

UNITED FOUR

W H A T S U R V I V E S

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**For my Papa,
Dr. B. R. Choudhary**

I am who I am because of your unconditional love.

PROLOGUE

Before the First Door

The child's cries did not stop all at once.

They frayed.

At first they were loud enough to scrape the walls raw-high, panicked, desperate sounds that ricocheted inside the room like trapped birds. Small fists struck the glass again and again, skin reddening, strength thinning, hope burning itself out faster than breath.

A woman stood behind the observation glass, arms folded tightly across her chest.

"How long does this usually take?" she asked, unable to keep the strain out of her voice.

The man beside her did not look away from the child.

"That depends," he said calmly, "on how attached they were to the idea of being rescued."

The child slid down the glass, legs giving way, breath hitching violently. The crying softened-no longer a demand, no longer an accusation. Just sound. Just habit.

The woman swallowed. "They're exhausting themselves."

"Yes," the man replied. "That's the point."

The room had been designed carefully. Soft corners. Muted colours. A bed too large for such a small body. A chair that would never be used. Cameras hidden behind tinted lenses,

angled to catch every movement without announcing their presence.

Inside, the child curled inward, fingers digging into their own arm as if trying to hold themselves together. A raw burn mark glistened on the forearm-fresh, deliberate. The child did not cry at the pain. Pain, by now, had rules.

The cries faded into uneven breathing.

Then silence.

The man leaned forward slightly.

“Watch now,” he murmured, almost fondly.

On the monitor, the child lifted their head.

Red-rimmed eyes scanned the room-not searching anymore. Measuring. Listening. The shoulders trembled once, then steadied. The child wiped their nose with the back of their hand, slow and deliberate, as though conserving energy.

A technician shifted behind him. “They’ve stopped-”

“-resisting?” the man finished gently.

He shook his head.

“No. They’ve stopped expecting.”

The child pressed their forehead briefly against the floor, then sat back. Their fingers traced the edge of the burn absentmindedly, testing sensation without reacting to it. A small whimper escaped, more reflex than need.

The camera adjusted.

Just slightly.

The child's head tilted.

They looked directly at the lens.

The woman's breath caught. "Did it just?"

"Yes," the man said quietly. "They felt it."

He smiled then-not wide, not cruel. Precise.

"Not fear," he murmured to no one in particular.

"Adaptation."

The technician hesitated. "Should we intervene?"

The man raised one finger, gently.

Not a command.

A suggestion that obedience would be wise.

"No," he said. "Let it finish."

Inside the room, the door slid open with a soft mechanical sound.

The child flinched-body tensing, breath hitching-but did not scream. Did not reach out. Did not beg.

They watched.

The man straightened, already turning away. "Mark the time," he said over his shoulder. "This one crossed the threshold faster than expected."

"What classification?" the woman asked quietly.

He paused at the door.

"Viable," he said. "For now."

The corridor lights adjusted automatically to his pace as he walked away.

Behind the glass, the room closed around the child.

And somewhere deep inside the facility, a system recorded the moment not as loss-

but as success.

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Chapter One

Madhumita



In Dharavi, mornings arrived before permission.

The room was already awake before Madhumita opened her eyes. Not because anyone had moved, but because the walls had begun to speak. A neighbour shouted about garbage downstairs. Someone swore. A metal shutter rattled. A pressure cooker screamed from two houses away, sharp and impatient.

The room was less than two hundred square feet. At night, it became a place to sleep. During the day, it became everything else.

Her father lay near the door, his thin mattress already half folded, making space out of habit. Her mother slept closer to the wall, one arm bent protectively as if even in sleep she remembered scarcity. Madhumita's younger brother lay curled near her feet, his school uniform folded neatly beside his head.

No one slept alone in this room. There was no room for that.

Madhumita swung her legs carefully over her brother and stood. The floor was cold, gritty. She folded her mattress against the wall and reached for the rope.

It lay coiled near the slab that served as their kitchen - a single burner, steel vessels stacked high, yesterday's rice soaking in water. Next to it hung a curtain, thin and fraying, marking off a corner with a bucket, a tap, and a drain in the floor. Bathroom. Washing area. Privacy, if no one pulled the curtain too fast.

Her mother was already awake now, pouring chai leaves into boiling water. Bangles clinked softly, wrapped in cloth to keep the noise down.

“Careful,” her mother said.

Madhumita nodded.

Outside, the argument about garbage escalated.

“You throw it here every day-”

“Then tell the municipality to come on time-”

A plastic bin hit the ground. Something cracked.

Madhumita stepped onto the wooden beam fixed between two walls.

“Slow,” her father said from the floor, not looking up.

Balance, her mother had taught her, was not about standing still. Balance was about knowing which way you could fall - and deciding not to.

Madhumita lifted her arms.

The rope dipped.

She did not.

A local train thundered past, so close the walls vibrated. The room shook. Somewhere a child laughed. Somewhere else someone spat.

Madhumita walked.

When she reached the end, she stepped down lightly.

Her father finally sat up and nodded once.

That was praise.

Later that morning, while her brother left for school and her mother scrubbed vessels at the tap, a man stopped near their

doorway. Clean shirt. Old shoes. He had been watching her for weeks.

"You walk well," he said to her father. "There's a show. Cultural. Outside India."

Outside could mean many things.

Her father didn't answer.

"How far?" her mother asked.

The man shrugged. "Not here."

Madhumita said nothing. She coiled the rope carefully and placed it back against the wall.

In Dharavi, nothing moved fast unless it was forced to.

Still, something had shifted.

She felt it the way she felt the rope before stepping onto it - not fear, not excitement.

Preparation.

Chapter Two

Olay



While Madhumita learned balance in a room that barely held four people, somewhere else balance meant restraint.

This place had no name.

It belonged to contracts, not countries.

The containment facility existed between borders, funded quietly, spoken of only in closed rooms. It was where extraordinary bodies were kept before decisions were made about their usefulness.

The cell was larger than Madhumita's entire home, but it felt smaller.

The walls were curved metal, seamless, leaning inward. White lights burned overhead, angled to erase shadow. Cameras watched from every corner. The air hummed, filtered, sterile.

Olay sat against the far wall.

He was enormous.

From his thick neck down to his massive, round torso, his body filled the space aggressively. His skin was pale - not human pale, but coarse, stretched tight over bulk that did not belong inside walls. His legs were short compared to the rest of him, thick and powerful, folded awkwardly beneath his weight.

He was bald.

His ears curved outward, long and unmistakably inhuman.

He wore nothing except a stretched red underwear, the fabric thin, clinging where it could, failing where it could not.

Fear lived in the room because of him.

Restraint fields held his wrists and ankles, invisible bands humming softly, pressing inward constantly. Not enough to stop him completely.

Enough to remind him.

Outside the reinforced glass wall, guards stood well back. No one stood directly in front of him.

They had learned.

Between Olay's legs, his children slept.

They looked like him - pale, rounded, disproportionate - but smaller, softer. Sedatives kept their breathing slow and uneven. One of them coughed.

Olay's chest expanded.

A growl rolled out of him, deep and vibrating, rattling against metal. The sound was not wild. It was controlled. Deliberate.

Hands went to weapons. Consoles lit up.

"Easy," someone whispered.

Olay lowered his head and pressed his forehead gently to the child's hair. His breathing slowed. The growl faded.

The room did not relax.

The door hissed open.

Two guards entered, wide distance between themselves and Olay. Between them stood a young woman.

She was thin, wearing a dusty green dress made of thick, rug-like fabric, worn soft by time. It hung loosely on her body, stained at the hem. Her hair was pulled back badly. Her face was young but dulled by exhaustion.

She carried a child.

The child slept against her chest, one arm locked around her neck. Her body curved around the child instinctively, shielding it.

When she saw Olay, she froze.

Fear tightened her shoulders. Shame followed quickly, as if fear itself embarrassed her.

The guards spoke. Quick. Impersonal.

She nodded too fast.

When the door sealed behind them, the room changed.

Olay watched her.

Recognition settled in him - not sympathy, not curiosity.

Recognition.

One of his children stirred. Olay adjusted automatically. The restraint field whined.

The woman flinched.

Olay growled again - lower, rougher, grumpier.

A warning.

The woman slid down the wall and sat, keeping her child between her knees. She did not run. She did not come closer.

In this place, staying was a choice.

Between Dharavi and this room, the walls were different.

But survival was not.

Chapter Three

Martha



Martha learned stillness from her mother long before she learned how to fight.

Her mother had believed that a woman should never make noise unless it was necessary. That noise invited attention, and attention invited judgment. She had grown up hearing that discipline was protection - that the world watched girls like her differently, measured them more harshly, waited for mistakes.

Her father believed in order.

Early mornings. Clean shoes. Straight posture. Speak when spoken to. Never raise your voice unless you were prepared to stand by it. He had worked two jobs most of his life and carried his exhaustion quietly, like something private.

Martha grew up in a house where rules were not debated.

They were lived.

By the time she was old enough to understand what strength looked like, she already had it - trained into her bones, not her muscles. She learned to hold her body still even when her chest burned, to listen without reacting, to obey without surrendering thought.

That was why they noticed her.

She was a beautiful woman now, her skin deep and warm-toned, her features sharp without softness. Strength lived compactly in her body - muscle layered beneath control rather than display. Her hair was cut short, tight curls kept close to her scalp, practical and final.

She stood on the rooftop in black leather fitted close to her body, rain sliding off the surface without soaking in. The city below moved on, unaware. Traffic lights blinked. Buildings glowed. Somewhere, people laughed.

Martha listened to her breath.

Steady.

That mattered.

Behind her, men shifted - armed, restless, loud. Their fear arrived before their footsteps did. Martha didn't turn.

She had been trained not to.

She knew how close the edge was without looking, knew how slick the concrete had become, knew exactly how her body felt today. Her knee gave a faint internal pulse - the enhancement checking alignment, adjusting pressure.

Not yet, she thought.

When she stepped forward, it wasn't reckless.

It was chosen.

The fall was clean and brutal. Wind pressed against her chest. The ground rushed up. Pain flared sharp and immediate as she landed, blooming through her legs.

She rolled with it.

Let it pass.

She came up balanced, breath already settling.

Behind her, someone swore.

Someone else laughed - thin, nervous.

They didn't follow.

She moved through the compound with the inevitability of something designed for precision. Guards fell before fear had time to become action. Wrists twisted. Knees folded. Weapons clattered uselessly to the ground.

Martha never struck more than necessary.

She never enjoyed it.

By the time she reached the inner building, her breathing had steadied. The door recognised her palm and slid open.

The room inside felt wrong.

Not cold.

Not hostile.

Comfortable.

Warm lighting. Polished floors. Chairs that invited you to sit and forget consequences. The faint smell of expensive cologne hung in the air.

A long table stood at the centre.

People looked up.

Executives.

Men and women whose faces appeared on magazines and global panels. Giants of the telecom industry - the ones who decided where voices travelled, which signals survived, which ones failed quietly when it mattered most.

They stared at her.

Confusion first.

Then fear.

Fear always arrived late to people like this.

Her handler's voice entered her ear, calm and practiced.

"These are the targets."

Martha stood still.

Something tightened in her chest.

"They've been interfering," the voice continued. "Non-compliant. Their networks obstruct operational requirements."

Neutralise.

The word was never spoken.

She looked at them properly then - not as objectives, but as people.

A man's hands shook as he gripped the back of a chair. A woman pressed her lips together too tightly, trying to hold authority like armour. Another stared at Martha as if violence belonged to other places, other bodies.

Martha knew she could do it.

She knew exactly how.

That knowledge sat heavy inside her, familiar and dangerous.

She thought of her mother's voice - quiet, steady, warning her never to do something she wouldn't be able to live with.

She thought of her father's silence when something disappointed him.

Her handler's voice hardened.

“Execute.”

Martha reached up and removed the implant from behind her ear.

Pain flared. Sharp. Honest. Blood warmed her neck.

She welcomed it.

It reminded her she still belonged to herself.

She dropped the device onto the polished floor. It cracked loudly in the quiet room.

No one moved.

Confusion spread - the moment when systems failed and no one knew what came next.

Martha turned and walked out.

She didn't run.

Running looked like doubt.

Three days later, she stood in a white room with no windows while a single word appeared on a screen.

LIABILITY.

She read it without reaction.

By the end of the week, she was restrained, transported, catalogued.

That was how she arrived at the facility.

Not because she lacked discipline.

But because she refused to be used to erase lives as quietly as signals.

Chapter Four
Katherine



While Martha was being reduced to a word on a screen, somewhere else a girl was living a life she believed was safe.

Katherine was sixteen years old, and until that year, nothing in her life had prepared her for disappearance.

She came from a family people admired. Successful. Organised. Comfortable in a way that felt permanent. Her father ran a business that kept him busy but never distant. He loved his children openly, fiercely, with a warmth that filled rooms. He noticed things. Remembered details. Katherine had grown up knowing she could always sit beside him, always be heard.

She was the third of five children.

Not the eldest, not the youngest - safely in the middle. Old enough to be trusted, young enough to be protected. Her house was always full: siblings arguing over bathrooms, music leaking from rooms, laughter spilling across the dinner table. Friends came over without invitation. Life moved forward without fear.

Her life was ordinary in the best way.

Then something happened.

Something she did not yet have words for.

At first, her body changed quietly. Fatigue she blamed on exams. Nausea she blamed on stress. She was sixteen and didn't yet know how to be afraid properly.

She didn't tell anyone.

She didn't know how.

The pain came during a school day.

Sudden. Violent. She barely made it to the washroom before her legs gave way. Locked inside a stall, she slid down against the cold tiles, breath tearing in and out of her chest, convinced something inside her was breaking beyond repair.

She didn't know she was giving birth.

Not until it was already happening.

The world narrowed to pain and panic and the sound of her own breathing as she bit down on her sleeve to keep from screaming. Blood spread across the floor. Her body shook uncontrollably.

And then there was a weight in her arms.

Small.

Warm.

Real.

A baby girl.

For a long moment, Katherine couldn't move.

The baby didn't cry immediately. She opened her eyes instead - dark, alert, far too aware for something so new. Katherine stared back, heart splitting open at the sight of a face that felt impossibly familiar.

She saw herself there.

Fear followed immediately.

She didn't know what to do.

Is she hungry?

Is her stomach hurting?

Is she cold?

Why isn't she crying?

When the baby finally cried, loud and furious, Katherine felt like the world had torn apart again. She wrapped her sweater around the tiny body, rocking instinctively, whispering apologies she didn't yet understand.

She cleaned herself as best she could. Hid what she could. Walked home carrying a truth that was already too large to survive.

Her parents knew almost immediately.

The house that had once been loud collapsed into a terrible stillness.

There was disbelief first. Then anger. Then something worse - shame that arrived faster than love.

Her father didn't shout.

That silence destroyed her.

He looked at her as if the girl he loved had vanished, replaced by someone he didn't recognise.

"This cannot stay," her mother said.

The words were calm. Final. Like gravity.

There were no questions about how it had happened. No concern for pain or fear. Only reputation. Only consequence.

Katherine was told to leave.

She packed while her siblings watched from doorways, confused and frightened, clinging to the belief that this must be a mistake. Katherine waited for her father to stop her.

He didn't.

The door closed behind her quietly.

She slept on buses, on floors, in corners of places that smelled of other people's exhaustion. She learned how to stand in lines without being seen, how to accept food without asking questions, how to keep her eyes down.

She learned how to disappear.

The baby girl stayed pressed against her chest through all of it.

Shelters blurred together. Days lost shape. Katherine lived in constant confusion, exhaustion settling into her bones.

Is she hungry?

Is she sick?

Is she tired?

What if I'm doing this wrong?

But when the baby slept in her arms - face smooth, blank, peaceful - Katherine felt something she had never felt before.

Stillness.

The child was different. Katherine felt it instinctively. She watched people. Followed voices. When Katherine cried, the baby grew quiet, almost attentive.

It frightened her.

It also anchored her.

That was when they came.

Quietly. Kindly. With voices that sounded helpful. With words like support and care. Their eyes never stayed on Katherine for long.

They stayed on the baby.

Katherine felt the wrongness immediately.

When one of them reached out, Katherine stepped back instinctively, clutching her daughter tighter.

“No,” she said.

The word came out thin. Panicked.

They took the baby.

Katherine screamed then - once, raw and broken - before hands held her back. The child’s cry cut off too quickly.

She was moved that same night.

A van with no windows.

A room that smelled of disinfectant.

Clothes that were not hers.

Time that dissolved.

She cried until her body hurt.

She cried because she didn’t know what they were doing to her baby.

Were they hurting her?

Testing her?

Changing her?

The not knowing was worse than imagining.

Then, during intake - somewhere between corridors and forms and bright lights - a guard stopped.

Something was placed into her arms.

Weight.

Warmth.

Her baby.

Katherine froze.

For one terrifying second, she didn't move. She searched the child's face desperately - counting fingers, touching her skin, listening for breath. The baby cried loudly, angrily, alive.

But Katherine couldn't stop wondering.

What did they do to you while I wasn't there?

No one explained.

She was carried forward like that - shaking, alert, watching everything - her arms locked protectively around the small body that made her real.

When the final door opened and she was guided inside the cell, the baby was already in her arms.

The room was dim.

And something enormous sat against the far wall.

At first, Katherine's breath caught in pure fear.

The creature was massive - pale, round, powerful, legs too small for the rest of him, ears strange and wide. He wore nothing but red underwear. His body filled the corner like something that had been forced into a space not built for it.

He looked dangerous.

Katherine reacted without thinking.

She turned her body slightly, pressing her back to the wall, angling herself so the baby was shielded. Her arms tightened instinctively.

The creature made a sound.

Low. Rough. A growl.

Katherine froze.

The baby whimpered once - then went quiet.

The creature lowered his head, pressing his forehead gently to two smaller shapes beside him.

Children.

His children.

Something shifted.

The growl softened. Changed. It was not a warning.

It was grief.

It was restraint.

He did not move closer.

He stayed exactly where he was.

Watching.

Katherine's fear didn't disappear - but it changed shape.

For the first time since everything had been taken from her, she felt something unexpected settle beneath the fear.

Recognition.

Whatever this place was, whoever they had brought here, she knew this with aching clarity:

She was not the only one who had been taken because of love.

Chapter Five

Olay – Before the Cage



The land Olay was born into had been damaged long before he ever existed.

The hills surrounding the settlement rose unevenly, their slopes torn open by decades of mining blasts that had stripped the earth and then abandoned it. Craters filled with stagnant rainwater dotted the ground like wounds that never healed, and the wind carried dust so fine it settled into skin and lungs, turning every breath into effort. Nothing grew easily there. People didn't either.

Those who lived among the hills did so because the world beyond them had already decided they were mistakes.

Homes were built from scavenged metal, broken wood, and whatever scraps the land had not yet swallowed. Bodies bore the cost of poisoned soil and air-limbs that grew crooked, skin that thickened or stretched strangely, faces that never quite aligned with what the outside world expected to see. Children were born altered and learned early that survival mattered more than being understood.

Even among them, Olay was different.

He did not grow tall so much as he grew dense. His body widened and thickened as if too much strength had been poured into a single form. His torso was broad and round,

layered with muscle that felt permanent, immovable. His neck blended almost seamlessly into his shoulders, giving him a block-like solidity that made his head appear anchored to his body rather than resting on it. His legs remained short but powerful, keeping his center of gravity low, grounding him, rooting him to the earth.

