth bundles for the first set of orders from Imran Bhai’s store. Nasreen sat beside her, her face scarred from acid burns but glowing with a new dignity as she measured fabric with trembling fingers.

On the other side, Shabana taught little Fareeda how to thread the sewing machine needle, guiding her small hands patiently.

The courtyard buzzed with quiet industry – women who once cried themselves to sleep now sat with straight backs, their eyes focused and strong.

“Beti,” Razia called out softly, bringing hot chai for everyone. “You are giving these women a life. May Allah bless you with the highest place in Jannah.”

Naila smiled through her tears, wiping her sweaty forehead. “No, Apa. I am only doing what every woman deserves – a chance to live with dignity.”

That afternoon, Noor returned from the madrasa carrying a small trophy in his tiny hands. His eyes shone with excitement as he ran into her lap.

“Maa! I came first in Urdu recitation today!” he squealed, burying his face into her dupatta.

She hugged him tightly, tears streaming down her cheeks. “MashaAllah, beta. I am so proud of you.”

He looked up at her with serious eyes, touching her tear-streaked cheek with his little fingers. “Don’t cry, Maa. I will become a big man one day. I will buy you a palace.”

She laughed softly through her sobs, kissing his forehead. “I don’t need a palace, Noor. You are my palace. You are my morning.”

One humid evening, as she worked late into the night on a wedding lehenga blouse order, a soft knock came on the shelter door. Razia opened it to find Junaid standing there, his clothes torn, eyes bloodshot, tears streaming down his unshaven face.

“Naila...” he whispered hoarsely, “please... I have nowhere left to go.”

Razia blocked the door with her frail body. “Leave,” she said coldly. “You lost the right to come here the day you raised your hand on her.”

But Naila stood up slowly, wiping her hands on her dupatta, her heart pounding with old griefs and silent rage.

“Let him come in, Apa,” she said softly.

Junaid staggered into the small room, collapsing on the floor at her feet, sobbing uncontrollably.

"I am ruined, Naila," he wept. "I lost everything. No work... no home... no friends... I am hungry. Please... forgive me. Take me back."

She looked at the man she once loved, once feared, once despised. Memories flooded her – his fists against her face, his curses burning her ears, his betrayal turning her body into an open market.

For a long moment, silence stretched between them, heavy with unsaid words. Then she spoke, her voice trembling but steady.

"I forgive you, Junaid," she whispered. "But I will never return to you. Ever."

His tear-streaked face crumpled with grief. "Why? Why can't you forgive me enough to come back?"

She knelt down, looking into his broken eyes. "Because I have finally forgiven myself," she said softly, tears streaming down her cheeks. "And I will never betray myself again."

She stood up, her back straight, her heart burning with a calm strength.

"Leave, Junaid," she said quietly. "May Allah guide you. But you and I are over."

Weeks passed. Eid arrived, bringing with it shimmering dupattas, jingling bangles, and the scent of henna and rosewater. Naila woke before dawn to cook sheer khurma in the shelter kitchen, stirring the milk and vermicelli with quiet joy.

Noor sat on the floor, threading bright glass beads into strings to decorate the courtyard. His face glowed with happiness, his laughter filling every silent corner.

As the women gathered to pray Eid namaaz together, their colourful dupattas fluttering in the morning breeze, Naila looked around at her sisters – Nasreen, Shabana, Fareeda – each of them standing with dignity, their eyes shining with hope.

They prayed with trembling voices, tears falling onto prayer mats, whispering silent gratitude to the One who never abandoned them.

The next morning, as Noor sat reading Quranic verses to her, she placed her hand on his little head, tears streaming down her face.

“Noor,” she said softly, “promise me something.”

He looked up with wide, serious eyes. “Anything, Maa.”

“Promise me you will never raise your hand or voice on a woman,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Promise me you will be a man of mercy.”

He nodded solemnly, placing his tiny hand on her heart. “I promise, Maa. I will become the kindest man in the world.”

She hugged him tightly, burying her face in his hair as silent sobs shook her body.

“Then my life is successful,” she whispered in her heart. “Then my suffering was not wasted.”

One evening, Imran Bhai visited the shelter with his wife and daughter. He walked into the sewing room, smiling warmly at the women working there.

“Naila,” he said gently, “I have a proposal. I want you to open a small boutique stall near my store. We will call it Dignity Boutique. You will sell readymade blouses, kurtas, and children’s frocks. The earnings will belong to the shelter women.”

