

# THE RED THREAD OF FATE

*Love Betrayal Death Rebirth and The Blood in between...*

*Ananya Pathak*



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# Disclaimer

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This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

# Dedicated To

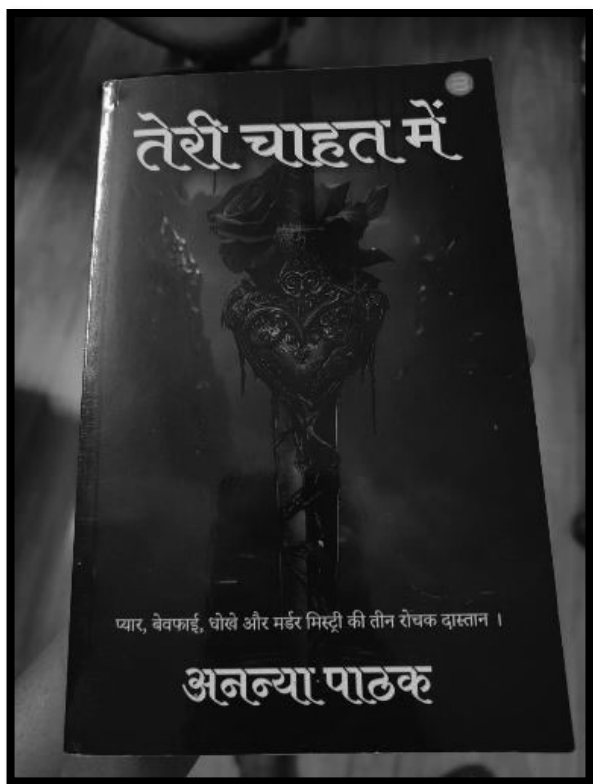
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*This book is dedicated to my protector Lord Shiva and my family.*



## Author's other books

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# Character List

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**Here is the Character List reflecting the central figures across lifetimes, dreams, and the interwoven fabric of love, grief, and fate.**

## **1. Vanya Sharma/ Amaya**

**Present Incarnation:** Vanya Sharma – A quiet, intuitive artist with a mysterious pull toward the past. Haunted by red threads and fragmented memories, she slowly uncovers her connection to past lives and an unfinished curse.

**Past Incarnation:** Amaya – A princess in ancient Banaras, bound by a forbidden love and victim to betrayal, her tragic death anchors the karmic cycle.

## **2. Aditya**

**Present Incarnation:** Aditya Verma – A tattoo artist from Chandni Chowk, Delhi. Skeptical of the supernatural, yet emotionally fractured by vivid dreams of a woman he can't remember... but has loved across time.

**Past Incarnation:** Aditya – A poor potter's son who loved Amaya, and died with her.

## **3. Devika**

The tragic third angle in the original triangle. In love with his childhood friend Aditya. Her grief, rage, and desperation turn her

into the anchor of the curse—her soul caught between vengeance and release. A ghostly presence who evolves from vengeful spirit to tragic guardian.

#### **4. Ishaan**

A mysterious figure who appears as a shadowy guide through multiple timelines. Holds deep knowledge of fate, karma, and rebirth.

#### **5. Radha Devi/ Radha Sharma (Vanya's Mother)**

Present-day mother of Vanya. Initially skeptical of her daughter's visions but later reveals ancestral secrets. Once silenced by fear, she gradually reclaims her place in the karmic chain.

#### **6. The Neem Tree**

Not a character in the traditional sense—but a sacred witness across timelines. The tree stands beside Vanya's home, in front of the temple ruins. It watches, remembers, and occasionally speaks through signs.



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## Chapter-1

# The Sketch

---

Banaras wore its age like a holy wound—its streets bleeding incense and dusk. The sun had long surrendered behind the ghats, turning the Ganga into molten copper, as Vanya Sharma stepped off the rickety local bus. The air smelled of ash, sweat, marigold, and something else—something raw and red, something her city had hidden for centuries beneath stone and smoke.