His skin was pale-washed of color, almost chalky in certain light-and roughened by years of stone, metal, and dust. It did not look fragile. It looked armoured.

And then there were his ears.

They curved outward, wide at the base and tapering slightly toward the top, sitting higher on his skull than expected. They gave his silhouette something ancient and unsettling, a shape that felt unfinished by evolution. When Olay was irritated or angry, the muscles around them tightened subtly, a small tell that those who lived near him learned to respect.

He was bald, his skull smooth and solid beneath calloused hands, and his face did not change easily. Emotion did not travel across his expressions; it stayed inside him, gathering weight. When he lowered his head, it was both instinct and warning, a posture that meant protection as much as restraint.

Olay never spoke.

No one remembered a time when he had.

At first, people waited for words. Later, they learned his language another way. They learned the meaning of his stillness, the warning carried in the low sound that vibrated deep inside his chest, the way the ground seemed to anticipate his movement when he shifted his weight. His growls were not

loud by default; they were felt before they were heard, rolling through bone before reaching air.

He was feared, but he was left alone.

Survival in the hills was simple and unforgiving. When supplies ran low, they watched the narrow road that cut past the edge of the valley. Travellers slowed there, uneasy but unprepared. Sometimes fear made them generous. Sometimes it made them careless. Taking what was left behind was not cruelty in that place; it was the difference between eating and starving.

Then she came.

She was shaped by the land too-no one wasn't-but she carried herself differently. She did not flinch when she saw him. She did not look away. The first time she sat near him, she kept her distance but stayed, placing water on the ground without expectation. The next time, she brought food. Later, she brought nothing at all except her presence.

When she touched his arm, briefly and without fear, something inside him shifted.

Nights did not grow quieter, but they changed. When she slept near him, the constant readiness in his body loosened in a way he had never known. For the first time, stillness did not mean waiting for threat; it meant rest. The world shrank into something manageable, a life built carefully between broken hills.

The pain came to her suddenly.

Olay understood danger. He understood blood and fear. He understood screams.

What he did not understand was how life and death could arrive together.

The birth was fast and chaotic. He held her as her body shook, felt the heat of fear, the slick warmth of blood, the strain of something forcing itself into existence. When the twins came—small, crying, alive—his chest filled with a pressure so intense it stole his breath.

Then she was gone.

Life remained in his hands while love slipped away.

He lowered himself to the ground with the children pressed against his chest, his massive body curling inward to protect something impossibly fragile. A sound tore out of him, rough and uneven, something forced up from a place he had never needed before. His body shook until exhaustion finally brought stillness.

From that moment on, the world narrowed.

Protect.

Feed.

Hide.

He moved deeper into the hills, away from the road unless hunger demanded it. He learned how to curl his body around the twins at night so the wind would not reach them. His hands—capable of bending rusted metal—moved with careful, almost painful gentleness when they touched the children. When they cried, something sharp and unbearable cut through him. When they slept, warm and heavy against his chest, the world felt briefly survivable again.

They grew quickly.

Too quickly.

They learned his body before they learned the land, crawling over his legs, gripping his fingers with surprising strength. Their sounds filled spaces that had once known only wind.

The world noticed.

The vehicles arrived one evening, their engines cutting through the valley with a confidence nothing living there possessed. Lights swept across the hills, searching. Men followed, bodies wrapped in armour, faces hidden behind glass and metal.

They did not shout.

They did not rush.

Weapons were raised.

Olay stood.

He felt it immediately-the readiness in his arms, the certainty that nothing they carried could stop him if he chose to move. His anger rose slowly, heavily, not explosive but accumulating, pressure building behind restraint. The low growl surfaced in his chest, a warning that had ended confrontations before they began.

Then they lifted the children.

Held them away from him.

Threat did not need explanation.

Olay stopped.

The black hood came next, pulled tight over his head, rough fabric pressing against his skin. His wrists and ankles were

bound. He did not fight. He followed when pulled, every step measured, his body vibrating with force held back only by the sight of his children.

The vehicle carried them away from the hills, across land that smelled of nothing living. Dust filled the air, settling into his mouth and lungs. The silence stretched unnaturally wide, broken only by the engine and the small, steady sounds of his children breathing beneath the hood.

As they approached the facility, the air changed. The vehicle slowed, and the silence was broken by the deep, grinding movement of massive metal gears turning somewhere ahead. Olay felt the vibration travel through the floor and into his bones before the vehicle moved again, passing through a gate he could not see but could unmistakably feel.

Inside, the world grew cooler and heavier. The hood dulled everything-sight reduced to shifting shadows, air thick and stale against his breath. He smelled metal and oil through the fabric, the recycled scent of machinery sealed behind walls and floors. As they moved through hallways and past elevator shafts, brief waves of heat brushed his skin-warm air venting through hidden grilles, exhaling softly in places where the lights dimmed and sound carried strangely through the enclosed space.

When the hood was removed, the room waited.

Concrete walls stained with rust. Thick industrial pipes running along the ceiling and walls like exposed veins. A narrow metal bed bolted to the floor. No restraints. No softness.

High above, a long, narrow slit of a window cut into the wall allowed light to enter only after passing through layers of dust outside. By the time it reached the floor, the light was pale and softened, breaking apart in the air, catching drifting particles until it looked almost solid—light slowed down, filtered, tired.

They placed the children back against him.

That was when he sat.

He pressed his back into the corner and curved his body around the twins, making himself as large and as still as the space allowed. His breathing slowed. His growl settled into something low and constant, a sound of presence rather than threat.

The land was gone.

She was gone.

The children were here.

For now, that was enough.

Chapter Six-

The First Shared Silence



The room did not need to announce itself as a prison.

It had the quiet confidence of a place that expected compliance-not immediately, but eventually. Industrial steel walls rose around them, dulled by age and dust, stitched together by thick seams that ran from floor to ceiling like old scars. Heavy pipes wrapped around the space, some disappearing into the walls, others exposed and vibrating faintly, as if the building itself never fully rested.

They had all arrived blind.

Black hoods had been pulled tight over their faces, reducing the journey to sensation alone. Dust had crept into mouths and lungs, dry and invasive. There had been no birds, no wind, no distant human noise-only engines, footsteps, and direction. At one point, heat brushed their skin as they were guided through enclosed corridors where the lighting changed abruptly. Behind the hood, they sensed the glow more than they saw it-emergency panels and maintenance lights set into the walls, their dull illumination throwing restless shadows. The warmth came from hidden machinery and elevator housings, exhaling softly into the passage as they moved through.

The door closed without urgency, without sound meant to warn. When it sealed, the movement ended, and they were left inside the room together.

Four metal beds were bolted into the floor, spaced deliberately apart. Each mattress was thin and flattened, long past the point of offering comfort. The floor carried the faint smell of rust and old disinfectant. Everything in the room felt used, but not worn out-maintained just enough to function.

The narrow window was already familiar to the room. The light hadn't changed since Olay's arrival. It still filtered in slowly, weighed down by dust, never quite reaching the corners. Dust hung suspended in the air, unmoving, catching the glow just long enough to remind them that the world outside still existed.

Olay sat where he had been placed.

His massive back was pressed into the corner, his body curved inward as much as it could be, as if he were trying to make space where none existed. His torso dominated the room even in stillness, pale skin stretched thick and rough over a form that did not belong inside straight walls. His legs, short but powerful, were folded beneath him, grounding him low and solid.

Between his legs, the twins slept.

Their bodies rose and fell unevenly, heavy with sedation. One of them shifted and made a small sound.

Olay reacted instantly.

His chest expanded, and a low vibration rolled through him—not loud, not explosive, but present. A growl that stayed close

to his body, controlled and contained. He lowered his head, pressing his forehead gently to one twin's hair, and his breathing slowed until the sound faded.

Across the room, Martha became aware of everything at once.

Her posture remained loose, almost casual, but her mind was already working. She counted the distance from the door to the nearest bed without looking. Noted how many steps it would take to reach the far wall. Registered the pipes near the ceiling, their thickness, the way they curved.

Then she assessed him.

The density of his torso. The thickness of his arms. The imbalance between his upper body and his legs that made him both grounded and dangerously stable. If he moved suddenly, the room would not hold him.

That conclusion came easily.

What unsettled her was the restraint.

He wasn't watching them.

He wasn't restless.

He was holding himself back.

"Well," Martha said lightly, folding her arms, "that's reassuring."

Her tone carried dry humor, deliberate and controlled.

Inside, something tight settled low in her chest.

Near the opposite wall, Katherine stood frozen.

She hadn't moved since entering.

Her arms were locked around her baby, her body angled instinctively so she shielded the child without fully turning away. Her eyes stayed on Olay-not staring, not searching, but watching with the sharp attention of someone who had learned too quickly that danger did not always announce itself.

The baby stirred softly.

Katherine's breath hitched.

Olay's growl returned immediately, deeper this time-but different. It did not push outward. It folded inward, pulled tight against his chest. He did not look at Katherine. He did not move toward her. He adjusted his position slightly, anchoring the twins more securely.

Katherine noticed.

She didn't know why it mattered, but it did.

The fear in her chest loosened just enough to make room for confusion.

Martha glanced at her. "You're doing fine."

Katherine shook her head. "I don't feel fine."

"That's usually a good sign," Martha said.

Katherine slid down the wall slowly until she was seated on the floor, the baby still held tight between her knees. Her breathing began to steady.

Olay watched her.

His eyes were dark and steady beneath a heavy brow. They did not harden. When Katherine finally met his gaze, her breath caught-not from fear, but from recognition.

He did not move closer.

That mattered.

Time shifted after that.

Olay's breathing deepened. The tension in his shoulders softened. His head tilted slightly, resting against the wall as exhaustion claimed him.

He fell asleep.

A moment later, a sound emerged.

Low. Rough. Unexpected.

A snore.

Martha blinked and pressed her lips together.

Katherine's mouth twitched before she stopped it.

The door opened again.

Madhumita stepped inside.

When the hood was removed, she blinked against the light, dust clinging to her hair and clothes. Her body swayed slightly as it adjusted to stillness. Her eyes moved quickly, automatically.

Floor.

Walls.

People.

She saw Katherine and the baby first, and something protective rose in her chest. She saw Martha next-relaxed, alert-and recognised strength.

Then she saw Olay.

She froze.

Not from fear.

From disbelief.

Her eyes widened as she took in his size, the strange curve of his ears, the way his body filled the corner even in sleep. He looked unreal, like something imagined rather than born.

She took a step toward the nearest bed, still watching him. The exhaustion she had been holding back finally caught up with her, and she let her body lean forward, ready to sit.

At that exact moment, Olay snored again-louder.

Madhumita startled, a small, involuntary sound escaping her as she froze mid-movement, half-standing, half-sitting, her heart suddenly racing.

For a brief second, the tension cracked.

Katherine smiled-barely, quickly.

Martha let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh.

Madhumita pressed a hand to her chest and shook her head, smiling despite herself.

Olay slept on.

The twins slept deeper.

The room did not become safe.

But it became shared.

And in that shared silence, something small but important took shape.

Not trust.

Not comfort.

Understanding.

Somewhere beyond the walls, something shifted.

A faint mechanical hum changed pitch, barely noticeable, but constant. One of the lights above flickered once before settling again, a reminder that the room was never truly still. Olay did not stir, but Martha felt it immediately—the sense of being adjusted rather than observed.

Whatever this place was, it had noticed them noticing each other.

Chapter Seven

What Holds Us Here



Madhumita woke up gasping.

For a moment, she didn't know where she was. Her chest felt too tight, her fingers curled as if they were still gripping something invisible. The memory returned before her eyes adjusted to the dimness.

The hood.

The sudden darkness pulled over her face. Dust so dry it burned her throat. Hands guiding her forward-not rough, not violent, but firm in a way that allowed no refusal. The silence outside had been the worst part. No traffic. No voices. No life. Only engines, footsteps, and movement toward a place that did not need permission.

She remembered the gate.

Not loud, but vast. The kind of sound that felt less like a door opening and more like the ground itself shifting. She had thought of her parents then-her mother near the slab, her father by the door-and wondered if they would feel it when the room at home suddenly became quieter.

Her breathing slowed as the present returned.

Metal walls. Exposed pipes. The narrow window filtering pale light through layers of dust.

The bed beneath her was hard and unyielding. Real.

She sat up and pressed her feet flat against the floor, grounding herself the way she always had before stepping onto a rope. Feeling her weight. Finding balance. Here. Now.

Across the room, Martha was already awake.

She stretched her arms slowly overhead, rolling her shoulders, testing her body with controlled movements. Fingers flexed. Relaxed. Her neck tilted slightly as if she were listening not just with her ears, but with her entire frame.

Nothing had changed overnight.

And yet everything had.

Her gaze moved through the room-the beds, the spacing, the seams in the walls-before settling briefly on Olay. He sat exactly where he had been the night before, his massive body curved inward, filling the corner even in stillness.

Martha's expression didn't shift, but her attention sharpened.

Near the opposite wall, Katherine sat with her baby pressed close, humming softly.

It wasn't a song with words. Just a low, uneven sound shaped by repetition-something between breath and instinct. The baby's breathing slowed, her small body settling against Katherine's chest as if recognising safety by rhythm alone.

Olay watched.

He had been awake longer than any of them realised.

The sound reached him in a way nothing else had. He tilted his head slightly, eyes fixed on the gentle rise and fall of the

child's body. Something moved through him-not anger, not fear, but a quiet astonishment.

He had never made sound for his children.

Protection, to him, had always meant silence. Stillness. Curling his body around them until nothing could pass through. The idea that comfort could take this form-soft, vibrating, human-unsettled him.

One of the twins shifted, making a small, restless sound.

Olay adjusted instinctively, tightening his arm just enough to pull them closer.

Metal scraped.

A restraint embedded in the wall tightened abruptly around his wrist, reacting to the movement. Olay froze. For a fraction of a second, his muscles tensed-pure reflex-before he caught himself.

The chain flattened.

Not snapped. Not broken.

Flattened.

The steel compressed under pressure, collapsing into itself like thin metal pressed between fingers. The system whined once, recalibrated, and went still.

No alarms sounded.

No guards appeared.

The room dropped into a deeper silence.

Martha stared.

So did Madhumita.

Katherine's humming faltered, her breath caught somewhere between fear and awe.

Olay looked at the crushed metal, then slowly released his grip. The chain reshaped itself, holding again. He leaned back deliberately, choosing stillness.

He had made his point without meaning to.

A question rose in Madhumita's chest and refused to be ignored.

If he could do that... why was he still here?

Why were any of them?

The answer arrived before the thought fully formed.

A voice filled the room-smooth, calm, evenly paced.

"Good morning."

It came from everywhere, filtered through hidden speakers, as if it had been listening the entire time.

"We will begin shortly," it continued. "Please remain where you are."

Martha exhaled slowly, her eyes never leaving the walls. "That answers it."

"Answers what?" Katherine asked, barely above a whisper.

"This isn't a prison," Martha said. "It's a controlled environment. They're not stopping us from leaving. They're watching what we do when we stay."

The hum in the room shifted slightly, almost responsive.

Madhumita stood.

Her legs felt unsteady, but she didn't sit back down. She looked at the walls. At the door. At the seams where it might open if invited.

Then she looked at Katherine. At the baby. At the twins pressed into Olay's body. At Martha's stillness.

"I could go," she said quietly. Not an announcement. A thought spoken aloud.

No one moved.

No one answered.

The door remained sealed.

Madhumita stayed where she was, the decision settling slowly inside her-not yet acted upon, but fully formed.

Let me be the one, she thought.

When it's time.

Olay watched her.

Something in his posture shifted-not approval, not command. Recognition.

The room did not change.

But something in it did.

They were not being forced.

They were being asked.

And each of them, in their own way, was already choosing.

Chapter Eight-

What They Take - And What Remains



Morning arrived without sunlight.

The narrow window offered no real sense of time-only a slight change in the colour of the light as it struggled through the dust outside. The room never woke together. It stirred in fragments, each body surfacing from sleep according to its own fears, its own habits.

Katherine was awake first.

She rarely slept deeply anymore. Even when her eyes closed, something inside her stayed alert, listening. She sat with her back against the steel wall, her knees drawn in, her baby girl folded into the hollow of her chest as if that was the only shape safety could take.

She hummed softly.

It wasn't a song with words. It was a sound born out of repetition-something between breath and prayer. A low, uneven melody that kept going because stopping felt dangerous. Her daughter's small fingers flexed and relaxed against Katherine's shirt, and each tiny movement loosened something tight inside Katherine's chest.

Across the room, one of the twins stirred.

He rolled onto his side and pressed his cheek into the thick curve of Olay's thigh, making a small, irritated sound, as if the world had woken him too soon. The other twin responded immediately, scooting closer and draping a heavy little arm across his brother's back-possessive, protective, half-asleep.

Olay adjusted without opening his eyes.

His massive hand moved slowly, carefully, settling over both children at once. His fingers were enormous compared to their bodies-scarred, rough, made for breaking-but the pressure he used was precise, gentle. The twins relaxed instantly, sinking back into sleep as if they trusted that nothing could reach them here.

Katherine watched him.

The fear was still there, but it had changed. It was no longer fear of the unknown. It was the fear of something immense and real-something that could destroy but was choosing not to. She looked down at her baby girl and wondered, not for the first time, what kind of mother she was becoming simply by surviving.

Then Madhumita woke with a sharp breath.

Her eyes flew open and her body jerked upright before she remembered where she was. For a moment, she expected hands on her arms, voices issuing instructions, the hood coming down again. But the room remained unchanged-steel walls, industrial pipes, dust suspended in the pale strip of light.

She pressed her palms flat against the mattress, grounding herself the way she always had before stepping onto a rope.

Feeling the surface. Feeling her weight. Reminding her body that she still existed inside it.

The memory came anyway.

The airport.

The exhaustion after the show-the good kind, the kind that comes after your body has held itself steady under hundreds of eyes and finally lets go. The applause still echoed faintly in her ears. Not polite clapping. Real applause. The kind that rises and keeps going even after you bow.

Everything at the terminal had looked normal. Too normal.

Announcements blended into one another. People moved with the careless confidence of those who expected to arrive where they were going. Madhumita remembered checking her phone and sending a message home.

Landed. Will call soon.

Her mother would have been waiting for that message. Probably standing near the doorway of their room, phone already in hand, pretending she wasn't waiting. Her father would have looked up only once, nodded, then gone back to what he was doing-but she knew he would have been counting the minutes.

She never made the call.

They approached her politely.

That detail refused to fade-the politeness. Clean clothes. Calm voices. A question asked as if it were routine. A hand gesturing toward a quieter corridor. No shouting. No grabbing. Just the confidence of people who did not expect refusal.

There was a room after that-bright, too bright. Questions disguised as conversation. Someone asked her to stand on one foot, then close her eyes, then walk in a straight line. Someone smiled, as if it was nothing.

She laughed once, nervously, and asked when she could leave. No one answered.

The hood came later. Not immediately. Not dramatically. It arrived like a conclusion.

When the fabric pulled tight over her face, Madhumita understood with sick clarity that she had already been taken long before the hood touched her skin.

She exhaled slowly and brought herself back to the room.