The room fell silent as Naila's tears spilled over. She pressed her trembling hands to her forehead in gratitude.

"Why are you doing so much for us?" she whispered through her tears.

He smiled softly, glancing at his wife who wiped her own tears quietly. "Because my mother raised me by sewing blouses like this," he said. "And because your dignity lifts us all higher."

Two months later, the boutique stall opened under a blue tarpaulin shade, colourful clothes fluttering in the breeze. People from the slums and nearby apartments came to buy their work, blouses embroidered with mirror work, cotton kurtas with neat piping, frocks in bright pinks and yellows.

Each sale added a brick to their dignity. Each customer's praise watered the dying flowers of their souls into new blooms of hope.

That night, after closing the stall, Naila sat with Noor under the neem tree. They ate roti with onion salad, laughing softly as he told her stories from madrasa.

She lay back on the cool earth, staring up at the sky thick with silver stars. Noor curled up beside her, resting his head on her chest.

"Maa," he whispered sleepily, "why do you always look at the sky before sleeping?"

She stroked his hair gently. "Because it reminds me how big Allah's mercy is," she whispered shakily. "And how small our sorrows are under it."

Two weeks later, they received news that Junaid died on a roadside, drunk, alone, and starved. His body was buried by strangers in an unmarked grave.

That night, Naila sat under the neem tree, tears streaming down her face.

“I forgive you, Junaid,” she whispered softly to the silent sky. “May Allah forgive your sins and give you peace.”

She closed her eyes, letting her tears wash away the last threads of hatred binding her to his memory. When she opened them again, she felt light – like a prisoner who had carried chains for so long that freedom felt unnatural.

Months turned into years. Noor grew taller, his shoulders broadening with strength and kindness. The boutique expanded into two stalls, employing twenty women from different shelters across the city.

One winter morning, as she walked Noor to his school entrance, he turned to her, tears in his eyes.

“Maa,” he whispered, “my teacher asked me who my role model is. I told him... it is you.”

She froze, her breath caught in her throat. Tears blurred her vision as she pulled him into her arms.

“You are my pride, Noor,” she whispered brokenly. “You are my dignity. My dawn after the darkest night.”

That evening, as she sat under the neem tree watching the sun dip below the slum rooftops in a blaze of gold and crimson, she closed her eyes and let the wind touch her tear-streaked face.

She pressed her palm to her chest, feeling her heart beat strong and steady under her thin ribs.

“I am Naila,” she whispered into the glowing dusk. “The one who attains. The one who survives. The one who became her own morning.”

And far away in the silent heavens, her father’s soul smiled softly, his hands raised in silent dua, blessing his daughter who was once called shame by society but became her own dignity.

Chapter Ten

The Radiance Beyond Night

Years passed like quiet seasons in a forgotten garden. The shelter's old neem tree grew taller, its branches spreading wide, casting cool shade over the bustling courtyard where dozens of women now worked together.

Naila stood under it one spring morning, watching the younger girls sew mirror work onto lehengas. The sun filtered through bright bougainvillea, scattering shadows across her calm face. Her once trembling fingers now moved with confident grace, teaching each woman to sew a straight seam, fold a neat hem, or bead a neckline with perfect symmetry.

She wore a simple blue cotton kurta, her long hair braided down her back with tiny jasmine buds pinned into it by Fareeda, now a seventeen-year-old mother who smiled with dignity as her daughter played at her feet.

Nasreen managed the fabric accounts. Shabana oversaw quality control. Fareeda handled customers with professional grace. The boutique had expanded into a full-fledged tailoring and embroidery centre called Noor's Dignity Boutique, employing nearly forty women from different shelters and slums across the city.

Every morning as they gathered for Fajr namaaz in the courtyard, their whispered prayers rose together like threads weaving an unbreakable tapestry of dignity.

Noor grew into a tall young man with calm eyes, a kind smile, and broad shoulders shaped by silent responsibility. He walked with dignity, always greeting elders with respect, holding open doors for women, and sitting by the old maulana after Friday prayers to listen to his wisdom.

He studied hard at the government school, earning a scholarship to a prestigious university in the city. Each evening, he returned home to teach Quran recitation to children at the shelter for free.

“Maa,” he said one evening, resting his tired head in her lap as she oiled his hair lovingly, “I want to open a school for children who cannot afford education.”