Vanya Sharma a 25 year old freelance illustrator and a former fine arts student from Delhi University also a haunted artist. She is lean, slightly underweight due to sleepless nights and an irregular lifestyle. Her wheatish complexion with a natural flush, often made paler by insomnia. Her large, deep brown eyes with a perpetual rim of fatigue—dream-filled, expressive, carrying centuries of silence. The kind of eyes that "remember too much." Her long, unruly black hair, kept in a messy braid. Clad in a handloom cotton kurta aired with a black Harem Pants with loosely draped block printed scarf, silver hanging earrings with an old pair of Kolhapuri chappals she refuses to replace with no make up. A red

untied sacred thread around her thin wrist that always seem to hold tension, as if still tethered to something invisible. Her appearance is like her memories- layered, worn, and never fully unstitched. She had always felt a constant, low-level pull toward temples, rivers, and old ruins.

Vanya, was born in Banaras, a city located near the holy river Ganga, and having a central place in the traditions of pilgrimage, death, and mourning in the Hindu religion. The city of liberation and last rites, to a Brahmin family known for doing holy temple work and classical music. Her father, **Raghav Sharma**, a veena player and priest-scholar, disappeared in the Ganga when she was eleven—declared drowned during an early morning boat ritual. His body was never recovered.

After his death, her mother Radha withdrew into silence, though she runs a small spiritual supplies shop but emotionally isolated. Vanya grew up feeling half-seen in a house full of rituals and shadows. Her only rebellion was **art**. She always indulges herself into sketching when she couldn't speak, drawing temples she dreamt about but had never seen.

She left for Delhi at seventeen to study Fine Arts, after earning a scholarship.

But something strange followed her—**her sketches began predicting events**, or depicting people she had never met but would later see.

At twenty-two, when she was in her final year, while submitting her project, she submitted a series titled **“Threaded Souls”**—comprised of charcoal portraits of unknown figures connected by red threads. Her professor remarked *“brilliant, yet disturbingly*

*intimate.*" A week later, her studio near her PG burned down. She never painted again.

Now, two years later, a psychic pull brings her back to Banaras.

To the house.

To the tree.

To the thread.

She doesn't know if she's descending into madness, memory, or a past life—but she's drawn to uncover the truth. Her sketching is no longer creative—it is compulsive, prophetic, **almost ancestral**.

She clutched a worn leather satchel filled with charcoal pencils, handmade paper, and a sketchbook she hadn't opened in weeks. Her hands, once confident, had forgotten their rhythm.

But ever since the fire at her Delhi studio, they'd trembled with something deeper than fear.

Now, they remembered what her mind tried to forget... Faces. Sounds. Threads.

But that itch to draw hadn't left her—it had only changed shape. It whispered in dreams now, in snatches of temples she'd never seen and eyes she felt she'd known in another life. She was no longer drawing to create. She was drawing to remember.

She wasn't alone in this journey. Her closest friend from college, Divya Shukla , had insisted on staying in touch long after graduation. Divya , a folklore enthusiast and aspiring anthropologist, had been Vanya's roommate in the PG and only confidante in Delhi. Witty, inquisitive, and emotionally intuitive, Divya had an eerie talent for decoding symbols and dreams. The two had shared many late-night conversations about karmic cycles, temple myths, and uncanny coincidences. Where Vanya drew,

Divya researched. They were twin flames of enquiry—one visual, one verbal.

Coincidentally, Divya was also from the Banaras, being from the same place they shared a unique bond, although she hadn't returned to Banaras with her, they still spoke almost daily on phone or on chat. Vanya didn't say it aloud, but she needed her. Vaanya's recent call—brief, panicked, laced with the mention of "the tree"—had alarmed her. Divya promised she'd come soon.

Today, Vanya had returned to where it all began... Banaras.

Her house on Tulsi Ghat, was older than her memory of it. Its sandstone bones had warped with time, and the carved archways that once cradled childhood lullabies now creaked with the weight of silence. The **neem tree** standing in the front yard still stood like a sentinel, its roots deep in memory and regret.

Tied to its branches were hundreds of **red threads**—faded red, sun-bleached, frayed by monsoon and neglect. Some still fluttered, as if refusing to forget the prayers they were tied with. Vanya had once believed each thread held a wish. Now she wasn't sure if they held curses instead.