Martha was awake, sitting cross-legged on her bed, back straight, gaze sharp. She rolled her shoulders once, then flexed her fingers, as if checking that her body was still listening to her. There was no panic in her movements-only readiness.

Martha spoke without turning. "You were taken during travel."

Madhumita swallowed. "International."

Martha nodded slightly. "That makes sense."

"Why me?" Madhumita asked quietly.

Martha finally looked at her. "Because people don't steal what they don't intend to use."

The words settled heavily in the room.

Katherine's humming faltered, then resumed-softly now.

The twins woke properly a few minutes later, not with cries but with insistence.

One sat up, rubbing his eyes, then immediately crawled into Olay's stomach as if it were the safest place in existence. The other reached for Olay's ear, tugged it familiarly, and burst into a short, breathy laugh, clearly pleased with himself.

The sound startled everyone because it was ordinary.

Madhumita smiled without meaning to.

It sounded like any child anywhere-on a bus, in a school corridor, in a line at a shop. A sound untouched by fear.

Katherine's baby lifted her head at the noise.

Her eyes focused on the twins with unsettling clarity-not the drifting fascination of an infant, but attention. When one twin laughed again, the baby made a sound back. Not a giggle. Not a cry. Something deliberate, almost responsive.

Martha noticed instantly.

"That baby," she said carefully, "is not reacting the way she should."

Katherine stiffened. "Don't."

"I'm not saying it to scare you," Martha replied. "I'm saying it because it matters."

Katherine hugged her daughter tighter. "She's tired."

"She's aware," Martha said quietly.

Olay opened his eyes.

His gaze moved from the twins to Katherine's baby. The child looked back without flinching, without confusion. Her small hand lifted, hovering in the air between them, stopping just short of touching him.

Olay went very still.

Katherine gently pulled the baby back, whispering something only they shared. The child settled, as if satisfied.

Silence returned, heavier now.

"We're being studied," Martha said. "Not just individually. Together."

"What do we do?" Madhumita asked.

Martha's eyes moved around the room—the pipes, the door, the blind corners. "We learn. We wait."

"And then?" Katherine whispered.

"Then," Martha said, "we decide what we take back."

Later, Madhumita sat beside Katherine on the floor and gently worked her fingers through Katherine's tangled hair. There was no comb, no oil—just patience. Katherine didn't resist. Her shoulders loosened almost against her will.

"You don't have to be strong all the time," Madhumita murmured.

Katherine's voice cracked. "If I stop, I don't know if I'll start again."

"Strength isn't not breaking," Madhumita said softly. "It's breaking and still choosing what comes next."

Across the room, Martha turned movement into play.

She showed the twins how to balance on the edge of the bed frame. One took it seriously, lips pursed, arms out like a professional. The other cheated by gripping the frame with his toes and grinned proudly anyway.

Martha shook her head. "That one," she muttered, "will survive anything."

Olay watched them all.

He did not move. He did not speak. But something in his gaze softened-not comfort, not trust, but recognition.

The room was changing.

Not because of the facility.

Because of them.

Somewhere beyond the walls, unseen systems adjusted quietly. The air hummed the same, but the feeling in the room was different.

They were being measured.

Not for weakness.

For what survived when everything else was taken.

Chapter Nine

The Shape of Trust



Time inside the room did not move forward so much as it widened.

Nothing dramatic happened. No alarms. No footsteps outside the walls. And yet, everyone felt it—the slow pressure of being watched, of being waited on. The kind of waiting that belonged to experiments, not people.

Martha was the first to turn that waiting into something usable.

She stood near the wall where the pipes bent downward and began stretching, not theatrically, not to be seen. Small movements. Ankles first. Knees. Hips. Her shoulders rolled once, then again, loosening tension she knew better than to ignore. She mapped the room while she moved, not with her eyes but with her body—counting steps, testing sound, feeling how the floor responded to weight.

Madhumita watched quietly.

“You train like you’re alone,” she said after a moment.

Martha glanced at her. “I train like I don’t want to be surprised.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

Martha gave a brief, humourless smile. "It is where I come from."

Across the room, Katherine sat with her daughter resting against her chest. The baby wasn't asleep. She was alert in a way that made Katherine uneasy-eyes following movement too closely, fingers flexing as if responding to patterns no one else could see.

Katherine shifted, trying to shield her daughter from the room, from the walls, from Olay-then stopped herself.

Olay had not moved.

He sat where he always did, massive body curved inward, his back to the corner as if he were the final wall of the room. The twins were awake now, pressed against him, restless but calm. One climbed halfway up his torso and settled there, cheek against Olay's chest, listening. The other leaned back against Olay's thigh, tracing invisible lines on the floor with a finger.

Olay watched everything.

He watched Martha's movements, not with suspicion, but with a quiet interest-as if he recognised discipline when he saw it. He watched Katherine adjust her grip on the baby, noting how she angled her body instinctively to protect without realising she was doing it.

And when one twin let out a soft, pleased sound, Olay's mouth shifted slightly-not a smile, but something close enough to be unmistakable.

Pride sat heavy and warm in his chest.

Not loud.

Not announced.

Earned.

One of the twins suddenly slid off Olay's leg and toddled toward Martha.

She noticed too late.

A small finger poked her knee.

Martha froze, her body reacting before thought caught up. She looked down slowly, expression flat.

The twin poked her again.

Then giggled - a soft, bubbling sound, delighted by the reaction itself.

Before Martha could respond, the second twin joined in, bumping into her shin by accident, then laughing harder at the collision, clearly pleased with the chaos.

Madhumita turned her face away, smiling despite herself.

Katherine let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh and pressed her lips together, as if afraid the moment would disappear if acknowledged.

Martha looked at Olay. "You do realise," she said dryly, "that they're testing boundaries."

Olay released a low sound from his chest.

Not a warning.

Approval.

The twins froze instantly, then scrambled back toward him, climbing over his legs and collapsing against his body in an untidy heap, their laughter fading into contented murmurs.

Olay's hand came down slowly, resting over them both.

Heavy.

Careful.

Certain.

He did not look at anyone.

But he knew they had seen.

Martha shook her head once. "Unbelievable," she muttered - though the edge in her voice had softened.

Later, Madhumita sat beside Katherine, not touching her, just present.

"You don't have to be strong all the time," Madhumita said quietly.

Katherine's voice wavered. "If I stop, I don't know if I'll start again."

"Strength isn't not breaking," Madhumita replied. "It's breaking and still choosing what comes next."

Katherine adjusted her daughter against her chest. Her shoulders settled, just a little.

Across the room, Martha leaned back against the wall, arms crossed, watching all of them now.

"They're not rushing this," she said. "Which means they want us intact."

"For what?" Katherine asked.

Martha's gaze moved briefly to Olay, then to the twins, then to the baby. "That's the part we don't get to know yet."

Olay shifted slightly.

The restraints responded, tightening just enough to remind him they existed. His muscles tensed-not in anger, but in restraint. He stayed still.

Not because he couldn't leave.

Because leaving alone was not an option.

The room hummed softly around them.

Not threatening.

Waiting.

And for the first time since being taken, none of them felt entirely alone inside it.

Somewhere far beyond the steel walls, a monitoring screen hesitated.

The readings smoothed themselves out a second later-well within acceptable margins-but for a brief, almost negligible moment, one signal failed to align with the others. Not Olay's mass. Not Martha's movement. Not Madhumita's balance.

The anomaly came from something smaller.

Quieter.

The system logged it as noise and moved on.

Inside the room, Katherine's baby blinked slowly and settled deeper into her mother's chest, as if whatever had passed no longer required attention.

For now.

Chapter Ten

What Is Missing



The door opened without ceremony.

No warning, no pause long enough to prepare. Just a soft mechanical sound and the sense of air changing, as if the building itself had decided she was allowed to move now.

Madhumita stepped out.

The corridor beyond was wider than she expected, its walls pale and seamless, curving gently instead of meeting at sharp angles. Light came from above, diffused and cold, designed to erase shadows rather than create them. Her bare feet made almost no sound against the floor, and that unsettled her more than noise would have. A place this quiet was not meant for people to linger.

She kept walking because stopping felt worse.

Breathe. Don't rush. Look normal. You are just another body being moved from one room to another.

The words ran through her head the way they always had before a performance, before stepping onto a rope suspended far too high above the ground. The same ritual. The same lie she told herself to keep fear from locking her knees.

Glass walls began to appear on either side of the corridor.

Rooms opened up behind them-labs, observation chambers, spaces filled with equipment she didn't have names for. Screens glowed with data that meant nothing to her at first glance. Shapes moved behind the glass: people sitting still, standing still, lying still. Some wore plain clothes. Some wore nothing at all except bands and sensors attached to their skin.

None of them spoke.

She slowed without meaning to.

Don't stare, she told herself. You stare, they remember you.

In one room, a man stood with his forehead pressed gently against the glass, eyes open but unfocused, as if he were looking through it rather than at it. In another, a woman sat on the floor, back straight, hands resting on her knees, breathing slow and deliberate-too deliberate, like someone performing calm rather than feeling it.

They look... finished, Madhumita thought, and the word made her chest tighten.

Not hurt. Not broken. Finished.

Someone walked past her from the opposite direction.

A man in a white suit. Not a lab coat-the fabric was too smooth, too structured. Clinical without being medical. His face was unreadable, trained into neutrality so complete it barely registered as human.

In his hand, he held a soft measuring band.

Pink. Faded slightly, as if it had been used many times. The kind used to measure a child's head, to track growth, to reassure parents that everything was progressing as it should.

Her stomach dropped.

The man didn't look at her. He adjusted the band absently between his fingers, the way someone might fiddle with a pen while thinking, and continued down the corridor.

No, she thought. No, no, no.

She had seen that band before. In hospitals. In clinics back home. In places where new life was weighed and measured and recorded with care.

This place did not feel like it cared about growth.

She was guided by nothing visible, by no hand on her arm, just the unspoken understanding of where she was supposed to go into another section of the facility. The air grew cooler here, sharper, carrying a faint metallic scent that clung to the back of her throat.

The room she entered was not large.

That was the first thing that frightened her.

It was too contained, too intentional. A chair stood at the center, surrounded by machines arranged with careful symmetry. Wires hung neatly coiled, ready. A device rested on a nearby table—something shaped vaguely like a helmet, studded with sensors, thin cables trailing from it like veins.

This is not for asking questions, she told herself. This is for answers they already want.

She sat when indicated, her movements slow, deliberate. The chair adjusted around her with a soft hum, not restraining her but making it very clear where she was meant to remain.

A needle pricked her arm.

She barely flinched.

Blood is easy, she thought distantly. I know blood. Blood doesn't scare me.

The helmet came next. Cool metal against her temples, a faint pressure as it settled into place. Wires connected. Lights blinked to life somewhere behind her.

"Just observe," a voice said calmly, not from a person but from the room itself. "No effort required."

That's always a lie, Madhumita thought. Effort is always required. They just don't tell you where.

The screen in front of her lit up.

At first, it showed nothing but numbers. Lines of data scrolling too fast to follow. Then images began to appear—rooms like the ones she had just passed. People sitting. People standing. Children playing quietly on the floor of sterile spaces that looked nothing like homes.

Her breath slowed as she forced herself to keep watching.

Then the feed shifted.

A small room appeared on the screen. Smaller than the others. Softer, somehow. There were toys scattered across the floor—simple ones, worn but clean. A low bed against one wall. A window high up, letting in the same filtered, dust-heavy light she had seen in their own room.

This looks like...

Her thought didn't finish.

The room was empty.

No child.

No movement.

No sound.

The toys remained where they had been left. A small shoe lay on its side near the bed, its laces still knotted clumsily, as if someone had never learned how to tie them properly.

The timestamp in the corner of the screen flickered.

Six hours ago.

Another line of text appeared beneath it.

STATUS: NON-VIABLE - SUBJECT REMOVED

Madhumita's heart began to pound, hard enough that she was sure the machine could hear it.

Removed where? she thought. Removed how? Removed why?

The feed shifted again.

Another child's room. Different layout. Different toys. Same emptiness.

Another timestamp.

Another line of text.

Again.

And again.

She realised then what she had been hoping for without knowing it—that this would be an anomaly. A mistake. One room among hundreds.

It wasn't.

Her chest felt tight, as if the air itself had thickened.

They don't fail here, she understood. They sort.

A memory rose uninvited: Katherine's baby, eyes too aware for her age. Olay's twins, laughing and poking and climbing without fear. Children who did not know how close the edge already was.

Her hands curled into fists in her lap.

This is what they do, she told herself, the words sharp and steady inside her mind. They watch. They wait. And when something doesn't fit, they erase it.

The machine hummed softly, recording everything—her heart rate, her breathing, the subtle shifts in her posture. She forced her face to remain still, her thoughts flowing inward instead of out.

Don't give them fear, she warned herself. Fear is data.

But something had already changed.

The room no longer felt like a place she might survive.

It felt like a place she had to leave.

As the screen dimmed and the helmet was lifted from her head, one thought anchored itself inside her with terrifying clarity:

If we stay, someone small will disappear.

And once that happened, nothing they did afterward would matter.

She stood slowly when released, her legs steady despite the storm in her chest. As she was guided back toward the corridor, past the glass rooms and the silent bodies and the

measuring band now resting on a metal tray, she repeated one sentence to herself over and over, shaping it carefully, turning it into resolve.

We are not meant to adapt to this.

We are meant to escape it.

By the time the door to their room came back into view, her fear had settled into something colder, heavier, and far more dangerous.

Certainty.

Chapter Eleven

What She Brings Back



The door opened the same way it always did.
Quiet. Controlled. Almost polite.

Madhumita stepped inside without hesitation, as if nothing inside her had changed. Her posture was steady, her breathing measured. Anyone watching through glass or cameras would have seen exactly what they expected to see—a compliant subject returned intact.

Only the room knew better.

Katherine looked up first. She always did. Her body reacted before her thoughts had time to form, arms tightening around her daughter as Madhumita crossed the threshold. Relief flickered across her face, quickly masked by caution. Relief was dangerous here.

“You’re back,” Katherine said softly, as if raising her voice might undo it.

Madhumita nodded. “I said I would be.”

She didn’t sit down immediately. She stood for a moment, letting her eyes adjust, letting the room settle around her again. It felt smaller than it had before. Or maybe she had simply outgrown it in the last hour.

As she stood there, she became aware of something she had not consciously noticed before.

Not the cameras. Those were obvious.

It was the absence of silence.

A faint pressure in the air, like sound being held rather than released. The kind of presence that did not announce itself but waited, patient and invisible.

Madhumita let her gaze drift-casual, unfocused-until it passed over a seam in the wall near the pipes. She did not stare. She did not pause.

She understood.

Martha noticed the difference instantly.

It wasn't fear. It wasn't shock. Martha had seen those things often enough to recognise them. What sat behind Madhumita's eyes now was sharper than either.

Decision.

Martha straightened slightly where she leaned against the wall. "You saw something."

It wasn't a question.

Madhumita met her gaze. For a brief moment, something unspoken passed between them-an understanding built not on trust, but on pattern recognition. Martha knew the look of someone who had crossed an internal line and could not step back.

"Yes," Madhumita said. "But not here. Not yet."

As she spoke, she lifted one hand and rubbed her forearm lightly, as though cold.

Her fingers brushed twice against her skin.

Martha's eyes flicked-not to the gesture, but to the wall behind it.

She understood.

Olay watched from the corner.

He had not moved much since Madhumita left. The twins slept sprawled against him, heavy and warm, their bodies rising and falling with the uneven rhythm of sedation wearing thin. One had turned in his sleep and pressed a foot into Olay's stomach, completely unbothered by the solid wall of muscle beneath it.

Olay's hand rested over them both.

He did not ask questions. He did not need to.

He could feel the change in the air. He always could.

It wasn't sound that told him they were being heard.

It was restraint.

The way the room expected stillness.

Madhumita walked toward him, slow and deliberate. She stopped a short distance away-not because she was afraid, but because she respected the space he kept around his children. She crouched instead, lowering herself until she was at eye level with the twins.

One of them stirred, eyes cracking open just enough to register her presence. He blinked at her, then reached out clumsily and brushed his fingers against her wrist before retreating again, satisfied.

The touch felt heavier than it should have.

Madhumita swallowed.

As she rose, she let her hand trail briefly along the pipe behind Olay's shoulder.

The metal was warm.

And vibrating.

Olay felt it too.

His eyes lifted to hers.

For the first time since she returned, she held his gaze-not long, not dramatic. Just long enough to let him understand what she had learned.

They are listening.

Olay did not nod.

He did not growl.

But his breathing changed, slow and deliberate, and his body adjusted by a fraction of an inch-angling himself so the bulk of his frame sat between the children and the wall.

The pipe behind him rattled softly under his weight.

The vibration altered.

Madhumita turned away before anyone could read too much into her face.

"I need water," she said lightly. "And something to sit on that doesn't feel like it's judging me."

Katherine let out a small, breathy sound that might have been a laugh. The tension eased just a little-not because things were better, but because they were together again.

Madhumita sat beside Katherine this time, not touching her, but close enough that their shoulders nearly brushed.

Katherine shifted instinctively, angling her body so her daughter was shielded without closing herself off completely.

“You don’t have to-” Katherine began.

“I know,” Madhumita said gently. “I’m not going to.”

They sat like that for a moment.

Above them, the pipes continued their faint, uneven vibration-old metal, imperfect insulation, just loud enough to blur fine sound if you knew where to sit.

Martha moved closer-not to Madhumita, but to the corner where two walls met and the floor dipped slightly. She leaned back, casual, arms folded.

Her heel pressed lightly against the seam.

The hum changed.

Just enough.

Then Katherine spoke again, quieter. “Did they hurt you?”

“No,” Madhumita replied. “That’s worse.”

Katherine frowned, confusion flickering across her face. “How can that be worse?”

Madhumita didn’t answer immediately. Her gaze drifted to the narrow window, to the dust-heavy light that never quite reached the corners of the room.

“Because they’re very careful,” she said finally. “And very patient.”

Martha listened, eyes half-lidded, body relaxed, mind razor-sharp.

“What kind of careful?” she asked.

Madhumita leaned back slightly, resting her palms on the floor behind her. The position looked relaxed. It wasn't.

"They don't break people," she said. "They measure them."

Martha's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Martha tilted her head slightly, listening-not to what was being said, but to what wasn't. The pipes hummed. The floor vibrated faintly. Olay shifted his weight, and the sound in the room changed again, duller, heavier.

"They're listening," she said quietly, "but they're not hearing everything."

Katherine frowned.

"The room's too loud in the wrong ways," Martha continued. "Machines don't ignore background noise like we do. Add him"-she glanced at Olay-"and whatever your baby is doing to their sensors, and most of what we say just turns into static."

She paused. "As long as we don't sound like a threat, we're just... data."

Katherine felt something cold settle in her stomach. "Measure... how?"

"Capability. Adaptation. Deviation." Madhumita paused, choosing her words with care. "And viability."

The word hung in the air longer than the others.

Katherine looked down at her daughter.

The baby stared back up at her, calm and observant, eyes far too focused for comfort. Katherine felt a familiar surge of panic and forced herself to breathe through it.

Martha spoke again, voice low. "Define viability."

Madhumita turned to her fully now. “They have rooms,” she said. “For children. Not like ours. Softer. Smaller. Designed to look like safety.”

Olay’s head lifted slightly.