She smiled softly, her eyes filling with tears. “You will, Noor. Allah will make it happen through your hands.”

The day Noor graduated with honours in Education and Social Work, Naila wore her best teal blue sari with gold embroidery and fresh jasmine in her hair. As she walked into the university auditorium, people turned to look at the graceful woman with proud tears shining in her eyes.

When Noor went on stage to receive his degree, he turned to the audience, his voice shaking with emotion.

“I dedicate this to my mother,” he said, his voice breaking as he looked at her through his tears. “She taught me dignity, patience, and the meaning of being a real man.”

The hall filled with thunderous applause. Naila wept silently, her hands raised in dua, whispering, “Shukr hai, Allah. You gave my life meaning through him.”

With his university stipend and the boutique’s savings, Noor opened a small school in the shelter’s backyard. They called it Subha Ka Madarsa – The School of Dawn – a place where slum children learnt Urdu, Hindi, English,

Mathematics, and Quran recitation under Noor's gentle guidance.

Naila cooked hot chana curry and rotis for the children each day, watching them eat with wide smiles, their hunger-filled eyes glowing with happiness and learning.

One afternoon, a local newspaper reporter visited the boutique. She watched the women working with dignity, their bright dupattas fluttering in the courtyard breeze. She saw Noor teaching children under the neem tree, his calm voice filling the silent air with knowledge and compassion.

The next day, their story appeared on the front page under the headline:

“From Brothel to Boutique: How a Mother and Son Rewrote Destiny”

Customers began pouring in, placing bulk orders for weddings and festivals. NGOs contacted them to hire women from other shelters. University students came to volunteer at Subha Ka Madarsa. Donations arrived to buy desks, books, and ceiling fans for the open classroom.

That winter, Noor received the State Youth Social Work Award for his education initiatives. Naila stood by his side as he accepted the medal from the Chief Minister, tears streaming down her cheeks as camera flashes lit up his proud, gentle smile.

After the ceremony, Noor hugged her tightly, whispering,

“Maa, this is all yours. You gave me life twice. Once by birthing me, and once by raising me with dignity.”

She wept silently, pressing her hands to his chest, feeling his strong heartbeat under her trembling fingers.

Evenings became the most precious hours of her day. She sat under the neem tree with a steaming cup of chai, watching the women return home with wages in their fists and hope in their hearts. Children played with old tyres and sticks, their laughter echoing across rooftops painted in the burnt orange of dusk.

Noor would return from the university library, carrying his notes and books, smiling tiredly at her as he washed his hands and sat beside her.

“Today we learnt about child psychology,” he said one evening. “Did you know, Maa, children who grow up in violence lose their sense of self-worth forever?”

She listened silently, tears filling her eyes. She reached out and stroked his hair with trembling fingers.

“But you never lost your worth, Noor,” she whispered softly. “Because Allah protected your heart.”

Sometimes at night, in her silent prayers before sleep, she thought of Junaid. She wondered if his soul had found peace. She no longer felt hatred, only a distant sorrow, like the memory of a terrible storm that once tore her world apart but could no longer touch her calm sky.

“Allah, forgive him,” she whispered quietly. “He was broken. But I am whole now.”

And with that dua, she would fall asleep, Noor’s steady breathing beside her, the moonlight falling on their small room like a blessing.

One morning, while preparing for a boutique order exhibition in the city, she looked into the mirror as Fareeda draped a rose pink chiffon sari over her shoulders.

Her reflection startled her, a woman with glowing caramel skin, lined with age but bright with wisdom, black hair

streaked with silver and adorned with fresh jasmine, eyes that shone with unbreakable strength.

“Amma,” Fareeda whispered, tears filling her eyes, “you look so beautiful.”

Naila smiled softly, touching her reflection with trembling fingers.

“For years, I thought I was nothing,” she whispered. “But today, I see myself. I am beautiful because I survived.”

At the city exhibition hall, hundreds of people visited their boutique stall. Women admired the delicate beadwork, mirror embroidery, and bright frocks. NGO directors placed bulk orders to employ more women. Fashion designers praised their precision and requested collaborations for upcoming collections.

As Naila explained stitch styles to customers, Noor sat beside her, proudly introducing her as “my mother, the founder of Noor’s Dignity Boutique.”