It had grown larger, more twisted, its bark dark and gnarled like something fossilized by grief. Hundreds of **red threads**—those sacred red strings—were tied to its limbs. Some were still vibrant, fluttering stubbornly against the breeze. Others had faded into ghostly wisps, sun-bleached and fraying, knotted with promises and betrayals the tree never forgot.

As Vanya passed it, she slowed. The wind stirred gently through the leaves, carrying a sound—rustling, but layered with something

more. Almost like chanting. Or crying. She placed a hand on the trunk. It was warm.

She pulled back instinctively.

“They say trees remember,” came her mother Radha Sharma’s voice from the rusted gate who stood beneath the fading sky. A 53 year old woman, wheatish complexion, thin built and medium height. She wore a cotton sari the colour of wilted roses, her hair pulled into a bun streaked with silver. Age had crept gently into her features—lines at the corners of her eyes, a dullness in the gaze that once held fire. The years had hollowed her cheeks and etched grief into the lines around her mouth. But her posture remained regal—like a dancer holding her final pose long after the audience had left.

“But this one,” Radha continued, glancing up at the neem’s canopy, “refuses to forget.”

Vanya didn’t respond. Instead, she looked up. One thread, knotted in blackened silk, hung crooked from the highest branch, swaying like a noose. A pulse of unease moved through her chest.

Vanya hadn’t seen her mother in two years. They had spoken little even then.

“You’re late,” Radha said softly, without judgment.

“I took the slow bus,” Vaanya replied. Her voice felt foreign here, like an echo misplaced in time.

They stood in silence for a beat too long—mother and daughter, both shaped by losses they refused to name.

Then Radha turned and walked toward the house, her footsteps steady on the cracked stone. Vanya followed, and for the first time in years, passed under the lintel of her childhood.

\*\*\*\*\*

The walls inside were crowded with time—old brass lamps, glass-paned cupboards filled with dusty incense packets, and portraits of gods whose eyes never blinked. A broken harmonium sat near the altar, untouched since her father vanished into the river fifteen years ago. His photo, garlanded with jasmine now dried and yellowed, watched them from the highest shelf.

Radha had refused to cremate him. “The Ganga took him,” she once told Vaanya. “That means he still belongs to her.”

Vanya didn’t remember crying. She only remembered drawing the river again and again until her hands blistered.

Radha had stopped dancing the same day. she locked the anklets in the attic trunk and never danced again.

\*\*\*\*\*

In her childhood room, nothing had changed.

The wooden floor still moaned under her feet like an old friend with a grudge. Her bookshelf leaned like it missed her weight. On the windowsill sat a cracked clay diya that still smelled faintly of ghee and mango wood. The air felt thicker here—heavier, as if soaked in invisible ink.

She placed her satchel on the desk and traced the rim of the old diya with her finger, unsure whether she was home—or simply returned to a place that had waited too long.

That night, the dreams came again.

She was barefoot, standing in a courtyard of red earth.

The sky pulsed with the bruised hues of twilight. Somewhere nearby, a temple bell tolled—deep, resonant, like it was sounding through her bones.

A woman in white wept beneath the neem tree. Her wrists were wrapped in **red threads**, dozens of them, twisted and tight, cutting into her skin like shackles.

A shadow watched from the corridor—a **man**. Tall. Still. His eyes held something ancient. Something ruined. He didn't move. He didn't have to. The thread stretched from his finger to hers.

And in the center of it all—Vaanya stood, heart pounding, unable to speak. Her own hands glowed with ash. Her feet bled into the soil. The dream felt older than her own body. Like she had lived it once. Like she had caused it.

She woke with a gasp.

The ceiling fan creaked slowly above her, its blades slicing the night in slow, futile rotations—like it was trying to rewind time. In the morning, sunlight filtered through neem leaves into long gold lines across her floor. Dust danced in the air like sleeping memories.

She stretched, then noticed something strange.

Her **old sketchbook**—the one she'd avoided like a wound—was open on the windowsill.

She didn't remember touching it.

The page was covered in frantic, smudged strokes.  
But the face was unmistakable.

A man. Thirty-something. Male. Clean-shaven. Slight cleft in his chin. Jaw tense. There was a faint scar above his left eyebrow—something she hadn't meant to add, but her hand had drawn it anyway.