Madhumita noticed. She continued anyway.

“When a child doesn’t meet whatever threshold they’ve decided on,” she went on, “the room empties.”

Katherine’s breath caught audibly this time. “Empties how?”

Madhumita closed her eyes for a brief second before opening them again. “Quietly.”

Silence fell over the room.

But this time, it wasn’t empty.

The pipes groaned softly as the building adjusted. Olay shifted his weight just enough to change the vibration again, deliberately now.

Martha exhaled through her nose.

“So,” she said after a moment, “this isn’t about what we can do.”

“No,” Madhumita replied. “It’s about what they can’t control.”

Katherine shook her head slowly, as if trying to dislodge a thought that had lodged itself too deeply. “My daughter is just a baby.”

Madhumita met her eyes. “That’s exactly the problem.”

Katherine’s grip tightened.

“She looks at things,” Katherine said, her voice trembling now. “She listens. She-sometimes it feels like she understands more than she should. But she’s mine. She’s not an experiment.”

Madhumita reached out then-not to the baby, but to Katherine’s forearm. The touch was light, grounding.

“I know,” she said. “And that’s why we can’t stay.”

Martha exhaled slowly through her nose. “You’re certain.”

Madhumita nodded. “I didn’t come back with fear. I came back with proof.”

Olay let out a low sound.

It wasn’t a growl this time. It wasn’t anger.

It was resolve.

Madhumita turned toward him. “They won’t touch your children yet,” she said carefully. “Not while they’re still... interesting.”

Olay’s eyes darkened.

“That word,” Madhumita continued, “is on a timer.”

The twins slept on, unaware, one with his hand curled into Olay’s skin, the other breathing softly against his chest.

Something in Olay shifted then-not explosive, not violent, but profound. The restraint he had practiced so carefully no longer felt like choice.

It felt like delay.

Martha straightened fully now. “Then we stop waiting.”

“Yes,” Madhumita said. “But we don’t rush.”

Katherine looked between them, fear and determination warring on her face. “If we try and fail-”

“We won’t,” Madhumita said.

“You don’t know that,” Katherine whispered.

Madhumita’s voice softened. “No. But I know this-if we stay, someone small disappears. And none of us survives that.”

Katherine closed her eyes, pressing her forehead briefly to her daughter’s hair. When she looked up again, something had changed in her posture. She wasn’t braver.

She was decided.

Martha nodded once. “All right,” she said. “Then we do this properly.”

Olay shifted his weight slightly, careful not to wake the twins. His massive hand flexed once, slowly, as if remembering its strength.

The room hummed around them, patient and watchful.

Inside it, something else had begun to move.

Not panic.

Not hope.

Planning.

And once that began, there would be no going back.

Chapter Twelve

What Breaks First



The food arrived the way everything else did in the facility—quietly, efficiently, with the careful neutrality of something designed to avoid provoking reaction.

A panel slid open in the wall near the pipes, revealing a shallow metal tray pushed forward on a narrow track. The motion was smooth, almost considerate, as though the room itself had learned how not to startle the people inside it. The tray stopped precisely at the same place it always did, aligned perfectly with the seam in the floor.

Madhumita was the first to approach it.

She crouched slowly, knees bending with the same caution she used before stepping onto a rope, her body already alert to imbalance. The food was portioned neatly: a pale grain pressed into a compact mound, a soft slab of protein beside it, and something green that looked like it had never touched soil. Everything was warm enough to eat but carried no real scent.

That unsettled her more than if it had smelled bad.

Food, to her, had always announced itself long before it was seen. The sharp bloom of mustard seeds hitting hot oil. The sweetness of jaggery melting. Steam carrying cumin and coriander through narrow corridors, clinging to clothes and hair. Food meant noise. Food meant impatience. Food meant someone calling out that it was ready.

This smelled like nothing.

“This is... strange,” she murmured, mostly to herself.

Martha stood a few steps back, arms folded loosely, eyes on the tray but attention on the room. "It's not meant to be enjoyed," she said. "It's meant to be tolerated."

Katherine lingered near the wall, her daughter resting against her chest. The baby's gaze drifted briefly toward the tray and then away again, uninterested, as if she had already categorized it as irrelevant. Katherine noticed that too, though she didn't know why it bothered her.

Olay did not move.

He sat in his usual position, massive body curved inward, the twins pressed against him. One of them was half-awake now, fingers flexing lazily against Olay's skin, while the other leaned heavily into his side, breathing slow and deep. Olay's hand rested over them both, broad and protective.

Madhumita lifted a portion of the grain and let it fall back onto the tray. It broke apart too easily. "My mother used to say food without smell doesn't stay in the body," she said quietly. "It passes through you like a stranger."

Martha glanced at her. "What did you eat growing up?"

"Whatever there was," Madhumita replied. "Rice. Dal. Achar. Sometimes just bread dipped in chai. But it was always hot. Always shared. Even when we had nothing, my mother made sure it felt like something."

Katherine swallowed. The words pulled something loose inside her. "My house smelled like baking," she said softly, surprising herself by speaking. "Butter. Sugar. My sister burned things constantly. You could tell she was home just by the smell."

Her voice faltered. She pressed her lips together and looked down at her daughter, who had curled one tiny hand into Katherine's shirt.

Martha picked up the tray then, her movements deliberate. "Eat," she said. "Slowly."

Madhumita hesitated, then nodded. She took a small bite. The texture was fine, almost too smooth. There was a faint chemical edge beneath it, subtle enough to be dismissed as imagination if you weren't paying attention.

Sedative, she thought.

She met Martha's eyes briefly. Martha had already tasted it. Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

They ate anyway.

Olay watched them with a focus that felt heavy, as if he were committing the moment to memory. The twins ate a few bites when Madhumita offered them small portions, then grew sluggish, their movements slowing, their eyelids drooping in that unnatural way that came not from fullness but from interference.

Olay felt it immediately.

He adjusted his position, drawing them closer, his body curling tighter around theirs. His breathing changed, deepening, becoming more controlled. The low sound that vibrated in his chest was not loud enough to be called a growl, but it was there—an instinctive warning held carefully in check.

The room dimmed shortly after, the lights shifting into that muted half-state the facility seemed to prefer when something was about to happen.

Then the door opened.

The man who entered did not rush. He didn't need to.

He wore no visible insignia, no excessive armor, only a dark uniform that fit him too well to be accidental. His movements were economical, his presence sharp without being loud. He looked like someone who did not repeat himself because repetition had never been necessary.

Two guards followed him.

"They're due," the man said calmly.

That was all.

Olay rose halfway to his feet before the restraint frequency surged, pressing down hard and sudden, forcing his body back into stillness. The air itself seemed to thicken around him, invisible force locking his muscles mid-motion.

The sound that tore out of him then was raw.

Not anger.

Panic.

"No," Katherine said instantly, the word breaking free before she could stop it. She stepped forward without thinking, her daughter clutched tight against her chest. "You can't"

The man didn't look at her.

One of the guards moved toward the nearest twin.

Madhumita reacted before thought could catch up, stepping between them. “He’s sedated,” she said sharply. “You’ll hurt him.”

The man’s gaze shifted to her. Not curious. Not annoyed. Just assessing.

“Pain is data,” he said evenly. “Resistance is noise.”

He gestured once.

The twin was lifted.

The remaining twin let out a confused, broken sound, reaching toward his brother with hands that suddenly felt too small. Olay’s body shook violently against the restraints, muscles screaming against limits he could feel but not see.

Katherine screamed then.

Not loud.

Complete.

The door closed behind them before Olay could finish the sound that tore out of his chest.

When the frequency released, the room felt wrong-too small, too thin, as if it might tear under the weight of what remained inside it.

Olay surged forward, slamming his fists into the wall. The metal absorbed the impact without denting, without reacting, as though it had been built specifically to drink strength and give nothing back. He hit it again, then again, his breathing ragged, uncontrolled, grief and fury collapsing into each other without shape.

Martha moved into his line of sight, not touching him, but anchoring herself there. “Olay,” she said firmly. “Listen to me. I know you can break this place. I know you can. But if you do it now, you won’t know where he is.”

Her voice did not shake.

Katherine dropped to her knees beside him, tears streaking down her face unchecked. “I know what this feels like,” she whispered. “I know what it is to have someone taken while you’re awake and powerless.”

Olay’s breathing hitched.

Madhumita stepped closer, her voice low but steady. “They want you to react,” she said. “They want to know how much it takes. If you burn everything now, they’ll learn faster. And they’ll hurt him more.”

Time stretched.

Then footsteps.

The door opened again.

The twin was returned.

He was limp, deeply sedated, his small body sagging unnaturally in the guard’s arms. A wide patch of his head had been shaved clean, raw skin exposed beneath the harsh light. Along his shoulder, a burn bloomed angry and wet, blistered and uneven.

Olay caught him.

The sound he made then came from somewhere far older than language.

Katherine sobbed openly, her hands hovering before she gently rested them against the child's small, warm body. "I'm here," she whispered. "You're not alone."

Martha knelt beside them, stripped of her usual distance. Madhumita joined without hesitation.

All three women touched the child carefully, reverently-not as allies, not as captives, but as family.

Olay folded inward around both twins, his massive body becoming shelter.

No one spoke.

They didn't need to.

In that moment, something irreversible took root.

Not escape yet.

But certainty.

They would not let this happen again.

To anyone.

Chapter Thirteen

Olay and Katherine



The room felt different after what had been taken and returned.

Not quieter-if anything, the pipes seemed louder now, the distant hum more insistent-but altered, as if the air itself had learned something it could not forget. No one rushed to fill the space with words. They all carried the same instinctive understanding: this was not a moment to explain, to analyse, or to plan. This was a moment to stay.

Olay sat exactly where he had been since the twin was brought back.

His body had not relaxed. It had reorganised itself around vigilance. One arm curved protectively around both boys, his broad chest angled slightly forward, as though he could shield them from memory as well as threat. The injured twin lay tucked against him, breathing shallowly but steadily. The shaved patch on the boy's head looked wrong against his soft, pale skin, too clinical, too deliberate.

Olay's gaze never left it.

Katherine noticed before she realised she had moved.

She shifted closer, slow and deliberate, careful not to startle him. Her own daughter slept against her chest, warm and

impossibly alive, her small hand curled into the fabric of Katherine's shirt as if anchoring herself to the world. Katherine knelt near Olay, close enough that the edge of his presence pressed into her space, but not so close that it felt like intrusion.

She did not speak.

She simply sat.

For a long moment, nothing happened. Olay's breathing remained heavy, controlled with effort rather than ease. His fingers flexed once against the twin's back, then stilled again. Katherine watched the motion and felt something tighten in her chest-not fear, but recognition so sharp it almost hurt.

"I know," she said softly.

Her voice surprised even her. It was not trembling. It was steady in a way she did not remember learning.

"I know what it feels like," she continued, her eyes never leaving the child. "To leave them alone for even a moment and come back different. To look at their skin and wonder what someone else did while you weren't there."

Olay did not look at her.

But his breathing changed.

The sound in his chest shifted, the low vibration easing just enough to signal that he was listening.

Katherine adjusted her daughter against her shoulder and reached out-not toward the injured twin, but toward Olay's forearm. Her hand hovered there for a fraction of a second, giving him time to refuse.

He did not.

Her fingers rested lightly against his skin. It was warm, rough beneath her palm, scarred in places where life had been unforgiving. She felt the tension beneath it, the restraint held together by will alone.

“You didn’t fail them,” she said quietly. “You stayed. That matters.”

Olay’s head lowered slightly, his chin dipping toward his chest. The movement was small but unmistakable. His grip on the twins loosened just enough for breath to move more freely between them.

Katherine exhaled.

Across the room, Madhumita and Martha watched without speaking. This was not something to interrupt. Even Martha, who understood control better than most, recognised that this was not discipline being practiced here. This was something older.

The children stirred then, as if drawn toward one another by instinct rather than sound.

Katherine’s daughter woke first.

Her eyes opened slowly, dark and alert, scanning the room with the calm curiosity that always unsettled adults. She shifted against Katherine’s chest, then leaned forward, her gaze locking onto the twins. A small sound escaped her—soft, questioning, deliberate.

One of the twins responded immediately.

The uninjured one lifted his head and blinked at her, his face scrunching in confusion before smoothing into something like interest. He reached out clumsily, his fingers brushing against the air between them.

Katherine's daughter leaned forward and pressed her small hand against his cheek.

The contact was gentle. Intentional.

The twin froze, startled, then broke into a wide, unguarded grin. He made a bubbling sound of delight and leaned into the touch, clearly pleased by the attention. The injured twin, still drowsy but aware, shifted closer, his forehead bumping lightly against her hand in an accidental but affectionate collision.

She let out a soft sound that might have been a laugh.

It was not loud. It did not demand attention.

But it stopped all four adults in place.

Katherine felt tears rise without warning. She did not wipe them away. There was no need to pretend strength here. Madhumita's throat tightened, her chest aching with something dangerously close to hope. Even Martha felt the edge of her composure soften, the hard lines of strategy giving way to something she had not allowed herself in a long time.

Olay watched the children.

Really watched them.

The injured twin stirred, his brow furrowing slightly. Katherine's daughter noticed immediately. She shifted her weight, toddled forward as far as Katherine would allow, and

placed her hand clumsily against his arm. The touch was uncoordinated, almost ceremonial in its seriousness.

The injured twin relaxed.

Olay's breath shuddered once.

Katherine turned her head just enough to look at him. "They're good together," she said. "They see each other."

Olay swallowed. The movement was visible in the thick line of his throat.

"They need names," Katherine added gently.

Madhumita glanced at her. "They have names?"

Katherine shook her head. "Not ones we know."

She looked back at Olay. "You never told us."

Olay's brow creased. Something like uncertainty crossed his face—a rare thing for someone so physically certain of himself.

Katherine smiled, soft but unwavering. "Then we'll give them something. Something they can carry."

She looked at the twins again, one after the other, as if weighing the sound of them in her mouth before letting them exist.

"For us," she said quietly, "for now... this one can be Leo."

The uninjured twin responded instantly, giggling and thumping his hand against Olay's chest as if he recognised himself in the sound.

"And this one," she continued, her voice gentler now, "can be Max."

The injured twin murmured softly, his fingers curling into the fabric near Olay's side.

"They suit them," Madhumita said quietly.

Martha nodded once. "Strong names. Balanced."

Katherine looked down at her daughter then, something shifting in her expression-hesitation, vulnerability, invitation.

Before she could speak, Madhumita moved closer.

"She deserves one too," Madhumita said softly. "A name that reminds her who she is, no matter where she's taken."

Katherine's breath caught.

Madhumita smiled gently. "Veera," she said. "It means brave. Not the loud kind. The kind that survives."

Silence followed-not empty, but full.

Katherine repeated the name under her breath, as if testing its weight. "Veera."

Her daughter lifted her head at the sound.

Olay looked at her then.

Really looked.

She met his gaze without fear, her eyes steady and knowing in a way that felt almost unsettling. Olay reached out slowly, his massive finger hovering near her hand.

She grabbed it without hesitation.

The contact sent something through him-sharp and grounding all at once. His shoulders lowered. His breathing eased. The room felt less fragile with that connection in place.

Martha watched the exchange and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. Approval, in her own language.

Katherine rested her head briefly against Olay's arm, the weight of the moment pressing into her bones. "We'll keep them safe," she whispered. "All of them."

Olay did not speak.

He did not need to.

His hand closed gently, deliberately, around all three children.

And in that shared stillness-raw, quiet, sacred-something unbreakable took root.

Not a plan.

Not a promise.

A bond strong enough to make even monsters choose mercy.

Strong enough to make a silent man find words, when the time finally came.

Chapter Fourteen

What We Begin to See



The room did not return to normal after that night.

Nothing dramatic announced the change. The walls remained steel. The pipes continued their low, uneven hum. Light filtered through dust the same tired way it always had. And yet, something fundamental had shifted-subtle but irreversible-like the moment after an argument when everyone knows that even silence has taken sides.

They stayed close to one another now without discussing it.

Not clinging. Not afraid. Just nearer than before, their bodies instinctively aware of where the others were. Olay remained on the floor, his broad back against the wall, the twins pressed into the curve of his body. Katherine sat beside him, her shoulder occasionally brushing his arm when she shifted Veera in her lap. Madhumita and Martha leaned against opposite walls, not far, their attention constantly moving-never fixed, never idle.

No one spoke for a long time.

They were listening.

Not just for footsteps or doors or voices, but for patterns. For repetitions. For the small tells that places like this always revealed to people patient enough to notice.

The facility was precise, but it was not perfect.

Martha was the first to articulate what all of them were beginning to feel.

“This place is layered,” she said quietly, not looking at anyone in particular. “Redundancy built over redundancy. Systems watching systems. Human oversight backed by machines, machines backed by protocols.”

She shifted her weight slightly, testing the floor beneath her heel. “They expect resistance. That’s the problem.”

Madhumita nodded slowly. “Which means anything obvious will fail.”

Katherine tightened her grip around Veera without realising she had done it. “So... there’s no way out?”

“No,” Martha replied calmly. “There’s no easy way out.”

That distinction mattered.

Olay did not move, but his chest rose and fell more slowly now, more evenly. He was learning something too-not about walls or doors, but about patience. About holding still without surrendering.

The twins were awake.

They no longer wandered aimlessly the way they had at first. They stayed close to Olay, climbing over his legs, leaning into his side, their movements purposeful in a way that felt... observant. Leo watched the door with open curiosity, his head tilting slightly every time the hum in the walls shifted. Max sat cross-legged near Olay’s knee, tracing the seam where the floor

met the wall, his fingers pausing whenever the vibration beneath them changed.

Madhumita noticed it first.

“They’re listening,” she murmured. “Not just hearing.”

Martha’s eyes sharpened. “Children are good at that. They haven’t learned what to ignore yet.”

“But this,” Katherine said softly, watching them, “feels like more than that.”

As if in response, the hum beneath the room altered—just a fraction. Not louder. Not quieter. Different.

Olay’s body tensed instinctively.

The restraint embedded in the wall responded immediately, a subtle tightening meant to discourage movement before it became action. The change was small, almost polite, but unmistakable to anyone who had lived with it long enough.

Before Olay could adjust his position, before the tension could escalate—

Veera made a sound.

It wasn’t a cry. It wasn’t even a call for attention.

It was a low, steady hum, soft and deliberate, rising from deep in her chest the way Katherine’s lullabies sometimes did, but different. Focused. Intentional.

The twins reacted instantly.

Leo stopped moving mid-climb and leaned back against Olay’s chest. Max pressed his palms flat against the floor and went

very still. Their bodies relaxed-not in fear, but in recognition, as though someone had just told them, It's all right. Stay.

The restraint loosened.

Not fully. Not dramatically.

But enough.

Enough that Olay felt it.

Enough that Martha straightened.

Enough that Madhumita's breath caught in her throat.

Veera lifted her head then and looked-not randomly, not searching-directly at the camera mounted high in the corner of the room.

Her gaze locked onto it.

For a single, stretched second, nothing happened.

Then the camera adjusted.

The movement was almost imperceptible. A fractional tilt. A recalibration so minor it could easily be dismissed as routine. But they all saw it.

The camera had responded to her.

The room went very quiet.

No one spoke. No one moved. The pipes continued their low vibration, but it felt distant now, like background noise to something far more important.