When a young journalist asked for her life story, she smiled gently, tears filling her eyes.

“I have no story,” she said softly. “I only have prayers stitched into every thread.”

That evening, after the exhibition closed, Noor took her to the city’s largest mosque for Maghrib prayers. As they prayed side by side in the women’s and men’s sections, her tears flowed freely into her dupatta.

“Allah,” she whispered, her forehead pressed to the cool prayer rug, “thank you for my son’s honour. Thank You for my life’s dignity. I came to You with nothing but wounds, and You turned them into wings.”

After prayers, they sat under the mosque's marble arches, sipping chai from paper cups, watching pigeons flutter under glowing lanterns.

"Maa," Noor whispered, "I want to do my Master's in Psychology and open a mental health centre for slum children. So many of them suffer in silence."

She smiled through tears, resting her head on his broad shoulder. "You are already healing them, Noor. You healed me too."

Years passed like gentle rains nurturing a barren land. Noor completed his Master's and opened Subha Mental Health Centre beside Subha Ka Madarsa. Volunteer counsellors taught emotional regulation, trauma healing, and resilience building to street children.

Naila's boutique expanded into a training institute for underprivileged women, offering stitching, embroidery, block printing, computer literacy, and basic accounting skills.

Donors funded a two-storey centre with classrooms, sewing rooms, a clinic, and a prayer hall. On the opening day, Naila cut the red ribbon, her hands trembling with silent prayers as cameras flashed and women wept tears of gratitude around her.

One winter evening, Noor came home with a folded newspaper. He placed it in her lap and sat at her feet, smiling up at her as tears filled his eyes.

She unfolded it with trembling hands to see her own photograph on the front page under the headline:

"From Brothel to Beacon: How Naila Changed Thousands of Lives."

She pressed the paper to her chest, tears falling onto it like silent blessings.

“I never wanted fame, Noor,” she whispered shakily.

He smiled softly, kissing her hands. “This is not fame, Maa. This is your dignity returning to you from the world.”

That night, after Tahajjud, she sat under the neem tree in the quiet courtyard, watching the moon rise behind mosque minarets. The wind rustled jasmine buds in her braided hair. Noor sat beside her, reciting soft Quranic verses to memorise for his next class.

She closed her eyes and let her tears fall onto her prayer beads.

“Allah,” she whispered softly, “I came to You broken and ashamed. You clothed me with honour. You gave me Noor. You gave me these women. You gave me back.”

She smiled through her tears, her chest filling with a silent, unbreakable peace.

“Now I know. Even the longest, darkest nights end. Even a woman like me can become her own morning.”

And as the moonlight fell across her weathered face, illuminating each scar like silver embroidery, Naila knew she was not the girl who was sold, nor the wife who was beaten, nor the whore society called her.

She was a mother, a teacher, a leader, a prayer, and a dawn.

She was Naila.

The one who became her own radiance beyond night.

Epilogue

The Morning That Remained

Years later, the neem tree still stood in the courtyard, its broad branches shading rows of sewing machines lined neatly beneath it. Bright fabrics fluttered in the warm breeze, crimson silks, turquoise cottons, lime-green chiffons embroidered with golden thread. The scent of chai, fresh rotis, and jasmine filled the air as women bent over their work, humming softly to themselves, their faces glowing with quiet dignity.

Naila sat on a low stool, her sari draped gracefully around her slender frame. Strands of silver threaded through her thick black braid, and her lined face glowed with a serene strength that only life's hardest journeys can give.

In her lap lay a blue cotton frock she was hemming for a customer's daughter. Her eyes blurred with tears as she folded the final seam.

How many little girls did I once sew for while my own girlhood was stolen from me? she wondered silently. But instead of pain, her chest filled with gratitude. Because today, those stitches were her power. Her prayer. Her unbroken dignity.

Inside the shelter-turned-training-institute, laughter and chatter rose like festival bells. Women carried trays of sweets and bowls of rose water through the halls lined with framed newspaper cuttings and award plaques. Noor's photograph hung beside hers on the entrance wall, showing him receiving

the State Social Work Excellence Award, his hand resting on her shoulder as she wept with pride.

Today, the institute buzzed with special joy. Noor was getting married.

Naila walked into the preparation room where young girls pinned garlands of fresh mogra to bright satin curtains. Fareeda, now a poised twenty-year-old, dressed Noor's bride, Zoya, in a dark maroon and gold sharara, adjusting her maang tikka with trembling fingers.