**"Who are you?"** she whispered to self.

She didn't know who he was.

But something inside her whispered:

**You've loved him before.**

And at the edge of the dream, the red thread stretched between them- Tight, Unbreakable.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter-2

# The Quiet River

---

*"Jeevan ek chakra hai...  
janmon ke paapon ka jal netra ke peeche chhup jaata hai...  
par Ganga sab yaad rakhti hai."*

*"He who tries to erase fate will be devoured by it. The river takes its own."*

Vanya's father Raghav Sharma was Renowned across Varanasi, Haridwar, and Prayagraj for his deep understanding of Vedas and Upanishads, Jyotish (Vedic astrology), Tantra-mantras and purification rites and Puranic mythology—especially karmic cycles, moksha, and reincarnation. He was often invited by ashrams, temples, and universities to give lectures. He was a PhD in Sanskrit and Comparative Theology—a bridge between academic rigor and spiritual practice. He was popular for his handwritten commentaries on obscure Upanishadic verses—meticulously kept in palm-leaf-bound

journals. He once debated a visiting Western scholar in fluent Latin, surprising many who assumed he was only a traditionalist.

He was tall, lean but not frail. He carried himself with regal bearing, though humble in posture. His face was long, aquiline nose, deep lines etched around the mouth and brow, eyes like burnt honey, often rimmed with fatigue but always alert. His skin got weathered and tanned from years of early morning rituals under the sun. His hair was thick, shoulder-length, greying in streaks, always neatly combed back, often covered with a cotton scarf during ceremonies, kept a trimmed, square, and speckled with white beard, like a sage.

He used to clad in traditional white kurta-pajama with a saffron angavastra draped over one shoulder, wooden rudraksha beads always around his neck.

His devotees see him as a pious, grounded, and incorruptible figure. He was respected among the scholars for blending rigor and mysticism—a rare combination. He was known to have rejected offers of fame, including TV spots, book deals, and political positions in cultural committees. He used to perform countless free rituals—shraddh, antyesti, and naamkaran—without asking for Dakshina for the poor people. He spoke rarely, but when he does, people listen—his words were calculative, measured, deliberate. There was a melancholy about him, as if he carries the weight of something long buried. He was disciplined, always used to woke up at the Brahma Muhurta, performs Agnihotra, without fail always used to fasts on Ekadashi. For his family of three, he was more of a silent guardian than a warm presence, as he used to be distant, reserved and often lost in his thoughts. He was protective yet cold towards Vanya- his daughter.

He watches her like a man afraid of déjà vu. Sometimes, in rare unguarded moments, he stares at the river for hours, murmuring things under his breath no one understands. The morning he disappeared, the holy **river Ganga was too quiet**. There were no waves, no song, only a mirror-still surface that reflected the sky like it had swallowed it whole.

Radha hadn't spoken when he left. He had risen before the conch sounded, bathed in cold water, and dressed in his white dhoti like every other day. But something about him felt final. The way he knotted the *angavastram* around his shoulder. The way he touched her forehead—not as a husband, but as a priest sending off a soul.

“Vanya's drawings are changing,” he said.

“She's a child,” Radha replied.

“No. She's remembering.”

She hadn't asked what he meant.

By the time the **ritual procession** set out from the ghats, the morning sun had broken through the lingering fog. Devotees gathered along the banks with folded hands and murmured prayers, watching the narrow wooden boat glide over the slow-moving waters of the Ganga.

Raghav Sharma, dressed in saffron robes, stood tall and calm at the bow of the boat, his silhouette framed by rising incense smoke and soft sunlight.

He was among five priests carrying brass urns, each filled with the ashes of departed souls, to be returned to the river—to the source standing at the bow of the narrow boat—chanting, tossing marigolds, holding the brass urns that would carry ashes back into

the source. The chant of the Mahāmṛityunjaya Mantra rose gently into the air:

*"Tryambakam yajamahe sugandhim pushtivardhanam..."*

Raghav's voice was the clearest of them all, his eyes far away—fixed not on the water, but on something deeper, older, “A remembering”.