Martha was the first to breathe again. "That," she said carefully, "was not a coincidence."

Katherine's arms tightened around her daughter, fear and awe colliding in her chest. "Veera," she whispered, not as a warning, not as a command-just as acknowledgment.

Veera blinked slowly, as if satisfied, then settled back against Katherine, the hum fading into quiet contentment.

Olay lowered his head, his forehead resting briefly against the twins. His massive hand came down gently, covering both boys at once. He did not growl. He did not tense. He simply stayed.

"They're not just watching us," Madhumita said softly. "They're reacting."

"Yes," Martha agreed. "And that means we matter."

There was a pause.

Then something small, human, and utterly unexpected broke the tension.

Olay shifted his weight slightly and frowned.

He tried to reach behind his shoulder.

Failed.

Tried again, adjusting his angle, his thick arm straining awkwardly as he attempted to scratch a spot just out of reach. His frustration was immediate and very real, a low sound escaping his chest as he gave up with visible irritation.

Madhumita pressed her lips together, hiding a smile.

Katherine glanced at Martha.

Martha hesitated only a second.

Then she stepped forward, movements efficient and unembellished, knelt behind Olay, and scratched his back exactly where he'd been reaching. No hesitation. No comment. Just precise, practical relief.

Olay froze.

Then exhaled-long and slow.

The sound was almost content.

Martha withdrew her hand immediately and stood, expression unchanged. "Next time," she said flatly, "say something."

Olay made a low, approving sound.

The moment passed, but something remained behind-an ease, fragile but real.

They sat together again, the four of them, watching the children. Leo leaned into Veera's side, fascinated by her hair. Max yawned and rested his head against Olay's thigh. Veera reached out and touched Max's cheek with clumsy seriousness, as if confirming he was still there.

No one stopped her.

No one needed to.

Finally, Madhumita spoke. "We don't run," she said quietly. "Not yet."

Martha nodded. "We observe."

"We learn," Katherine added, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice.

Olay shifted, adjusting his position so all three children were within the circle of his body. His gaze moved from one adult to the next.

He did not need words.

The understanding was complete.

They would survive this moment by moment.

They would pay attention.

They would protect what mattered.

And when the time came-not because fear demanded it, but because preparation allowed it-they would act.

Not as individuals.

As a team.

The camera in the corner remained still.

For now.

Chapter Fifteen

Preparation Disguised as Survival



If someone had been watching closely, they might have thought nothing had changed.

The same steel walls held the room. The same dull light filtered through dust and hesitation. The pipes still breathed with their uneven rhythm, old metal complaining softly as it always had. Food arrived. Waste was collected. The door opened and closed with the same measured courtesy. On the surface, the room behaved.

Inside it, however, something else had begun.

It did not announce itself. It did not rush. It moved the way training always does—quietly, repetitively, invisibly—until one day you realise your body knows something your mind hasn't yet named.

They stopped talking about escape.

That was the first sign.

Not because they had abandoned the idea, but because talking about it would have been a mistake. This place was built to listen for fear, for defiance, for urgency. It was not built to recognise patience.

So they learned patience.

“Slow is safer,” Madhumita murmured once, barely audible, as she shifted her weight and let her breathing settle.

Martha set the tone without declaring it. She began treating the room like a drill ground disguised as a cage. Her movements were unremarkable to anyone glancing in-a shift of weight here, a stretch there-but every action was deliberate. She stood in different places when the door opened. She noted which guard shadows passed the threshold and which never did. She watched how long the hum in the walls changed pitch after a delivery, how long the air seemed to hold memory before returning to baseline.

She counted without counting.

Not numbers, but intervals. Gaps. The difference between systems responding and systems resetting.

“This place doesn’t like uncertainty,” she murmured once, not to anyone in particular, as she leaned back against the wall. “It prefers patterns.”

A low sound left Olay’s chest, brief and thoughtful. Not disagreement. Recognition.

Madhumita understood immediately.

She had lived her life on the edge of gravity. She knew the difference between movement that invited collapse and movement that carried you through. She began walking the room at different times, never abruptly, never stopping suddenly. She let her body flow, slow and continuous, as if the floor itself were something she needed to listen to.

She noticed that the room resisted sharp decisions.

Sudden turns made the hum tighten. Quick shifts made the air feel heavier. But continuous motion-steady, predictable-passed unnoticed, like water around stone.

She filed that knowledge away carefully.

Balance was not about defying the fall. It was about convincing the fall you belonged there.

“Good,” Martha said quietly, watching her. “Don’t rush it.”

Olay learned restraint in a new language.

Before, restraint had been survival forced upon him-something imposed, painful, humiliating. Now it became strategy. He tested it the way he tested his strength, quietly and with control. He shifted his weight by degrees, feeling how the restraints responded not to intention but to acceleration. He learned how much stillness was required to keep them passive, how much tension the system tolerated before it reacted.

Anger, he learned, was loud.

Stillness was invisible.

“You’re doing it,” Katherine said softly, more reassurance than instruction.

He began to breathe differently, deeper and slower, anchoring his mass not as a threat but as a constant. The room adjusted to him. The restraints stopped correcting so aggressively. He felt the difference in his bones.

This was not submission.

This was camouflage.

Katherine watched all of it with new eyes.

She had spent so long believing strength looked like endurance alone, like suffering quietly until the worst passed. Now she saw something else taking shape—strength as awareness, as choice, as timing. She began asking questions, not frantically, not apologetically, but carefully. When does the room feel heavier? When does the door sound different? When does Veera grow unusually still?

“Tell me before it happens,” she whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

Her instincts, long dismissed as fear, sharpened into something precise.

Veera responded to it.

The baby was no longer just calm. She was intentional. She grew quiet before the hum shifted, her body settling as if she anticipated the room’s next breath. Once, when Leo began to fuss, Veera reached out and touched his cheek, and he stopped instantly—not startled, not distracted, but soothed in a way that felt aligned.

“That’s not normal,” Madhumita said softly, awe threading her voice.

Max watched her the way people watched weather.

He did not understand her, but he trusted her.

The twins learned quickly. They began avoiding certain corners without being told. They leaned into Olay when the room grew restless. They mirrored Veera’s stillness when she

focused, their small bodies instinctively falling into formation around her.

Children were not supposed to do this.

All four adults knew it.

No one said it aloud.

“Not yet,” Martha said quietly, as if caution itself could be spoken into existence.

The days blurred into a rhythm that felt almost military in its quiet discipline. Observation replaced panic. Routine replaced despair. Even moments of tenderness carried purpose-not as tools, but as anchors. They reminded each other why control mattered, why patience was worth the cost.

Once, Olay shifted and growled softly in irritation, trying again to reach the same unreachable spot on his back. The sound was frustrated, almost embarrassed. Martha glanced over, assessed the angle, and stepped in without comment. She scratched precisely where his reach failed, firm and efficient, then withdrew immediately.

Olay exhaled, the sound long and grounding.

“Posture,” Martha said flatly, as if correcting a stance. “You’re collapsing inward.”

A low, approving sound rumbled from Olay’s chest.

He adjusted. The room hummed, then settled.

Even that became information.

By the end of the chapter of days-no one knew how many-it was no longer possible to pretend they were simply surviving.

They were training.

Not to fight the facility head-on. Not to outrun it. But to understand it so completely that when the moment came, they would already be moving before the system realised it needed to respond.

Katherine held Veera close that night, her hand resting protectively on Olay's arm as the twins slept, their small bodies rising and falling in practiced calm. She felt fear still, sharp and alive-but it no longer owned her.

"We'll learn everything," she whispered, not as a plea, but as a vow. "Every breath of this place."

"Together," Madhumita said quietly from across the room.

Olay did not answer.

He shifted just enough to shelter all three children more fully within the circle of his body.

Across the room, Madhumita met Martha's gaze. No nods. No words. Just understanding, clean and exact.

They were not ready to escape.

But they were no longer unprepared.

And for a place built to control outcomes, that was the most dangerous thing of all.

Chapter Sixteen

The Cruel One



Food arrived the way it always did—without ceremony, without kindness, without the dignity of choice.

A panel in the wall slid open with a soft mechanical sigh, and a tray appeared as if the room itself had exhaled it into existence. The smell reached them first: warm starch, faint spice engineered to be harmless, a lingering metallic note that never belonged in real kitchens. The facility didn't feed them to comfort them. It fed them to keep their bodies predictable.

Madhumita moved first, as she usually did. Not because she was hungriest, but because she understood that hesitation became data here. She crouched near the tray, eyes scanning quickly—bowls of pale khichdi-like grains, a thin lentil broth, pieces of bread that looked freshly made and still tasted faintly of the sterile air. There were small portions of fruit too, cut too neatly to have been touched by a human hand.

Katherine watched from where she sat with Veera against her chest. Veera's fingers rested on Katherine's collarbone, her grip soft but certain, as though the child had decided this was the safest anchor point in the world.

Martha's gaze remained on the seams in the wall, the corners where air moved differently, the slight vibration of the pipes.

She didn't look hungry. She looked alert-like hunger was just another sensation to file away until later.

Olay sat with Leo and Max pressed close, the twins folded into the shape of his body as if his bulk was the only geography they trusted. They were awake today. Not fully energetic, not truly free of whatever the facility kept in their systems, but awake enough to notice the food, to follow the motion of the tray, to blink slowly like small animals evaluating whether the world was safe.

Max-the one who had come back altered-did not move much. His breath was steady now, but his body held a careful stillness that didn't belong to children. The shaved patch on his head looked worse in daylight. Not dramatic. Worse in the way an injury does when it was made with purpose.

The burn had scabbed raw. It wasn't a cut. It wasn't an accident. The skin looked like it had been pressed too hard against something hot, then left to heal without care. Around it, the fine pale hair had been shaved away in a clinical circle, as if the injury was part of a procedure rather than a cruelty.

Olay's eyes kept returning to that patch, again and again, as though his gaze could somehow reverse time.

Martha set bowls down near each of them, careful with her movements. "It smells like someone described food to a machine," she murmured, tone light, as if humour could soften the edge of her throat.

Madhumita's mouth twitched. "My mother used to make khichdi when someone was sick," she said quietly, more to herself than to anyone else. "This" She glanced at the bowl. "This feels like they're trying to copy the idea of it."

Katherine nodded once, eyes lowering. "Back home, even plain food has... hands in it. Someone stirring. Someone tasting. Someone deciding you deserve warmth."

Martha took a piece of bread, broke it in half, and ate with the steady calm of someone refusing to be impressed by anything, even hunger. "Eat," she said, not unkindly. "We need our bodies."

Katherine swallowed a small mouthful, chewing slowly. Veera watched the motion, then watched the bowl, then looked away as if she'd already decided the food didn't matter.

Leo reached for Madhumita's fingers when she leaned close, poking her knuckle with the serious curiosity of a child who needed to confirm she was still real. When she smiled softly, he made a pleased sound and leaned back into Olay again, satisfied.

Max didn't reach for anything. He leaned against Olay's thigh and stared at the floor, his small hand curled into the fabric near Olay's knee like a tether.

Olay's enormous palm rested lightly over the twins, heavy enough to shelter, gentle enough not to crush. His breathing was slow and deliberate, like he was forcing each inhale to stay quiet.

A faint click sounded from somewhere inside the wall.

Not loud.

Not urgent.

But the kind of sound that made bodies remember fear before minds could name it.

Martha froze mid-chew-not stiffly, not obviously, just a slight pause that could have been mistaken for thought. Madhumita's eyes flicked toward the door seam. Katherine's shoulders tightened.

Olay didn't move at all.

But the air around him changed. The room learned his attention and held its breath.

The panel that usually stayed shut near the door slid open-not for food, but for people.

Boots arrived first.

A heavy step. Then another. Then the softer, deliberate sound of someone who liked to time his entrance.

Two guards stood at the threshold. They wore the same reinforced suits as the others, faces half covered, bodies positioned with trained distance. They didn't step fully inside at first, as if the room belonged to something larger than them.

Then a third figure entered behind them.

He announced "Hello again, I am Jarvis".

He was not dressed like a guard.

He wore a darker uniform-cleaner, tailored in a way that suggested authority rather than labour. His gloves were immaculate, like he touched the world only when he wanted to. His face held the kind of calm that didn't come from peace-it came from confidence that nothing here could touch him.

Katherine recognised him before her mind finished naming him. Her body reacted first-arms tightening around Veera, shoulders drawing inward, breath catching like it had snagged

on something sharp. The memory of Max being taken didn't return like a scene. It returned like a bruise pressed without warning.

Martha's eyes narrowed by a fraction. "Him," she said quietly, not looking away. Not a question. A confirmation.

Madhumita felt her stomach drop as if the floor had shifted beneath her feet. She didn't need a name to understand the feeling he carried in with him-ownership, rehearsed and casual.

Olay's breath deepened.

Jarvis didn't smile immediately.

He looked.

Not at the adults first.

At the children.

His gaze moved over Leo and Max the way someone might assess a tool: weight, function, response. His eyes lingered on Max's shaved patch for half a second-just long enough for Katherine to feel sick.

Then he finally let a smile appear.

It was small.

Polite.

And cold.

"Well," Jarvis said softly, as if greeting guests instead of captives. "Look at you all. Eating. Bonding. Trying to make this feel like a home."

No one answered.

Jarvis didn't seem to care. He took a few steps in, slow enough to show he wasn't afraid, but not so slow that it looked like caution. He stopped just outside arm's reach of Olay.

That was deliberate.

He was close enough to provoke.

Close enough to enjoy the feeling of power.

But not close enough to be foolish.

He glanced at Madhumita. "You," he said, like selecting an item from a shelf. "Still standing upright. Impressive. For someone who thinks balance is strength."

Madhumita held his gaze without flinching, but her stomach tightened. She knew what he was doing. He wasn't speaking to hurt her directly. He was speaking to see who would react.

Jarvis turned his attention to Martha. "And you," he murmured. "Still pretending discipline is the same as control. You're charming."

Martha's expression did not change. But her fingers tightened once around the bread, then loosened, as if reminding herself that she was not allowed to throw anything.

Jarvis tilted his head slightly, as though listening to music no one else could hear. "Katherine," he said, voice softer now, almost intimate. "Still holding on to the idea that love is protection."

Katherine's breath caught. She felt it in her chest, like a hand squeezing her ribs.

Jarvis took another half-step toward her.

Not toward Veera.

Toward Katherine.

That mattered. He didn't see the baby as a person. He saw her as leverage.

"Do you know what happens to children?" Jarvis asked, tone conversational. "They grow. They learn. They leave. They disappoint. They forget you. They become strangers with your face."

Katherine's lips parted, but nothing came out.

Jarvis watched her eyes fill, watched the fear ignite, and seemed pleased by it-like a gardener pleased by a plant responding to water.

"They are of no worth once they grow up," he added quietly, almost kindly. "Not to you. Not to anyone. You're risking your life for something that will eventually walk away from you without looking back."

Veera shifted against Katherine.

Not frightened.

Aware.

Her head turned slowly until her gaze landed directly on Jarvis.

Jarvis's smile faltered for the smallest moment.

Not because he was afraid of a baby.

Because something in that gaze did not behave like a baby.

Veera stared at him with unsettling steadiness, as if she were not seeing his uniform or his authority, but something beneath it. Something human. Something fragile.

Jarvis recovered quickly. He didn't like being observed.

He looked away from Veera and back to Olay, the way a man looks away from a mirror.

"And you," Jarvis said, voice lowering, "you're the easiest one."

Olay did not react.

Jarvis leaned in just slightly-not enough to enter danger, but enough to show intention. "Because you think love makes you strong," he murmured. "But love is the thing that makes you obedient."

Olay's breathing deepened, slow and heavy, as if he were dragging his anger down into his bones.

Jarvis's eyes flicked toward Max.

Then to Leo.

Then back to Olay.

He didn't have to touch them to threaten.

His gaze was enough.

Martha felt her body prepare before she gave herself permission. Madhumita's hands went cold. Katherine's arms tightened around Veera until the baby made a small sound of protest.

Jarvis smiled again, satisfied.

Then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small strip of cloth-clean, white, clinical.

A bandage.

Not for comfort.

For theatre.

He held it up as if offering it to them. "We're very careful here," he said lightly. "We don't hurt what we don't have to. We only take what we need."

The guards behind him shifted.

Jarvis didn't look at them. He didn't need to. They were extensions of his intention.

"Olay," he said softly, like speaking to an animal he believed he owned. "Move."

Olay remained still.

Jarvis waited.

The room held its breath.

Then Jarvis exhaled, almost amused. "No?" he said. "Fine."

He turned his head slightly toward one of the guards.

A minimal gesture.

A command disguised as nothing.

The guard stepped forward.

Martha moved instinctively, one foot sliding back, body angling to intercept-but the second guard shifted too, blocking her path with practiced ease. They weren't faster than her. They were positioned for this.

Katherine felt panic rise. “Don’t,” she whispered, not to the guards, but to the world.

Madhumita’s voice stayed steady. “Jarvis,” she said, carefully using the name as if it were a rope she could hold onto. “What are you doing?”

Jarvis glanced at her. “You’ll see,” he replied, as if inviting her to watch a demonstration.

The guard reached toward Leo.

Leo did not scream. He did not understand fast enough.

He only blinked, confusion spreading across his small face as the gloved hand closed around his arm.

Olay’s body shifted then.

Not violently.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

Enough that the restraints responded instantly-tightening in a harsh, warning pulse that vibrated through the wall and into his bones.

Olay froze, muscles trembling under forced control.

Leo made a small startled sound.

Jarvis’s eyes gleamed.

“This,” Jarvis said softly, almost reverently, “is the part I enjoy.”

He watched Olay’s restraint like it was a performance.

He watched love turning into a cage.

Katherine's breath fractured. She moved without thinking, stepping closer to Olay, voice urgent but gentle. "Olay," she whispered, "look at me."

Olay's eyes flicked toward her, wild and dark.

Katherine held his gaze like she was holding a knife by the blade. "Not yet," she breathed. "Don't give him what he wants."

Jarvis laughed quietly. "How touching," he murmured. "The girl who lost everything thinks she can teach restraint."

The guard tightened his grip, pulling Leo half a step—just enough for Leo's feet to stumble, just enough for the child to understand separation for the first time in that slow, dawning way that makes panic arrive late and pure.

Leo's free hand reached backward, fingers grasping for Olay.

Olay's body shuddered.

Madhumita moved closer too, voice firm. "Olay. If you break this room right now, you won't know where they take him. You'll smash walls and lose him anyway."

Jarvis's smile thinned. He didn't like hearing strategy spoken aloud. He didn't like people remembering they could think.

Martha's eyes never left the guard's hands. Her voice was low, controlled, meant for Olay as much as anyone. "Hold," she said. "Hold. We get him back, then we plan."

Olay's jaw clenched.

The restraint tightened again, punishing even the intention of movement.

Leo's face crumpled. A cry finally broke out of him-high, shocked, the sound of a child suddenly realising separation exists.

Katherine flinched like she'd been hit.

That sound did something inside the room.

It made the air heavier.

It made the walls feel closer.

It made every adult understand, in their marrow, what would happen if they failed.

Jarvis watched them all, eyes bright with cruel satisfaction.

"This is what you are," he said quietly. "You're not dangerous. You're predictable. You love. And love is a handle."

He nodded once.