"You look like a queen," Fareeda whispered, tears brimming in her almond eyes.

Zoya smiled shyly, her gaze falling to her henna-stained hands, the intricate design covering her palms with Noor's name hidden within floral patterns. She was an orphan who studied at Subha Ka Madarsa, later volunteering at the Mental Health Centre. Noor fell in love with her quiet compassion and soft strength. Today, their souls would unite under Allah's blessings.

As evening fell, the nikaah ceremony began under the neem tree decorated with fairy lights. Men gathered on one side, women on the other, children sitting cross-legged along the aisle lined with rose petals.

Naila sat in the front row, her heart pounding with prayers. As Noor read his vows, tears streamed down her face.

"Allah," she whispered, pressing her trembling hands to her forehead, "thank You for making my son the man I always prayed for. A man who protects dignity instead of destroying it."

After the nikaah, Noor approached her, his eyes brimming with tears. He bent down and touched her feet before hugging her tightly.

“Maa,” he whispered brokenly, “I am everything I am because of you.”

She kissed his forehead, tears falling onto his neatly gelled hair. “No, Noor. You are everything because of Allah’s mercy.”

That night, the courtyard transformed into a glowing garden. Women served biryani, kebabs, and sheer khurma to hundreds of guests. Children ran between tables, squealing with laughter as elders blessed Noor and Zoya with silent duas.

Razia Apa, frail with age but glowing with pride, held Naila’s hands tightly.

“Look at this, beti,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Years ago, you entered my shelter with empty eyes and a broken soul. Today, you are the queen of this place.”

Naila smiled through her tears. “I am nothing, Apa. I am only a woman Allah decided to lift after crushing.”

“No,” Razia said firmly. “You are a woman who lifted herself with Allah’s guidance. That is true faith.”

In the weeks after the wedding, the boutique expanded further with government grants to employ widows and abandoned women across the state. Noor and Zoya began building a second shelter-school in the neighbouring district.

Every evening, as dusk settled like a soft shawl across the rooftops, Naila sat under the neem tree with her prayer beads, whispering quiet gratitude into the cooling wind.

One such evening, Zoya brought her a cup of chai, sitting beside her silently.

“Ammi,” she whispered softly, placing her head on Naila’s shoulder, “teach me to become like you.”

Naila closed her eyes, tears spilling down her lined cheeks.

“Don’t become like me,” she whispered shakily. “Become who Allah made you to be. And never forget your worth, beti. A woman’s dignity is her greatest prayer.”

That night, Naila dreamed of her father for the first time in decades. She saw him sitting under the mango tree of their old village home, wearing his simple white kurta-pyjama, his silver hair ruffled by the breeze.

He looked up at her with tears in his eyes, his hand outstretched.

“My Naila,” he whispered, his voice trembling with love, “I knew you would find your way. I am so proud of you, beti.”

She fell to her knees, weeping into his lap as he stroked her hair with gentle hands.

“Abbu,” she sobbed, “forgive me. I couldn’t fulfil your dreams.”

He lifted her tear-streaked face, smiling softly.

“You fulfilled them in a way I never imagined,” he whispered. “You became Allah’s favourite by protecting your dignity and serving others. There is no greater success than that.”

Years turned quietly, like pages in a prayer book read at dawn. Noor and Zoya had two daughters, Meher and Hina. They grew up playing in the boutique courtyard, learning stitching from their grandmother between madrasa lessons and schoolwork.

As Naila aged, her back bent and her hands grew stiff with arthritis, but her eyes never lost their glow. Every morning, she sat by the window, watching the sun rise behind rooftops, whispering “Alhamdulillah” with each pink ray lighting her wrinkled face.

One winter evening, a young woman journalist came to interview her for an international women's rights documentary.

"Naila Ji," she asked softly, tears brimming in her eyes, "if you could tell your fourteen-year-old self anything today, what would you say?"

Naila closed her eyes, tears sliding down her weathered cheeks.

"I would tell her," she whispered with a trembling smile, "that life will break you a thousand times. But if you hold onto Allah's rope, and your dignity, and your prayers, you will become your own morning one day."

One spring dawn, as birds sang from neem branches heavy with blossoms, Noor entered her room to wake her for Fajr. He found her lying on her thin mattress, eyes closed, her prayer beads clutched in her fingers, her lips curved in a small peaceful smile.