### **Halfway across the river**

The boat slowed. The rowers dipped their oars in silence.

And suddenly—the light dimmed.

The sky, clear just moments before, seemed to veil itself in gray, like an eclipse without warning. There was **no wind**, no thunder. But the water began to churn—subtle, swirling, as though **something beneath stirred**.

A hush fell over the boat.

One of the younger priests hesitated with his urn.

### **PRIEST 1 (anxiously):**

"What's happening? There's no storm in the forecast."

### **PRIEST 2 (wide-eyed):**

"The river... it's pulling us."

**Raghav stepped forward**, holding his urn with both hands. But he didn't pour the ashes.

He looked down into the water.

And **the chanting stopped**.

Because in that moment—just before it happened—**the other priests saw it**:

**A flash of red** at his wrist.

Not a thread from this world.

**A red thread**, aged and frayed, almost glowing, like it had waited lifetimes to bind him again.

Like the river had opened up just for him—and closed again just as fast.

The urn fell from his hands and bobbed briefly on the surface... before it too was gone.

No splash.

No cry for help.

No resistance.

**He simply sank.** Just absence.

### **Back at the Ghats**

The boat returned with one fewer soul.

Radha, waiting on the upper steps, already knew.

She saw it in the stillness of the boat.

In the eyes of the priests—confused, shaken, unable to explain.

In the river, that had calmed again, as if nothing had happened.

### **Whispers Followed**

"He didn't fall. He stepped."

"The red thread—did you see it? It was glowing."

"Was he possessed? Or was he... free?"

The other priests claimed they saw something red around his wrist—just before he sank.

Three hours later, **a garland returned**, floating up the current like it had changed its mind. His *rudraksha mala* followed, tangled with red thread.

But...his body never came back.

\*\*\*\*\*

Radha did not scream. Did not speak. She sat beneath the **neem tree** in the courtyard, her dancer's spine too proud to collapse. In her lap lay **Vanya**, confused and still too young to understand the permanence of vanishing.

The house grew silent after that.

Radha stopped dancing.

The temple drums no longer made her feet twitch. Even the gods on the walls began to gather dust.

But sometimes, at night, she could still smell him—**sandalwood and river wind**. She would wake and reach across the bed for a body that was no longer there.

And once, just once, she found something beneath Vanya's pillow.

A **single red thread**, tied in a circle, no bigger than a coin. Faint. Fraying.

She burned it at dawn.

\*\*\*\*\*

They said Radha Sharma danced like flame.

fingers told stories even when her mouth stayed sealed. Her eyes could summon gods.

Her last performance was on the night of **Kartik Purnima**, beneath the full moon, on the steps of the **Dashashwamedh Ghat**. The crowd was thick with tourists, pilgrims, Brahmins, and beggars. But when Radha danced, silence rippled outward. The temple bells paused for her.

She chose to perform **Ardhanarishvara**—the dual form of Shiva and Shakti. Male and female. Destroyer and creator. Union and division.

Her body moved as both.

Right side strength. Left side surrender.

Vanya, barely six, watched from the edge of the crowd, her tiny fingers curled around her father's. And for a moment, Raghav forgot to breathe.

Radha's anklets rang like fate.

She danced a love that transcended life. A betrayal older than myth. A longing that could never be fulfilled.

When she finished, sweat glistening along her collarbone, the whole ghat held its breath. Raghav went near her and said, "I saw her. In the firelight. The other woman."

Radha didn't ask who.

She already knew.

That night, she folded her ghungroos into a silk cloth. She touched Vanya's sleeping forehead. Then she locked the anklets in the attic trunk and never danced again.

Because some performances are not art. They are memory.

\*\*\*\*\*

It started with the sound of water.

Vanya was seven. The neem tree had been shedding thread that week—thin red wisps that drifted onto her windowsill. Her mother said they were wishes escaping.

That night, Vanya dreamed of a **courtyard with no sky**.

The walls were high and smooth, carved with strange symbols she couldn't read but somehow understood. A temple bell echoed from somewhere far off, tolling not time, but endings.

She stood in the centre, barefoot, in a white cotton dress too big for her.

There was blood in the soil. A smear, like something had been dragged.