And then-casually, as if ending a lesson-he lifted two fingers.

The guard stopped.

Leo was still in his grip, crying, twisting, reaching.

Jarvis stepped closer, then stopped abruptly, the smallest flash of human caution tightening his shoulders when Olay's muscles bunched under the restraint. He covered it quickly, smoothing it over with that same polite calm.

"Not today," Jarvis said softly, almost indulgent, like he was sparing them as a favour. "Today was just to remind you that you don't get to decide what stays."

He looked at Leo, still crying, and his mouth curved faintly-as if the sound was proof of something.

Then Jarvis inclined his head toward the guard.

The gloved hand released Leo.

Leo stumbled backward into Olay's body, sobbing hard, clinging immediately to Olay's chest as if he could crawl inside him and never be reached again. Olay's arms wrapped around him instinctively, shaking with held force, his breath thick and measured, his whole body vibrating with violence he refused to release.

Jarvis's gaze moved over them-satisfied, almost bored now that the reaction had been collected.

"I'll come back," he said, voice mild, directed at no one and all of them at once. "For Leo. When you're tired. When you think you've learned patience." His eyes flicked to Max's shaved patch. "You already know what careful looks like."

The door sealed.

The room did not go quiet.

The room went wrong.

Olay did not roar.

That was the frightening part.

He sat utterly still, breath thick and measured, his whole body vibrating with violence he refused to release.

Max shifted against him, restless now, sensing the fear. He made a small, confused sound, searching with his hands.

Katherine's eyes filled fully. Tears slid down her cheeks without resistance.

She didn't wipe them away.

She couldn't.

Madhumita felt her own throat tighten, the kind of tightness that comes before sobbing, before anger, before the body chooses one.

Martha's hands clenched at her sides, then loosened. Her face remained calm, but her eyes sharpened into something cold.

Olay's fingers flexed slowly, once, twice, as if his hands were remembering what they were made for.

Katherine moved closer to him, shaking. She sat down beside his massive body, so close her shoulder pressed against his arm.

"I know," she whispered again, voice breaking now. "I know what it feels like. When they take something small and you can't stop it. When your whole body wants to burn the world down, but the world still holds what you love."

Olay's breathing faltered once, like a swallowed sob.

Katherine leaned her forehead gently against his arm.

"Listen to me," she whispered. "He wants you to explode because then he wins twice. He takes your child and he turns you into the monster he's been describing. Don't let him choose your shape."

Madhumita crouched on Olay's other side, voice low, steady. "we don't let it happen again. Not to Leo. Not to Max. Not to Veera. Not to any of us."

Martha stepped forward then-slow, controlled, as if she were walking into a line of fire. She knelt near Leo placed her hand lightly on his shoulder.

Leo startled, then leaned into it with a quiet, aching need.

Martha's voice stayed flat, but something in it softened. "We learn their routine," she said. "We learn which doors open. Which people come. Which systems twitch. And then we take our own turn."

Katherine lifted her head. Her face was wet, her eyes raw, but her voice had changed. "We swear," she said quietly, as if the words were too sacred to say loudly.

Madhumita nodded. "We swear."

Martha's jaw tightened. "We swear."

Olay did not speak.

But his hand came down slowly, resting over Max's back-heavy, careful, certain.

Katherine reached out then and touched Max's cheek with shaking fingers, the way Veera had touched him earlier, serious and gentle. Max blinked at her, confused, then let out a small sound and leaned into her hand.

Madhumita touched his other shoulder, steadying him, grounding him.

Martha kept her palm where it was, disciplined and present.

Veera watched all of it from Katherine's lap, eyes too aware.

She made a soft hum-low and deliberate.

Max's body stilled.

Olay's breathing eased by a fraction, not because he was calm, but because he was choosing control.

The room held them in its cold, listening silence.

Leo was pressed into Olay now, shaking, his sobs slowing into harsh hiccups as if his small body didn't know how to stop being terrified. Olay's hand stayed on him-heavy, sheltering-like an oath made without language.

And inside the room, four adults sat around one child as if forming a circle against the universe itself, making a vow with their bodies because words were too small.

They would not be taken apart again.

Not quietly.

Not politely.

Not ever.

Chapter Seventeen

The Quiet Test



By now, even the room had begun to feel like it had habits.

The steel walls were the same, the pipes still humming in that uneven, old-metal rhythm, but the air no longer felt blank. It carried memory. It held the weight of what had happened to Max, and the absence of what could be taken again. The room didn't forget. Neither did they.

They had stopped behaving like four separate survivors trapped in the same cage.

They moved like a unit now-softly, without announcements, without the dramatic gestures that would have given the facility something easy to measure. Their closeness was not desperate. It was functional. Instinctive. As if the body knew before the mind did: proximity meant warning, warmth, and witness.

Olay sat against the wall with the twins pressed into him, the curve of his body forming a shelter that did not look gentle until you watched the way his hand adjusted when one child shifted, or how his breathing changed when the other made a small sound in sleep. Max's shaved patch was still there, still wrong, still a raw burn that held the memory of hands that had no right. Leo hovered near it sometimes, not touching,

just watching as if he could understand pain by staring hard enough.

Katherine sat close enough that her shoulder sometimes brushed Olay's arm when she shifted Veera. It had become normal-this strange, impossible arrangement-like the room had forced them into a shape and now refused to let them unlearn it.

Martha and Madhumita stayed on opposite sides more often than not, but it wasn't distance. It was coverage. Martha's eyes were always scanning corners, seams, tiny defects in a system built to pretend it didn't have any. Madhumita's attention moved differently-less sharp, more continuous-like she was listening to the floor with her ankles, measuring timing through vibration, the same way she once measured wind and rope tension with her fingertips.

They did not talk about escape in daylight anymore.

Not because the idea had vanished.

Because saying it out loud in the wrong air felt like giving a name to a fire while the walls were still soaked in fuel.

Food arrived.

The panel slid open with its familiar, almost polite mechanical sigh. A tray appeared, warm to the touch, as if the room had breathed it out.

The smell came first-soft starch, thin lentil broth, bread that looked real until you tasted it and realised it carried no human decision in it. It was engineered comfort: mild enough to not inflame, steady enough to keep bodies predictable, faintly spiced in a way that felt like a laboratory's guess at culture.

Madhumita crouched by the tray because she always did. Not hunger-habit. The facility watched hesitation. She refused to offer it.

She lifted a bowl, held it for half a second, and felt heat rise into her palms. Her mind did not drift to taste. It drifted to timing.

The hum in the walls shifted slightly higher, slightly tighter-like a system waking up to record.

Martha noticed too. She always did.

Her eyes didn't move to the food. They moved to the seam above the panel, to the corner where a tiny camera sat like an insect that never slept. She had learned the room's rhythm well enough to feel when it was paying extra attention.

Katherine fed Veera first, as she always did. Not because the baby needed it-Veera rarely seemed hungry in the ordinary way. Katherine did it because the act reminded her she still had agency. She still had a role beyond being watched.

Veera's small mouth accepted a little broth. Then she turned her face away, done. Finished. As if her body had taken what it required and refused the rest.

Leo leaned forward, curious, and poked his own bowl with a finger. The surface trembled. He watched it like it was magic.

Max stayed tucked into Olay's side, one hand curled into the fabric near Olay's thigh as if holding on to the only thing that didn't vanish.

Olay's palm rested over them both-heavy, careful. His breathing was slow, his posture still, but inside him everything

was awake. The room could not see it. The room only saw stillness and assumed obedience.

It did not understand stillness could be a weapon.

Martha crossed the room with the same casualness she used when she wanted the cameras to misread her. She didn't hurry. She didn't stalk. She moved like someone stretching her legs.

When she reached the tray, she bent and picked up a piece of bread.

She tore it once, slowly.

Then she tore it again.

A pause, almost nothing.

Her fingers shifted the torn bread slightly-just enough to change the placement of the bowl beside it.

A tiny adjustment.

Not to test food.

To test the room.

The hum responded.

Not with alarm.

With correction.

A subtle tightening in the air, as if the system had noticed a deviation and decided to smooth it out.

Martha's gaze flicked to Madhumita for the briefest moment.

Not a nod.

Not a signal anyone else would catch.

Just a look that said: It reacts to changes. But it does not know what they mean.

Madhumita's heart kicked once in her chest, hard enough that she felt it in her throat.

Then she lowered her head and pretended to blow on the broth like it was simply too hot.

Katherine watched with the kind of attention you get when you've spent years learning to read danger without looking like you're reading it.

"Eat," Martha said lightly, as if this was nothing. "While it's warm."

Olay made a low sound-not approval, not refusal. Just presence.

Leo giggled suddenly, delighted by the warmth of the bowl against his fingers. A childish, bright sound that didn't belong in a room like this.

The camera in the corner adjusted-fractionally.

It tilted, recalibrating.

Following motion.

Veera lifted her head at that exact moment.

Not because of the giggle.

Because the room's hum had shifted.

Her eyes moved slowly upward and locked onto the camera.

For a second she simply stared, expression blank in the way infants sometimes look blank-except it wasn't blank. It was focused. Intentional. Like she had picked a target.

The hum changed again.

The camera adjusted more sharply this time, like it was trying to interpret her. Trying to correct for something that didn't fit its model.

Martha, without moving her face, let her fingers brush the seam of the wall beneath the camera-casual, idle.

A woman absentmindedly touching a wall.

But her skin felt it: the vibration, the faint heat, the tiny inconsistency in the metal.

"Interesting," she murmured, so low it could have been a thought.

Katherine's mouth went dry. "Veera..."

Veera blinked once, slow. Then she made that soft hum-the low, deliberate sound she sometimes used when the room tightened.

The twins reacted immediately.

Leo stopped moving mid-giggle and leaned back into Olay's chest as if someone had told him to be still.

Max's body softened by a fraction, his hand unclenching from the fabric.

Olay's restraint eased.

Not fully.

But enough.

Enough for all four adults to feel it.

Madhumita's fingers tightened around her bowl.

The room wasn't just watching.

It was responding.

And the children-without being told, without being trained-were behaving like they understood the room's language better than the adults did.

Martha returned to her wall, carrying her bread like nothing had happened.

But her eyes were alive now. Sharper.

Madhumita swallowed once, forcing her face to remain calm.

This had been a test.

A small one.

And it had answered something important: the facility didn't need to be outsmarted with explosions yet.

It could be misled.

The rest of the day passed in controlled normalcy. They ate. They moved. They let the cameras record what the cameras wanted: stable bodies, mild conversation, no urgency.

But inside each of them, something had shifted into place.

Not hope.

Not yet.

Mechanism.

That night, the room changed again.

There were always hours when the facility felt less attentive-not asleep, never asleep, but diffused. The hum lowered slightly. The pipes became louder in comparison, as if the building's own skeleton was finally allowed to speak.

Madhumita could feel it the way she used to feel a rope settle under her weight: a slight loosening, a tiny change in tension.

It was never silence.

But it was the closest thing to privacy they were going to get.

Katherine lay with Veera against her chest, eyes open in the dim light. Martha sat cross-legged near the wall, posture relaxed, attention razor-sharp. Olay remained against his corner, the twins pressed into him, one breathing deep, the other half-awake, small face turned toward Veera as if drawn.

Madhumita shifted closer to the pipes-casual, slow.

She had noticed something: when you sat close to the thickest junction of metal, the room's sound blurred. The pipes didn't just hum. They masked.

Martha had noticed it too. She moved with the same silent understanding and positioned herself where the floor dipped slightly-a seam that made vibrations behave oddly, a place the facility had likely ignored because it wasn't relevant to measurements.

Katherine watched them both.

She didn't ask.

She understood.

Veera stirred.

And before Katherine could even whisper her name, the baby lifted her head and looked-directly-toward the corner camera again.

Madhumita felt her stomach drop. Not fear of the camera.

Fear of what Veera might provoke.

But Veera didn't provoke.

She simply stared, calm as stone.

Then she hummed.

The hum rose softly, steady and low, like a tuning fork held close to the room's spine.

The camera adjusted.

Once.

Twice.

Then-just for a second-it stopped moving altogether.

Not dead.

Not shut off.

Paused.

As if the system had been forced to recalibrate something it didn't understand.

In that pause, Martha's voice came, barely above breath.

"Now."

Katherine's chest tightened. "Is it... safe?"

“No,” Martha murmured. “But it’s less unsafe.”

Madhumita let out the smallest laugh-not humor, disbelief. “That’s the best kind of safe we get.”

Olay’s eyes opened fully.

In the low light they looked darker, deeper, and far more human than anyone expected from a body like his. His gaze moved from Martha to Madhumita to Katherine.

He did not speak.

But his attention held them like a question.

Katherine swallowed. “We can’t keep guessing,” she whispered. “Not with them.”

Her hand tightened around Veera’s back.

Madhumita nodded slowly. “We won’t.”

Martha’s fingers traced the seam in the floor, gentle, almost absent. “The system is built to detect sudden decisions,” she said. “Fast movement. Sharp changes. Panic.”

Madhumita leaned closer to the pipes, voice low. “But it doesn’t notice the slow ones. It corrects. It smooths. It assumes everything is just... settling.”

Katherine looked between them. “So what do we do?”

Martha’s eyes flicked toward the children.

“They’re the key,” she said, voice careful. “Not because they’re weak. Because the system treats them differently.”

Katherine’s throat tightened. “Like a care protocol.”

“Exactly.” Martha’s mouth twisted slightly, the closest she came to bitterness. “It wants them intact. Trauma complicates data.”

Madhumita exhaled slowly. “And Veera...”

She didn’t finish the sentence.

She didn’t need to.

Veera was not behaving like an ordinary child. Veera was doing something unmistakable—quieting the room, influencing the sensors, pulling the system into recalibration.

Olay shifted minutely. The twins pressed closer without waking fully, as if his movement had been a lullaby.

Katherine watched that, and the tenderness hit her so hard she almost couldn’t breathe around it. Olay’s entire world fit inside the shape of those two small bodies.

Madhumita lowered her voice further. “We need routes,” she said. “We need to know where doors lead. Where air changes. Where sound changes.”

Martha nodded. “A map. But not paper. Not screens.”

“Body,” Madhumita murmured, understanding blooming. “A map in the body.”

Martha’s eyes sharpened. “Exactly.”

Katherine’s fingers trembled slightly against Veera’s back. “How do we get outside this room to feel anything else?”

Martha’s gaze slid toward the food panel. “They open it. Every day. They stand there. Every day. The system resets after deliveries. Every day.”

“And the children move first,” Madhumita added, eyes on Veera. “Because the room doesn’t clamp down hard when they move.”

A silence settled-not empty, but thick with possibility.

Then Katherine whispered, almost ashamed of wanting it: “After... if we do get out... where do we go?”

The question felt like a forbidden luxury. Like imagining sunlight while still underground.

Madhumita’s expression softened. “Home,” she said simply. “Not the same home. But... my mother’s hands. My father pretending he isn’t worried. The smell of chai that’s actually been tasted, not measured.”

Katherine swallowed hard. “I don’t know if I have a home anymore.”

Madhumita’s eyes held hers. “Then we make one.”

Katherine’s breath shuddered. “I want a room with a door I can lock from the inside,” she whispered. “And a window. And a bed that doesn’t feel like punishment. I want to hear my daughter laugh somewhere that isn’t monitored.”

Martha was quiet for a moment, then said softly, “I want a place where no one tells me what my body is for.”

The words were simple.

But they landed like a blade.

Madhumita glanced at her. “And what would you do there?”

Martha’s gaze moved to the children, then away. “Sleep,” she said, almost as if she disliked admitting it. “Without listening.”

Katherine turned her head toward Olay.

“And you?” she asked gently, as if the question was a blanket she was offering, not a demand.

Olay didn’t answer.

He just pulled the twins closer, one arm curving around them with slow certainty. Leo made a tiny sound in sleep and tucked his face into Olay’s chest. Max’s fingers curled into Olay’s skin like he was anchoring himself.

Olay’s mouth shifted.

Not a full smile.

But something soft enough to make Katherine’s eyes burn.

His dream was right there.

Not a place.

Not a plan.

A body around his children. Anywhere. Always.

Katherine’s throat tightened so much she could barely speak. “Okay,” she whispered. “Okay.”

Veera hummed again, low and steady, as if the room itself needed reassurance.

Martha’s posture changed slightly. The softness of talking about futures vanished, replaced by the clean edge of purpose.

“Tomorrow,” she murmured, “we test again.”

Madhumita nodded. “Small.”

Katherine’s voice shook, but it didn’t break. “What kind of small?”

Martha's eyes flicked toward the delivery panel. "Placement," she said. "Positions. Who stands where. Who moves first. How long the system takes to smooth it out."

Madhumita's fingers flexed slowly, as if remembering rope and gravity. "And we listen. The air. The floor. The pipes."

Katherine looked down at Veera. "And her?"

Martha's gaze held on the baby for a heartbeat. "We don't use her," she said quietly. "We follow what she does. There's a difference."

Madhumita's voice softened. "We let her be what she already is."

Veera stared at the camera again as if she understood she was being discussed. Her gaze didn't look like a child's curiosity. It looked like recognition.

The camera adjusted once.

Then stilled.

The room's hum lowered.

For a handful of seconds, the air felt almost... unclenched.

Martha exhaled. "That's our window," she said.

"And the route?" Katherine asked.

Madhumita answered, voice steady: "We build it. Step by step. Sensation by sensation. A map in the feet. A map in the breath."

Olay's eyes stayed on them.

Listening.

Learning.

Not isolated anymore.

Part of it.

Martha leaned back, letting her shoulders touch cold steel. “No heroics,” she said. “No rushing. No panic. We stay boring until we’re not.”

Madhumita smiled faintly. “Boring is camouflage.”

Katherine pressed her lips to Veera’s hair, a soft, shaking gesture that tasted like prayer. “Then we become invisible,” she whispered.

Olay’s hand came down slowly over the twins.

Heavy.

Careful.

Certain.

The gesture felt like agreement.

Not in words.

In weight.

In presence.

In commitment.

They stayed there in the dim light, the four of them, holding their children and holding each other with a quiet ferocity the cameras could not measure properly. Their plans were not loud enough to be caught cleanly. The pipes blurred them. Veera’s hum softened the room. The system recalibrated and called it noise.

And beneath all of it, a new rhythm began to form-steady and controlled, like the first breath before a leap.

They were not escaping tomorrow.

Not yet.

But something had begun that could not be undone, because it was no longer just anger or fear.

It was method.

It was unity.

It was the slow, dangerous choice to turn survival into preparation.

And when Madhumita finally closed her eyes, she heard herself think the words clearly, as if she were speaking to the rope, to gravity, to fate itself:

Not yet. But soon.

Chapter Eighteen

The Sound That Decides



The room had learned their names.

Not in the way a home learns them—through laughter, repetition, warmth, the lazy comfort of calling someone across a kitchen. This place learned names the way it learned everything else: as tags, as labels, as points on a graph that could be moved from one column to another with a keystroke. Even the air felt different once you realised that. It didn't just hold sound. It held records.

They had reached a point where surviving inside the room no longer felt like progress. For days—maybe weeks, time had become slippery—they had collected small truths the way people collected scraps of paper in a storm: the door timing, the pitch changes in the hum, the way the lights recalibrated after a delivery, the places where the floor vibrated unevenly as if something larger ran beneath it. The information was real. It mattered. But it was no longer enough.