He knelt beside her, sobbing quietly as Zoya entered with Meher and Hina, tears falling silently down their cheeks.

"Maa has become light," Noor whispered brokenly. "She is with Allah now."

They buried her beneath the neem tree she loved, wrapping her frail body in soft white cotton, laying rose petals over her face. Hundreds gathered – women she had taught, children she had fed, men she had inspired, NGOs who had partnered with her work. Noor led her janaza prayer with a shaking voice and tears streaming down his face.

As they lowered her into the earth, he whispered,

"Maa... you were my morning. And now you are my forever light."

Years later, Subha Ka Madarsa expanded into Subha Foundation, running schools and mental health centres across four districts, employing over a thousand women and educating nearly ten thousand children each year.

In the main centre courtyard, under the old neem tree, a marble plaque read:

“In Loving Memory of Naila – The Woman Who Became Her Own Morning And Lit The Dawn For Others.”

Every year on her death anniversary, Noor, Zoya, Meher, Hina, and hundreds of women gathered under the tree, reciting Quran, feeding the poor, and sewing free uniforms for slum children.

They told her story to new trainees, of a girl once sold, beaten, and broken, who rose through faith, dignity, and silent prayer to become her own dawn.

And as each woman learnt her stitches, folded her hems, and threaded her dreams into bright silks, she carried a prayer in her heart:

“May I, too, become my own morning.”

Author's Note

To Every Woman Who Has Ever Been Silenced, and For Every Woman Who Has Ever Risen.

When I sat down to write this book, I wasn't merely writing a story. I was opening a wound, one that has been carried not only by me but by generations of women across the world. A wound that is passed down in whispers, in sighs, in silences that hide pain too heavy to bear. A wound that often goes unnoticed because it has become so normalized that society no longer questions it.

This book is not just Naila's story. It is the story of countless women in villages, towns, and cities across every continent. It is the story of the daughter who grows up in love but is forced into chains too early. It is the story of the wife whose laughter is stolen behind closed doors. It is the story of the mother who cries into her pillow while cooking meals for a family that does not recognize her sacrifice. It is the story of the woman in the marketplace who hides her bruises under her scarf. It is the story of the professional in the city whose heart silently bleeds despite the smile she wears for the world.

Yes, the languages are different. The dresses are different. The customs are different. But the suffering is painfully the same.

Women across the world carry the weight of unspoken helplessness and hopelessness. From the narrow lanes of forgotten villages to the skyscrapers of modern cities, the thread is common: society has told us, directly or indirectly,

that our worth lies not in who we are, but in what we can endure.

The Weight of Helplessness

There is a particular kind of helplessness that only a woman understands.

It is the helplessness of being silenced when your voice trembles with truth.

It is the helplessness of being told to “endure it” when your body aches with bruises.

It is the helplessness of watching your dreams suffocate under duties you never chose.

It is the helplessness of knowing you are intelligent, capable, and worthy, but being denied a chance to prove it.

It is the helplessness of being told that dignity means obedience, even when obedience kills your spirit.

This helplessness is not limited by geography. It is not confined to one culture. It is not locked in rural homes. It exists in boardrooms where women are overlooked for promotions. It exists in marriages where women are treated as property. It exists in families where daughters are told to sacrifice their education for their brothers. It exists in communities where widows are shamed for simply existing.

Helplessness, for women, has been universal.

And yet, in that very helplessness lies something remarkable: the seed of strength.

The Paradox of Being a Woman

Being a woman has always been both vulnerability and power. It is a vulnerability because society has always targeted women first, controlling their bodies, silencing their voices, dictating their choices. But it is also power, because every

attempt to crush a woman has also revealed the resilience she carries inside her.

A woman may be pushed down, but history has shown she rises, again and again. She rises in the mother who walks miles for her child's education. She rises in the girl who studies under streetlights because she was denied electricity. She rises in the widow who builds a life from the ashes of loss. She rises in the survivor who transforms her pain into purpose.

Being a woman is living at the edge of fragility and yet holding the strength to rebuild worlds.

And this is what I want every reader, every woman especially, to understand:

You may feel powerless, but you are never without power.

Breaking the Barrier

Why do women stay in situations that break them? Why do they endure? Why do they silence themselves when every part of them wants to scream?