A woman wept beneath the neem tree, her hands bound with threads that glowed in the dark. A man watched from a corridor where no shadows reached him. He wore white. His face was hidden. But Vanya felt something sharp in her chest when she looked at him.

Between her finger and his, a red thread pulsed.

Alive.

"Don't forget," the woman whispered.

"Forget what?" Vanya asked.

But the dream collapsed before the answer came.

She woke up crying, hands clenched around nothing. Radha stood over her, eyes wide, face pale, calling her name over and over again—

But the name she said wasn't "Vanya."

"Devika," she whispered.

And then she left the room.

Vanya never asked her mother what it meant. But the name clung to her skin like incense smoke.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter-3

# The Whispering Womb

---

Radha was once famed in her youth for her Bharatanatyam performances—she danced for temples and festivals across the country. Her beauty was said to be “of another time.” She married Raghav Sharma, a scholar and priest, in a match arranged by karmic suggestion: her own mother claimed they had shared a bond in a previous life.

Radha stopped dancing the day her husband disappeared in the river.

She believes—though never speaks of it—that he was taken, not drowned.

That some karma had come due.

After that, Radha turned inwards. She kept the house like a shrine. She began tying **the sacred red threads to the neem tree**, whispering mantras not found in common scriptures. Some say she became a little mad. Others say she sees too much.

Now, Radha watches Vaanya with silent dread. Because she knows what the dreams mean.

She's seen the red thread before—on herself, years ago. But she chose to ignore it.

And it cost her everything.

Radha has tried to keep Vanya away from the truth. She believes the less her daughter knows, the safer she will be. But as fate turns its gears again, Radha realizes that karma cannot be buried—only postponed.

“You came back because the thread remembers, even when we forget.”

Radha had always dismissed old wives' tales about pregnancy. The cravings, the dreams, the way some women claimed they could feel their child's soul before it even had a heartbeat. She'd smiled politely at the temple women who told her to chant mantras to “cleanse the karmic bond,” and ignored her mother-in-law's suggestion to hang lemons over the cradle.

But in her sixth month, the dreams began.

Not hers.

She knew that because the girl in them wasn't her.

The girl was barefoot. Dressed in tattered saffron. Hair soaked in rainwater, face streaked with tears and vermilion. She stood beneath a massive neem tree, clutching a red thread in her bloody fingers, screaming a name over and over.

“Aaditya.”

Then: “Amaya.”

Then: silence.

Every time Radha woke, the name “Devika” echoed in her ears like a bell after lightning.

She tried not to tell anyone. Not her husband. Not even the doctor.

What could she say?

*“I think my unborn daughter is dreaming someone else’s life?”*

Some days, she’d feel the baby move — not like a kick, but like a *pull*. Like something inside her was reaching back. Not forward.

Radha began to avoid mirrors.

Because sometimes, in the reflection, she thought she saw a shadow standing behind her. A girl. Hair dripping wet. Eyes full of betrayal.

Vaanya both resents and pities her mother’s silence. She’s never felt mothered, and yet can’t fully detach. There is guilt, rooted in the idea that Vaanya may have inherited more from her mother than just blood—**perhaps grief, or even a curse.**

## Chapter-4

# The Purpose

---

**T**he rain hadn't stopped for three days.

Vanya Sharma sat hunched over her old wooden desk, the room dim except for the warm glow of her sketch lamp. Outside her room, monsoon drops slid down the pane in slow-motion streaks, mirroring the sweat running down the back of her neck. It wasn't hot. It was fear.

She stared at the half-finished charcoal sketch in front of her. The eyes stared back—wide, glassy, lifeless.

**Too lifeless.**

Her fingers tightened around the pencil.

She hadn't meant to draw him. She hadn't chosen the face. It had come to her the way it always did—half-dream, half-nightmare, her hand moving faster than her mind, sketching lines with an urgency she couldn't explain.

There was a name on the tip of her tongue. She didn't know it.

Not yet.

She sighed and leaned back, cracking her neck. The room smelled of paper, old eraser dust, and something else—incense maybe, or memories. Her breath caught as she looked down at the finished face.