Knowing a cage intimately did not make it less of a cage.

Olay sat with his back pressed into the corner, Leo and Max tucked into the curve of his body like the room could not reach them if his skin was the wall first. Leo had his cheek against Olay's chest, listening in the way children listened when they didn't understand but refused to be left out. Max

lay half on Olay's thigh, half on the cold floor, his injured patch turned away from the light as if even his body wanted to forget it existed. Veera sat in Katherine's lap, the baby's spine held straight by some private instinct that made her look less like an infant and more like a small, watchful judge.

Martha stood near the pipes, as always, as though she could hear the building's intentions through the metal. Madhumita paced in a slow, steady loop that looked casual if you didn't know how much discipline it took to keep your movement smooth when fear wanted to snap you into stillness.

No one spoke.

They didn't need to. A silence like this was not emptiness. It was a held breath.

Then the sound arrived.

At first it was faint, a thin thread of noise that could have been a mechanical whine or the squeal of a valve under pressure. The facility made a thousand small sounds all day; most of them blended into the background until you forgot you were listening. But this one didn't blend. It pushed through.

A child's cry.

Not the brief, cranky protest of hunger or discomfort. Not a fussy whimper that could be soothed. This was raw. High. Uncontrolled. The kind of sound that carried the shape of panic inside it, the kind that didn't know how to stop.

Katherine's head lifted first, fast enough that her hair swung forward across her cheek. Veera's eyes opened fully, instant and sharp, as if the sound had pulled a switch inside her. Martha's posture changed almost imperceptibly—one shoulder

lowering, one foot shifting, her body aligning the way it did when she smelled trouble. Madhumita stopped pacing mid-step, breath held between ribs, listening like a woman balancing over a drop.

Olay went utterly still.

The cry swelled again, closer now, echoing in the corridor outside their room as if the hallway itself was a tunnel designed to carry distress. It wasn't just a child either-there was another sound braided into it, deeper and more broken, a parent's voice cracking under the weight of helplessness.

"No-please-please"

The words were muffled by distance and walls, but the meaning wasn't. You didn't need to hear the full sentence to know what it was. You could feel it in the way the voice pitched upward, in the way it tore on the last syllable like it was ripping flesh.

A woman, Madhumita realised, stomach turning.

The child cried again-closer, then suddenly sharper-as if the person carrying them had adjusted grip, had tightened hold, had increased speed. And behind it the mother's sound rose, transformed from pleading into something worse, something animal, something that didn't belong in a human throat until grief forced it out.

A howl.

Not dramatic. Not cinematic. The real kind, the kind you hear in hospitals and funerals and places where the body finally understands it cannot fight what's happening.

Katherine's hands tightened around Veera so hard the baby made a small sound of discomfort. Katherine loosened her grip immediately, horrified at herself, and Veera settled back as though she had never been bothered-though her gaze had gone distant now, listening in a way that felt too focused to be normal.

The cries moved past their door.

For a moment, they overlapped-child and parent tangled together in the same raw sound, fear answering fear. Then the rhythm broke. The child's cries were pulled sharply in one direction, faster, lighter, carried by hurried footsteps. The mother's voice lagged behind, heavier, dragged the other way, breaking apart as distance forced separation.

Madhumita's eyes stung suddenly, not from tears yet but from that pre-tear pressure that came when something inside you shifted beyond endurance. Martha's jaw clenched once, tight enough to create a small hollow in her cheek. Olay's shoulders lifted a fraction as if his body had tried to stand without permission.

Then the sound began to fade.

Not because the child and the mother stopped crying.

Because they were being taken farther away.

The corridor swallowed the noise slowly, each step carrying it down and away, until the cries became muffled, then distant, then thin, and finally-worst of all-quiet enough that the mind began inventing what might have happened to make them stop.

When the hallway went silent again, the room felt contaminated.

Like it had been touched by something irreversible.

Katherine breathed out shakily. "That... wasn't ours," she whispered, voice hoarse. She didn't mean it as reassurance. She meant it as horror.

Madhumita's hands curled into fists at her sides. "It doesn't have to be ours," she said softly. "It still counts."

Martha didn't look away from the door. "That was extraction," she said, as though giving it a correct name could keep it from crawling into their lungs. "They didn't sedate first. They wanted the sound."

"Why?" Katherine asked, and her voice cracked on the word.

Martha's eyes didn't soften. "Because sound teaches obedience faster than pain."

Olay's breathing had thickened. It wasn't loud. It was controlled the way a storm was controlled when it still sat far out at sea. But his body had changed. The skin around his mouth looked tighter. His hands rested over Leo and Max like iron forced into gentleness.

Katherine looked at him and understood with a sick clarity that he had heard that parent the way she had once heard herself.

She remembered the moment the baby had been pulled from her arms the first time-how her voice had shattered, how her body had fought even when her mind knew fighting would

fail. She had thought that was the worst sound she would ever make.

Now she knew the facility collected worse ones.

Madhumita moved closer, sitting down near Katherine and Olay, not touching, just entering the circle where the truth lived. “This is why,” she murmured. “This is the proof you can’t unsee. Not my room on the screen. Not the measuring tape. This. This is what happens while we stay and learn and pretend time belongs to us.”

Katherine swallowed hard. “So what do we do?”

Martha answered immediately. “We stop treating this like an endurance test.”

Olay’s head lifted slightly at the tone, as if he recognised decision.

Madhumita nodded once. “We need to get out of this room first,” she said, and her voice was steady now, steady in the way it became after fear had burned itself into resolve. “Not the whole facility. Not yet. This room is a bottle. Everything begins here. If we can break this boundary, we can see. We can find routes. We can make choices instead of being moved.”

Katherine stared at them both. Her eyes were wet, but her expression had hardened into something new. “They will take one of ours,” she said quietly, not as a worry but as a fact. “If we stay long enough, they will take Veera. Or Leo. Or Max. Or all of them.”

Martha’s gaze flicked briefly to the camera in the corner. “They might already be planning it.”

Veera, as if hearing her own name in the air, lifted her head slowly and looked directly at the camera. The gaze wasn't curious. It was direct, unsettling, like a small creature making eye contact with a predator and refusing to blink.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then the camera made a tiny adjustment-barely a tilt, barely a recalibration-but all of them saw it because they had taught themselves to notice the smallest betrayals.

Martha exhaled slowly. "She does that on purpose," she murmured.

Katherine's arms tightened protectively. "Veera," she whispered, not scolding, only pleading.

Veera blinked once and turned her face into Katherine's chest as if she had finished what she needed to do.

The hum in the pipes changed.

Not loud. Just wrong.

Martha straightened. "Door," she said quietly, and her voice carried the same calm that soldiers used before a breach.

The panel near the door slid open again.

Two guards stepped in first, positions practiced, bodies angled so they could retreat fast. Their attention stayed on Olay, and the room responded to that attention; the restraints in the wall hummed faintly, ready to punish motion before it became action.

Then Jarvis entered.

He didn't stride in like a villain. He didn't need performance. He moved the way a man moved when he was used to being obeyed without question—slow enough to show confidence, quick enough to show he had other places to be. His uniform was darker than the others', cleaner, tailored. His gloves were immaculate, and his eyes held a detached amusement that made Madhumita's skin crawl.

They knew him.

Not because he announced himself. Because their bodies remembered him.

Martha's shoulders tightened almost imperceptibly. Katherine's stomach dropped so hard she felt dizzy. Olay's jaw clenched and held. Madhumita felt her own pulse quicken as if her blood recognised the shape of danger.

Jarvis looked at their faces and seemed pleased, as though recognition was the reaction he had come to collect.

"Ah," he said softly. "That sound travels, doesn't it?"

No one answered.

Jarvis let his gaze drift lazily around the room—over the bowls of food, the children pressed into Olay, the way Katherine kept Veera angled inward as if her ribs were armour.

"I hope you're settling in," he continued, voice almost conversational. "Though getting settled is the worst thing you can do here."

He said it gently, as if offering advice. That was what made it worse. Advice implied interest. Advice implied he wanted them to remember him.

Madhumita forced herself to hold his gaze. "What do you want?" she asked.

Jarvis's mouth curved slightly. "Still asking questions," he murmured, as if amused by the persistence. His eyes moved to Martha. "Still looking for patterns." Then to Olay. "Still pretending stillness is choice."

Then his gaze returned to Katherine.

He didn't look at Veera first.

He looked at Katherine, because he understood leverage better than anyone in the room.

"Katherine," he said quietly.

Her throat tightened. She did not answer.

Jarvis took a half-step closer-not too close, never too close. Close enough to make Katherine feel the heat of his presence. Close enough that she could smell something faint beneath the sterile air: soap, metal, and a hint of cologne that made him feel unfairly human.

He tilted his head as if curious, as if this was a small detail in a long day.

"What's your daughter's name?" he asked.

The question was soft. Polite. Almost kind.

Katherine's arms locked around Veera. She stared at Jarvis with a hatred so bright it surprised her. She wanted to spit. She wanted to claw. She wanted to do something that would make him stop speaking like he belonged in the world.

But she knew the trap. She knew what he fed on.

So she said the name anyway, because not saying it would not protect it.

“Veera,” she whispered.

Jarvis nodded once, as if satisfied.

“Veera,” he repeated, and hearing her baby’s name in his mouth felt like being touched by something filthy.

Jarvis’s gaze flicked briefly to the child, the smallest glance, as though he were not looking at a baby but at a schedule.

Then he looked back at Katherine.

“She’s due,” he said.

He didn’t say tomorrow like a threat. He said it the way someone said an appointment time.

“As early as they can clear the room.”

The words did not shout. They didn’t need to. They went straight under Katherine’s skin and wrapped themselves around her organs.

Katherine made a sound that wasn’t a cry yet, but the beginning of one-something broken and involuntary that clawed at her throat.

Jarvis watched it without reaction.

Then he turned away.

He walked toward the door with the same unhurried ease he’d entered with, the guards shifting with him like shadows. At the threshold he paused, hand resting on the frame, and without looking back he added, almost thoughtfully, “Settling is how you die here.”

Then he left.

The door sealed behind him.

The room did not become quiet.

It became charged.

Katherine sat frozen for a second as if her body didn't understand how to move now that the future had been spoken aloud. Then her breath came out in a rush, shaky and furious. She looked down at Veera, at the baby's calm face, and something in Katherine cracked-not into weakness, but into a kind of clarity so sharp it felt like pain.

"They're not waiting," she said, voice low. "They're not studying anymore. They're... scheduling."

Madhumita's hands were trembling. She pressed them flat against her thighs to steady them, not because she was afraid of her own shaking, but because she refused to offer any visible fracture to the cameras. "Tonight," she said quietly, and the word sounded like a blade being drawn. "We don't wait until morning."

Martha's eyes had gone cold. Not panicked. Not frantic. Cold in the way a soldier's eyes went cold when the mission stopped being theoretical. "We move before they do," she said. "We make the first decision."

Olay had not made a sound.

But the air around him felt heavier, dense with contained violence. His breathing was slow, deep, deliberate. Leo and Max had gone still, sensing the shift the way animals sensed thunder long before it arrived. Leo pressed his face into Olay's

chest. Max's fingers curled into Olay's skin like he was trying to hold him in place.

Olay lowered his head, pressed his forehead gently to both boys, and for a moment he looked less like a monster and more like a man being asked to survive the impossible.

Katherine moved closer. She pressed her shoulder against his arm, not as comfort, but as alliance. Her voice was raw. "They think they can take her because she's small," she whispered. "Because she can't fight."

Madhumita leaned in too, her voice steady with a kind of anger that felt old. "They think size is the only kind of power," she said. "They think quiet people will stay quiet forever."

Martha's gaze moved to the camera. Then to the door seam. Then to the floor. "We don't need heroics," she said. "We need precision."

Katherine looked at Veera. The baby's eyes were open now, watching the adults with that unsettling calm. Veera made a soft sound-half hum, half breath-and Leo's body relaxed against Olay as if the sound had given him permission to stay still.

Martha noticed. "She can do it again," she murmured.

Madhumita swallowed. "Then we have a window," she said, and the word window felt like the only air in the room.

They sat there for a moment, all four of them, the sound of the other child's crying still echoing in their bones, Jarvis's words sitting like poison on their tongues, and the future sharpening into a single point.

Not a plan yet.

A decision.

Madhumita's voice dropped to something almost private. "We leave tonight," she said, and it wasn't a vow performed for courage. It was a simple statement of fact, like naming the ground beneath your feet.

Martha nodded once. "We leave tonight."

Katherine's arms tightened around Veera, and she spoke through tears she refused to hide. "We leave tonight."

Olay did not speak, but his hand moved-slow, careful-and covered all three children at once, as if drawing a boundary the facility could not cross.

And in the middle of all that fear and fury, in the middle of the steel and the humming pipes and the watching cameras, something else rose-quiet, terrifying in its steadiness.

Purpose.

Madhumita looked at the door as if she could already see the hallway beyond it, the routes they hadn't walked yet, the world that still existed somewhere outside this controlled air.

"Not yet," she whispered, the words meant for them, meant for herself, meant for the part of her that still wanted to freeze.

Then she inhaled, deep and slow, and the second sentence arrived like a promise forged in fire.

"But soon."

Chapter Nineteen

The Loop



The cell never truly went quiet.

Even when nobody spoke, the place hummed-soft, constant, like a throat clearing itself in the dark. Air vents breathed. Lights buzzed. Somewhere beyond the concrete, boots passed in regular intervals, as if the building itself had learned how to walk.

They sat in a loose circle on the cold floor, backs against the wall, trying to look calm for the cameras and failing miserably for each other.

Martha kept her eyes up, not on the lens, but just beside it-like she could see the shape of the room the camera belonged to. Military habit. Always measuring. Always calculating.

Katherine held herself very still, both arms wrapped around her own ribs, as if she could hold her fear inside her body by force. Her face was pale under the harsh light, but her eyes were sharp-sharp in the way mothers become when the world turns into a threat.

Madhumita watched everyone at once, her gaze moving like a slow sweep across the room, returning again and again to the twins, Max and Leo, tucked close to Olay's legs on the far side.

Olay sat with his back against the wall, heavy and unmoving, like he'd been put there by the building itself. The two boys clung to him-one on each side-fingers digging into the fabric of his clothes as if he was a pillar that could not be shaken.

And Veera... Veera was quiet.

Not the quiet of fear. The quiet of listening.

She sat slightly apart, knees drawn up, chin resting lightly on them, eyes lowered-except they weren't really lowered. They flicked. Not to the guards outside. Not to the ceiling. To people.

To mouths. To breaths between sentences. To the spaces where plans were born.

Katherine broke first.

"We can't just... wait here." Her voice came out low, like she didn't trust the room with it. "They'll move us. Or... worse."

Madhumita nodded once. "We need a distraction. Something that forces them to open the door."

Martha's jaw tightened. "Something small enough that they don't come in with a full squad."

Olay snorted softly as if he wants to say "'Everything they do is a full squad."

Martha ignored him like she'd been trained to ignore noise. "We make them think it's medical. A sick prisoner. They'll send one or two."

Katherine swallowed. "I can act."

“You don’t need to act,” Martha said, eyes narrowing, scanning Katherine like she was assessing injury. “You just need to look like you’re about to die.”

Madhumita looked away for a second, like the words hit something tender. Then she nodded. “If they believe it’s urgent, they hurry. If they hurry, they make mistakes.”

Katherine exhaled shakily. “Okay.”

Martha leaned forward, elbows on knees. “We rehearse once. Not to escape. Just to see their response time. We learn their pattern.”

“How long?” Madhumita asked.

Martha’s eyes went distant, counting. “An hour? Two? Enough for them to relax again.”

The twins looked up at the word escape, eyes wide. Max shifted closer to Olay. Leo’s lips parted like he was about to ask something, but he didn’t.

Veera didn’t move.

But her eyes sharpened.

Katherine started the act slowly.

First the breath-ragged, uneven. Then the body-curling inward, shaking, as if something inside her had turned and was trying to claw its way out. She let a soft, strangled sound catch in her throat, the kind that makes people look away because it feels too private.

Madhumita played her part too, voice rising just enough to sound real.

“Help! She’s not well-she’s not well!”

Martha stayed back, watching the camera. Watching the ceiling. Watching for the first sign of movement beyond the door.

Olay’s hands flexed once, knuckles cracking quietly, the only signal of impatience he allowed himself.

The twins held their breath.

And Veera stared at the camera like she was staring through it.

They waited.

Thirty seconds.

A minute.

Two minutes.

Nothing.

Martha’s eyes narrowed. “That’s... wrong.”

Madhumita looked at the sealed door. “Maybe they’re ignoring it.”

“No,” Martha said. “They don’t ignore medical. Not in places like this. It’s risk. Liability. Control.” Her gaze flicked up to the camera again. “They always respond.”

Katherine lowered her head, panting-half acting, half genuinely exhausted now.

Madhumita’s brows pulled together. “Then why-”

Martha didn’t finish the sentence. She didn’t need to.

The silence answered.

It wasn't normal silence. It was empty silence. The kind that happens when somebody stops watching... or thinks they already have.

A cold thread slid down Martha's spine.

Her eyes moved-slowly, carefully-away from the camera and across the room.

To Veera.

Veera was still. Almost too still. But there was a faint, almost amused curve to her mouth, like she'd heard a joke nobody else understood yet.

Martha's suspicion rose like a weapon being lifted.

Veera's gaze shifted-just once-to the twins.

Max blinked.

Leo's eyes narrowed, thoughtful and quick, like he'd just connected two things inside his head.

Martha watched the exchange like it was a coded message.

Then Leo looked up at Veera, looked at Martha, and said only two words-soft, simple, absolute.

"Veera did."

The room stopped breathing.

Katherine stared. "What?"

Madhumita's face changed first-confusion collapsing into realization, then into something bright and disbelieving. "Veera...?"

Veera lifted her eyes toward the camera again, and that tiny smile returned, like yes, like obviously.

Katherine let out a sound that was half laugh, half sob, and reached across the floor. She didn't hug Veera fully-not yet, not when every movement was watched-but she leaned in and pressed a kiss to Veera's forehead anyway, quick and fierce, like a blessing.

Madhumita covered her mouth for a second, eyes glassy. "You... you can-

Martha's voice cut through it, sharp and controlled. "Enough."

They all turned to her.

Martha held their gaze one by one-Katherine's hope, Madhumita's relief, Olay's impatience, the twins' wide-eyed excitement, Veera's calm.

"This," Martha said, "is not the moment to celebrate."

The happiness faltered.

Martha nodded toward the camera. "If what Veera did bought us time, then time is the only thing we've got. And time ends."

Katherine wiped her face quickly. "So... evening. Like we planned."

Martha nodded once. "We wait. We do it for real. And once we step out-" her voice lowered, hardening like steel- "there is no coming back."

Even Olay's expression shifted slightly at that. Not fear. Respect.

They waited.

Time in that cell wasn't measured by clocks; it was measured by stomach pain, by thirst, by the way your muscles screamed at you for sitting too long, by the way your mind tried to chew itself. The lights never changed. The air never warmed. The only hint of evening was a subtle shift in the corridor sounds—different boots, different pace, different tiredness in the voices beyond the walls.

When the food came, it came with the same dull routine: a metallic clank, a slot opening, a tray pushed in like they were feeding animals.