The answer is complicated. Some stay because of love. Some stay because of fear. Some stay because they do not see another way. Some stay because society tells them leaving is shameful. Some stay because they have been taught since birth that their value lies in sacrifice, not in joy.

But the truth, my dear sisters, is this: *You do not have to stay. No cage is unbreakable. No barrier is impenetrable. No prison is eternal.*

The world may tell you that you are fragile. But have you ever seen an eagle break the winds with its wings? Have you ever seen how it soars higher the stronger the storm becomes? That is what you are capable of. You can fly, soar, and rise above the storms of your life.

The walls around you may seem unshakable now. The chains may feel permanent. The silence may feel endless. But once you decide, deeply, fiercely, that your dignity matters, those walls will begin to crack.

It does not happen in one day. Sometimes, it takes years. Sometimes, it takes falling a thousand times before rising once. But rise, you must. Rise, you will.

The Revolution of Self-Respect

If there is one message I want you to take from this book, it is this: *Self-respect is not negotiable.*

You can lose money. You can lose possessions. You can lose relationships. But never lose your self-respect. Because once you do, you lose yourself.

Self-respect is the foundation of freedom. It is the soil from which dignity grows. It is the root of dreams. Without it, you will always live under the shadow of someone else's control. With it, you will begin to bloom, even in the harshest deserts.

Respecting yourself does not mean arrogance. It does not mean neglecting your family. It does not mean running away from responsibilities. Respecting yourself means refusing to live in a situation that suffocates your soul. It means choosing peace over fear, hope over despair, life over survival.

It means knowing that your worth is not defined by anyone else, not your husband, not your family, not society, not even tradition. Your worth is defined only by you.

Mental Health: The Hidden Battlefield

For too long, women have been told to ignore their inner wounds. *“Don’t complain. Don’t cry. Don’t talk. Endure it.”*

But silence kills.

Mental health is as real as physical health. The bruises on your mind hurt just as much, sometimes even more, than the bruises on your body. Depression, anxiety, trauma, fear, these are not weaknesses. These are the natural scars of battles you have fought alone.

Taking care of your mental health is not selfish. It is survival. It is dignity. It is rebellion in a world that expects you to shatter quietly.

Every woman reading this: I urge you, tend to your heart. Tend to your mind. Tend to your soul. Speak to someone. Write it out. Cry it out. Pray it out. But never carry it in silence until it poisons you.

You deserve peace. You deserve healing. You deserve to breathe freely.

From Helplessness to Hope

This book is full of pain because reality is full of pain. But it is also full of hope, because reality is also full of hope.

I have met women who had every reason to give up but didn't. I have heard stories of women who walked away from marriages that crushed them, who built businesses with nothing but determination, who raised children with love while rebuilding themselves, who broke traditions that chained them.

And I believe with all my heart that you can be one of those women too.

The journey from helplessness to hope is not easy. It demands courage. It demands tears. It demands loneliness. But at the end of it, there is freedom. At the end of it, there is dignity. At the end of it, there is a life that feels like your own.

To Every Woman Reading This

I want you to remember:

You are not alone. Even when it feels like no one sees you, know that somewhere in the world, another woman is carrying the same scars, fighting the same battles.

You are not weak. Even if you feel broken, your survival until this very moment is proof of your strength.

You are not worthless. Even if people treat you as disposable, your existence itself is sacred.

You are not defined by your suffering. You are defined by your ability to rise from it.

My Hope for You

When you turn the last page of this book, I do not want you to just close it and return to life as it is. I want you to carry something with you, something small, something powerful, something unshakable:

The belief that you deserve more.

The courage to say no when the world expects you to say yes.

The fire to walk away from what breaks you.

The determination to build a life that makes you proud.

The wings fly, soar, and rise, no matter how heavy the chains once were.

Because you, my dear reader, are not just a woman. You are the dawn after the longest night. You are the flame that cannot be extinguished. You are the eagle that was never meant to crawl.

This book belongs to you. To every woman who has been silenced, ignored, bruised, belittled, abandoned, or erased. And

also to every woman who has risen, fought back, and reclaimed her voice.

May it remind you of your pain, but also of your power.

May it honor your struggles, but also ignite your strength.

May it tell you that even in your darkest moments, you are never without hope.

Because you, beautiful soul, were never meant to live small.

You were meant to break the barrier.

Love Yourself Always.

Anjum J Parveen 