She reached for her phone. Maybe she could search missing persons reports. But the thought of it made her stomach churn. What if—again—she found him? Found that this stranger, this sketch from her dream, was real?

It had happened twice before.

She hadn't told anyone. Who would believe her? Even she didn't.

A sharp knock startled her.

She jolted upright.

**Knock. Knock. Knock.**

Not the front door. Her room's back entrance. No one ever used that.

She stood slowly, walking barefoot across the floor, heart thudding. The knock came again.

She opened the door.

Police Inspector Rohit Mishra stood on the threshold, rain dripping from his long coat, the dark circles under his eyes deeper than she remembered.

"Vanya," he said, without a smile. "I need your help."

\*\*\*\*\*

Ten minutes later, they were sitting across from each other, her sketch now in his hands.

He stared at it, motionless.

“I knew it,” Vanya whispered. “He’s real.”

Rohit looked up sharply. “You’ve seen him before?”

“No,” she said. Her voice sounded hollow. “I mean... yes. In a dream. I drew him last night.”

Rohit’s eyes narrowed.

“His body was found in Nehru park this morning,” he said, laying a crime scene photo beside her drawing.

It was the same face.

Same scar.

Same empty eyes.

Rohit spoke gently. “This isn’t the first time you’ve done this, is it?”

She didn’t answer. She couldn’t.

Instead, she stood, walked to the window, and touched the glass.

Out there, beyond the rain, something tugged at her chest. A pull. Invisible, but real—like a string wound too tight, trembling with tension.

“I don’t understand what’s happening to me,” she whispered. “I draw them before they die.”

Rohit stood too, now serious in a way she hadn’t seen before.

“I shouldn’t be saying this,” he murmured. “But three months ago... the girl you sketched with the lotus tattoo? We found her body in the Ganga. Your drawing was the only lead we had.”

Vanya turned slowly. Her eyes were wide, glassy. Like the sketch.

“There’s more,” he continued. “Each of the victims—we found a red thread wrapped around their left wrist.”

Her mouth went dry.

In her dream last night... there had been a **red thread**, frayed at the edges.

Around the man’s wrist.

Tight. Binding. Almost glowing.

She sat back down, her hands trembling now.

“Show me the photo again,” she whispered.

Rohit slid it forward.

Vanya leaned in close. The corpse was wet, pale, brutalized. But there—just above the wrist.

“You think it’s connected, don’t you? To the other victims?”

Same thread. Same knot. Same eyes wide open like they saw the past crawl back- **Rohit said quietly.**

**After a brief pause.**

You shouldn’t be this close to it, Vanya. “I didn’t ask for this. It’s not like I’m following it—it’s following me.”

“Maybe it remembers you” - Rohit said softly.

*Vanya looks up sharply.*

What did you say?

*He blinks like he didn't mean to say it out loud. Covers quickly.*

"Nothing. Just—these things... they feel personal. Like whoever's doing this... knows how to find you.

*Beat. Vanya's eyes don't leave his face.*

You always say that. "Be careful," "Don't get too close." But you never tell me why it scares you so much.

*He hesitates. A flash of something crosses his face—guilt? Memory?*

"Because I've seen what happens when people don't listen."

*She notices the way his fingers touch the silver ring on his thumb—an old habit. A relic. Familiar somehow, though she's never seen it before.*

"Do you believe in past lives, Rohit?"

*He doesn't answer. Just looks at her, like he's standing at the edge of a memory he's not ready to fall into.*

Vanya's coming to Banaras was not a mere coincidence...

Rohit was Vanya's neighbour and a police inspector. Both were childhood friends. Six feet tall, slim, curly haired, fair-skinned, attractive young man Rohit had come to Delhi in connection with some case. Vanya's studio had not been burnt at that time. He had gone to meet Vanya at her studio that day. Nestled in a quiet corner of South Delhi, behind an aging colonial building near Hauz Khas, lies a narrow staircase winding up to a sunlit attic. At first glance, the studio seems like any other bohemian artist's den.

But Vanya's studio breathes with something more—*memory, myth, and mourning*.