Martha's body went tight. "Positions."

Everyone moved like they'd practiced without practicing. Katherine curled in the center, shoulders shaking. Madhumita dropped beside her, voice rising.

"Something's wrong—she's not responding!"

Olay stayed near the hinge side of the door, ready.

The twins went to the shadow behind him, small hands gripping fabric.

Veera sat with her eyes on the camera.

Katherine's acting was better now—because it had teeth. Because this time it wasn't a rehearsal; it was a blade being raised.

She let her breath turn thin. Let her head loll. Let her body slacken in a way that made even Martha's stomach twist.

Madhumita's voice cracked on purpose. "Please! She's—she's going—"

The lock clicked.

The door opened.

And the guard stepped in.

He didn't fully enter. He never fully entered. He stayed half-out, half-in, cautious. A man who'd learned what this place did to people and didn't want any of it touching him.

His eyes swept the room. "What now?"

Madhumita pointed at Katherine, hands shaking. "She can't breathe-she"

The guard snorted, unimpressed, and took one step forward.

That step was the only mistake he got.

Martha moved.

It was fast and clean-no wasted motion, no drama. One moment she was sitting still; the next she was a weapon. She closed the distance in a single rush, grabbed the guard's arm, turned his body into the doorframe, and-there was a wet sound.

The guard's eyes went wide.

Then empty.

He didn't even get time to scream.

His body sagged.

Martha caught it so it wouldn't hit the floor. No noise.

Veera's eyes flicked to the door.

And the door, as if it suddenly remembered fear, tried to swing shut.

Veera lifted her gaze-just a look, nothing more-and the door stopped mid-motion, trembling like it was fighting an invisible hand.

Olay exhaled, a sound like a laugh and a growl had a child. “Hah.”

Martha dragged the guard’s body aside, laid it down carefully, and looked at them all.

Her face was unreadable, but her voice landed like a verdict.

“Now there is no coming back.”

They stepped out.

The hallway was wide and brutal, lined with pillars that looked decorative but felt like cover made by a sadist. The light was colder here. The air was sharper. Somewhere in the distance, a metallic whirring-drones, maybe. Or something worse.

Martha lifted a hand, palm down. Low. Quiet.

They moved as a group-tight formation, children in the middle. Martha in front. Olay slightly to the side, like a wall walking.

They rounded the first bend.

Guards.

Four of them. Two closer, two farther, rifles slung, talking casually like nothing in the world could ever go wrong.

Martha didn’t hesitate. “Pillars,” she mouthed.

They scattered behind cover-Katherine and Madhumita pulling the twins with them. Veera slipped like shadow. Olay crouched behind a pillar that looked too small to hide him,

but somehow his size made it work-nobody wanted to believe something that big could be real.

Martha's eyes tracked distances, angles, the shift of shoulders, the way fingers touched triggers. Her mind did math at the speed of terror.

Then she moved.

The first guard turned his head-too late.

Martha was already there.

A flash of motion. A muted crack. The guard dropped without a sound, knees folding like a puppet cut from strings.

The second guard jerked his rifle up, breath sharp-Martha pivoted and struck again, precise, ruthless. He went down.

The two farther guards shouted, weapons rising-

And Olay exploded out from behind the pillar like rage given bones.

He crossed the distance in three steps. One guard tried to aim; Olay grabbed the rifle and the man with it and slammed him into the wall hard enough that the sound got swallowed by the building's own hum. The other guard managed one panicked swing of the barrel-Olay punched once.

The guard crumpled.

Martha grabbed Olay's shoulder hard, yanked him back into cover.

"Don't," she hissed. "Make. Noise."

Olay stared at her like she'd insulted his religion.

Martha didn't blink. She stepped to the nearest downed guard who was still twitching, grabbed his chin, and then two fingers, quick and brutal, struck at the side of his neck.

The twitching stopped.

Olay's mouth twisted into a half-shrug, half-smirk. Fine. I don't care.

Martha glanced at him like she absolutely did.

They moved again.

A locked door came next-thick, heavy, the kind of door that existed to remind people they were trapped.

Olay stepped forward immediately, cracking his knuckles. His eyes practically lit up. Finally, something simple.

He reached for it-

And the lock clicked.

The door swung open like it was welcoming them.

Olay froze mid-reach, offended.

Veera stood behind him, face calm.

Olay looked at her, then at the open doorway, then back at her-like that was my moment.

Veera's smile was almost playful.

Madhumita actually let out a tiny laugh, the sound shocking in a place like this.

Olay threw his hands up in silent frustration and stepped aside.

They slipped through.

The next hallway narrowed, pulling them toward the end where an elevator waited-metal doors, a small light above it like a single, hopeful eye.

Everyone saw it at the same time.

Madhumita's breath hitched. "See that?"

Martha's voice came out sharp. "That way."

She took one step forward.

A sound like burning paper sliced the air-sssss-so quick it didn't make sense at first.

Martha jerked back instinctively, eyes snapping downward.

A thin, smoking line ran across her black bodysuit-right over her leg-fabric eaten through, skin underneath already angry red.

For half a second, nobody moved.

Then everyone looked up.

And they saw it.

Criss-cross red lines, faint but deadly, stretched across the hallway to the elevator like a net made of light. The beams hovered at different heights, layered, patient. Waiting.

Katherine's hand flew to her mouth.

Madhumita went pale.

Max and Leo made a small sound together and clamped onto Olay's legs-one on each side-like baby animals bracing for a storm.

Martha's eyes stayed locked on the lasers. Her face tightened—not fear, but the fury of someone who almost lost a limb in a single careless step.

She swallowed once.

Then, in a low, furious whisper, she said:

“That wasn’t a warning... that was a slicer.”

She glanced at the thin burn on her leg, then back at the red web.

“One more step,” Martha said, voice like ice, “and I’d be leaving pieces of myself on this floor.”

And the hallway kept humming.

As if it had been waiting for them all along.

Chapter 20

No Coming Back



For a moment after the lasers disappeared, no one moved.

The hallway looked ordinary again—bare concrete, pale light, the elevator waiting at the end as if it hadn't almost killed them. The sudden absence of danger felt unreal, like the world had forgotten what it was supposed to do next.

Max's fingers were still knotted into Olay's clothes. Leo's face was buried against his leg. Neither of them seemed ready to believe they were still alive.

Madhumita let out a breath that turned into a small, disbelieving laugh. "Well done, Veera," she said softly. "Once again."

Veera stood very still, eyes calm, her expression unreadable except for the faintest hint of a smile-like she'd simply solved something that had been obvious to her all along.

Katherine crossed the space and dropped to her knees in front of her, hands trembling as she cupped Veera's face. She pressed a kiss to her forehead, lingering there longer than necessary, as if grounding herself in the fact that Veera was still here.

"My brave girl," she whispered.

Martha didn't let the moment settle.

“Run,” she said, already turning toward the elevator. “Before this place remembers we’re not supposed to be standing.”

They ran.

Their footsteps echoed too loudly in the narrow space, breath tearing in and out of their lungs. Madhumita slammed her thumb against the elevator button, watching the light blink on with agonizing slowness.

“What if someone’s inside?” Katherine whispered, pulling the twins closer.

Martha and Olay moved instinctively to the front, bodies angling, shoulders squared, ready to take whatever came first.

The doors slid open.

Empty.

Relief crashed into them all at once, leaving them dizzy.

They piled inside, the metal walls closing around them, amplifying every sound-their breathing, the tremor in Katherine’s voice, the soft whimper Max tried to swallow.

“We should go down,” Madhumita said quickly. “The exit-”

“Will be crawling with guards by now,” Martha cut in. “That’s the first place they’ll lock.”

“But-”

Olay cleared his throat.

The sound was deliberate, final.

He reached past them and pressed the button for the uppermost floor.

The doors slid shut.

No one argued.

Katherine pulled the twins into the corner, wrapping herself around them. Veera stood close to her side, one small hand resting against Katherine's arm. Martha and Olay stood in front, shoulders set, Madhumita beside them.

The elevator began to rise.

For a brief moment-fragile and unexpected-Madhumita's hand found Olay's. Then Martha's hand closed over his from the other side, firm and grounding.

Olay stiffened, then stayed still.

Something unfamiliar settled in his chest. Not fear. Not anger. Responsibility. The weight of people trusting him with their lives.

The elevator slowed.

Stopped.

The doors opened.

Guards.

Two close, mid-conversation. Two more farther down the corridor, alert but unprepared.

And to the side-a door marked EXIT.

Olay's eyes flicked to it instantly. He tilted his head toward Madhumita.

Martha caught the signal. "Stay behind us," she murmured. "Move to the door."

The first guard turned at the wrong moment.

Olay surged forward, hitting him like a force of nature, lifting him clean off his feet and slamming him into the floor with bone-breaking finality. The second guard barely had time to react before Martha was on him-disarming, striking, ending it with ruthless precision.

The farther guards raised their weapons.

Olay reached them first.

One was hurled aside like dead weight. The other managed half a shout before Martha closed the distance and dropped him without a sound.

Silence followed-sharp, unreal.

Through the glass of the EXIT door, Katherine, Madhumita, and the children stared back at them, breath fogging the surface, eyes wide.

Martha opened the door.

Concrete stairs rose ahead.

They ran.

At the top waited a heavy metal door-rooftop access.

Olay stepped forward, rolling his shoulders, eyes gleaming as he glanced at Veera. My turn.

He slammed into it.

Metal screamed. The lock tore free. The door burst open.

Sirens erupted instantly.

“They know now,” Madhumita said, panic threading her voice.

“What do we do?” Katherine asked, clutching Veera.

The rooftop was empty, wind cutting across open space. Beyond the edge, the facility stretched out, vast and hostile.

Madhumita scanned fast. “The back side. Fewer guards. Fields beyond the wall.”

“But we’re too high,” Martha said. “We need a rope.”

Katherine’s voice cut through, sharp, primal. “Then we find a way.”

Madhumita’s eyes snapped toward the stairwell. “Fire hose. Near the elevator.”

“I’ll get it,” Martha said instantly.

Madhumita grabbed her arm. “But-”

“I will be back,” Martha said, already moving.

Olay stepped forward, intending to follow.

Martha stopped him with a look. “You stay. Protect them.”

She disappeared down the stairs.

Gunfire echoed below.

Time stretched painfully thin.

When Martha returned, she was bleeding-cuts along her arms and leg, her limp no longer hidden-dragging the heavy hose behind her.

Sirens wailed. Automated weapons unfolded. Drones lifted into the air.

Madhumita took the hose from her hands without a word, fingers flying as she secured it.

“Martha, you’re hurt,” Katherine said.

“No time,” Martha replied.

“Order,” Madhumita said. “Martha with Leo. Katherine with Veera. Me with Max. Olay last.”

They moved.

Martha descended first, pain etched into every line of her body. Katherine followed, holding Veera close. Madhumita went next with Max.

Olay turned as guards poured onto the roof.

Something inside him snapped.

He didn’t hold back.

He became a storm-smashing guards aside, tearing drones from the sky, bullets striking and falling uselessly away. Rage, grief, vengeance—all of it burned through him as he cleared the path.

Finally, he grabbed the hose and began to descend.

It strained immediately under his weight. Fibers groaned. The metal brackets screamed against concrete.

He ignored it.

The sirens blurred into one endless howl.

The hose stretched too far.

And then it gave way.

The fall was sudden and brutal. Olay hit the ground with a force that drove the breath from his lungs and shook the earth

itself, carving a rough crater into the soil as dust exploded outward.

Above, Katherine's scream caught in her throat. Martha leaned over the edge, heart hammering.

The dust shifted.

Olay pushed himself upright.

Alive.

Relief hit them all at once, sharp enough to hurt.

They regrouped in a blind spot near the wall, bodies trembling, breath ragged.

The concrete wall loomed ahead-ten feet of smooth gray, separating captivity from something unknown.

Martha's eyes sharpened. "Service road. Emergency vehicles."

Veera lifted her gaze. The drones hesitated-just enough.

Olay placed his hands against the wall and pushed. Concrete cracked, then broke, opening a low, jagged gap.

Madhumita went first, slipping through, climbing, dropping on the other side and running flat-out toward the nearest vehicle.

The door flew open.

The engine roared to life.

One by one they followed-Katherine with Veera, the twins scrambling through, Martha limping hard now, and finally Olay forcing himself through the opening and slamming the door behind him.

Veera slid into place, hands steady, instinct sure. The vehicle responded, alive beneath them.

Inside, breath turned into sobs, laughter, shaking embraces. Katherine pulled the children into her arms, holding them as if she could keep the world away by force alone. Madhumita bowed her head for a moment, whispering something that sounded like thanks.

Martha wiped blood from her mouth and stared ahead.

“Too early,” she said quietly.

Madhumita looked at her. “Where do we go?”

Katherine lifted her head and looked at the children, then at Veera.

“Somewhere our children are safe,” she said. “That’s enough for now.”

The vehicle surged forward.

Behind them, the facility burned with light and sirens.

Ahead lay danger. Uncertainty.

But they were together.

And for the first time, that felt like it might be enough.

Epilogue - Quiet Hope

The sirens didn't stop all at once.

They followed them at first-thin, distant, stretched by speed and space-echoing across the night like the memory of something that still wanted them back. Somewhere behind them, gunfire cracked once, twice, then dissolved into noise swallowed by the open road. The sound lingered longer in their bodies than in the air, hearts still racing as if the alarms might surge back at any moment.

The vehicle pushed forward regardless.

It was big-an armored utility transport, built for rough ground and heavy loads. Thick doors. Reinforced panels. The kind of machine meant to keep moving even when things went wrong. Its engine rumbled low and steady, powerful without urgency, tires gripping the road with patient confidence. Every vibration traveled through the floor, grounding them in motion, in weight, in the undeniable truth that they were no longer inside the facility.

Madhumita drove with both hands locked around the wheel, posture rigid but controlled. The dashboard glowed softly in front of her, casting pale light across her focused face. She didn't look back. She didn't need to. Her job was forward-keep them moving, keep them unseen, keep the road unbroken.

In the front passenger seat, Martha worked through pain with practiced discipline. A small medical kit rested on her lap, the metallic clink of tools barely audible beneath the engine's

hum. She stitched herself slowly, methodically, pulling thread through torn skin as if it were routine. Her jaw tightened when the needle passed through deeper flesh, but she didn't pause. Blood marked her hands, her sleeve, the edge of the seat-evidence, not complaint.

Behind them, the back seat held what mattered most.

Katherine sat pressed into the corner, one arm wrapped protectively around Max, the other around Leo. The boys slept hard now, exhaustion finally winning-heads tilted against her, breaths deep and even. Their faces were soft in sleep, stripped of fear, unaware of how close the night had come to stealing them away. Katherine watched them for a long time, memorizing every detail as if the road might try to take this moment too. Eventually, the strength left her shoulders, and she leaned sideways, resting against the seat, eyes fluttering shut without fully surrendering to sleep.

Veera sat by the window, knees drawn up, forehead resting lightly against the glass. The world slid past in fragments-fields, fencing, distant structures-each dissolving into darkness as quickly as it appeared. The reflection of her face hovered faintly in the glass, layered over the road behind them. Her eyes tracked everything, alert but calm, as if she were listening to something deeper than sound.

Olay didn't truly fit anywhere.

The rear compartment door was partially open, held in place by a heavy latch, cold air rushing in around him. One massive shoulder and part of his arm remained outside the vehicle, the night wind tearing at his clothes. His body was wedged sideways, knees bent at an awkward angle, one hand gripping

the interior frame to keep his balance as the road shifted beneath them. He didn't complain. He barely seemed to notice. His gaze stayed fixed on the darkness behind them, eyes narrowing as he watched the road unfold through the mirrors and the open space beyond.

For a while, the sirens faded completely.

Then-light.

Far back. Distant. Steady.

Headlights.

They didn't rush. They didn't flicker. They stayed exactly where they were meant to be, appearing and disappearing with the curves of the road, always returning to the same place. Too consistent to be coincidence. Too calm to be accidental.

Olay noticed immediately. He said nothing at first. He measured distance, counted time, tracked the way the lights followed without gaining or falling back.

Veera shifted slightly beside the window, lifting her head. Her eyes flicked to the reflection behind them, then forward again. She didn't ask. She already knew.

Martha tied off a stitch and finally spoke, voice low, even.

"We're still being followed."

Olay nodded once, his grip tightening on the frame as his eyes stayed on the road behind them.

Katherine stirred, half-awake, her voice soft and heavy with exhaustion. "Not tonight," she murmured, tightening her hold on the children without waking them. "Not tonight."

No one disagreed.

The vehicle kept moving.

The road widened, opening into long stretches of dark fields on either side. Space enough to disappear. Space enough to be found. Madhumita adjusted their course slightly, choosing turns that felt less obvious, more deliberate. The engine responded smoothly, obedient.

Martha leaned back at last, resting her head against the seat. The stitching would hold-for now. The pain could wait.

Olay remained still, eyes on the mirrors. The headlights stayed distant, patient, unwilling to rush.

Veera's reflection hovered in the glass, her face overlapping with the road behind them, past and future layered together. She watched without fear.

The vehicle carried them onward, away from concrete and steel, into a darkness wide enough to hold possibility. They were not safe. Not yet. But they were together, and they were moving, and for this night, that was enough.

Behind them, the road did not empty.

Ahead, it opened.

And somewhere between the two, something waited-quiet, deliberate, already closing the distance.

Authors Note

This story came to me as a dream.

Not the kind that fades when you wake up, but the kind that stays - unsettling, emotional, insistent. I could see the people in it clearly. I could feel their fear, their restraint, their quiet courage. Long before I knew how the story would end, I knew one thing for sure: they would not survive alone.

United Four is my first attempt at writing anything like this. I am not a trained writer. I did not come to this book with rules, techniques, or plans. I came with images, emotions, and questions that refused to leave me.

What happens when people from completely different worlds are forced into the same cage?

What does strength look like when violence is not an option?

How far can love stretch before it becomes resistance?

This is not a story about escape alone. It is a story about waiting, observing, choosing restraint over rage, and finding family where none was expected. It is about children who should never have been touched by cruelty, and adults who learn that protecting them gives their own lives meaning again.

If this book feels quiet in places, that is intentional.

If it feels painful in others, that is honest.

I hope you find something human here. Something that stays with you after the last page.

Thank you for reading.

About the Author

Akshi Prabha Choudhary is from Udaipur, Rajasthan, India.

She spent many years working in Human Resources, an experience that sharpened her understanding of people- their behavior, resilience, contradictions, and quiet strength. Today, she is a host for travelers and lives a life rooted in observation, finding stories in places where others see routine. She rarely feels bored; she watches, listens, and notices.

A former national-level boxer, Akshi believes strength is not about aggression but about discipline, endurance, and knowing when to hold still and when to move. This philosophy runs quietly through her work.

United Four began as a dream- vivid, emotional, and persistent. The images stayed with her long after waking, until her husband encouraged her to write them down, not as a writer, but as someone telling the truth of what she felt. This book is her first writing attempt, driven by instinct rather than intention.

She believes that when life presents problems, the most important question is not “Why did this happen?” but “What comes next?” For her, survival is not about being unbreakable- it is about clarity and forward motion.

United Four is her first book. Whether the story continues will depend on where this journey leads- but this book stands firmly as its beginning.