It was plastered in layers of peeling paint, charcoal smudges, and unfinished murals. Reds dominate—every shade from rust to blood to maroon. One entire wall was dedicated to drawings of faceless figures bound by red thread, some reaching for each other, others suspended mid-fall. Vanya's sketches were scattered on the floor and pinned crookedly on walls. Most are fragments—eyes, wrists, threads. Some appear centuries old in style—portraits of a girl in ancient Indian garb, her wrists inked with sacred threads, her gaze always turned away. Rohit saw an **unfinished painting** stands on an easel near the window. It's haunting: A girl—barefoot—stands under a **neem tree**, her dupatta tangled in red string. The shadows behind her hint at galloping horses, torches, and betrayal.

Their was a low wooden table littered with charcoal pencils, vermilion powder, incense sticks. A string of sacred threads (red and yellow) dangles from a rusted nail on the wall. A cracked brass mirror leans against the corner—when the light hits it, the cracks resemble a web of fate.

The large north-facing window lets in soft daylight that shifts with the mood of the studio. On rainy days, it grows dusky and surreal—shadows seem to move.

Vanya was fond of classical music and sometimes plays old recordings of classical music—flute, veena, or soft temple bells. Other times, silence hangs so heavily that the tick of a clock feels accusatory.

After looking closely at the studio Rohit felt that the space feels like it's half in the present, half lost in memory. Her friends find it eerie whereas Vanya finds it *familiar*. **There's a smell of old books, damp wood, and something faintly floral—like raat ki rani.**

There he saw Vanya's sketches which impressed him a lot. Those sketches were deep, intense, there was something in those sketches that Rohit could not take his eyes off, he felt that he had some connection with these faces made by Vanya. After completing his work, Rohit came back from Delhi to Varanasi. After a few days, he got a case in which a dead body of a girl was found in the holy river Ganga. When Rohit reached the spot and saw the face of the dead girl, he felt that he had seen this girl somewhere before. After racking his brain, he remembered that he had seen the picture of this girl in Vanya's studio. He was shocked as to how this could be possible. Similarly, he found a couple of dead bodies further ahead which were related to Vanya's studio and the sketches made by her. It was Rohit's request to help him with the red thread murders that Vanya was in the town.

Meanwhile, she reached for her sketchpad again, her hand already moving. Eyes glassy. Almost in a trance.

"Another face is coming," she said softly.

"Already?" Rohit asked.

But Vanya didn't respond.

Because in her mind's eye, she saw it again—fog, soft and grey, curling around something dark. And from that mist emerged a man, half-hidden, watching her. Always watching.

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**Rohit's father** was , a retired Sanskrit scholar and temple priest—rigid, pious, deeply concerned with karma and dharma was the next door neighbour and friend of Vanya's father Raghav Sharma. Rohit's mother—passed away when Rohit was 10. She was gentle, artistic, used to draw mandalas and write letters to the river as prayers. Her softness lingers in Rohit. His older sister, married and living in Pune. Occasionally calls Rohit to push him toward marriage, unaware of the emotional storm he carries inside.

Their home in **Banaras** is tucked in a quiet, old-fashioned colony near the Ganga—a neighborhood where people still leave their doors unlocked during the day and exchange sweets on festivals.

Vanya who lived the next door with her mother Radha. Rohit, older by a few years, was the quiet boy who helped her reach mangoes on the compound wall or chased away stray dogs when she cried.

Every winter, they'd gather with neighbourhood kids for rooftop kites and Ramayana plays. Vanya once dressed as Sita. Rohit—Shiva in the tableau. She still teases him about how serious he looked holding a fake trident.

Though they didn't attend the same school, their paths crossed during tuition and temple events. He once gave her his geometry box after she lost hers during exams on returning she drew something inside the lid—he never erased it.

After Radha fell sick in Vanya's late teens, Rohit—now training in the police academy—would often drop off groceries or medicines quietly, never staying long. Radha trusted him deeply.

There was an unspoken pact between Vanya and Rohit. After Raghav Sharma disappeared in the Ganga, Radha was never the

same. Rohit became the silent protector—checking in when no one asked him to, helping Vanya fix things around the house, telling himself it was just “responsibility.”

Vanya never saw it. Or maybe she did—but didn’t want to.

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## Chapter-5

# The Red Dreams

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The rain had finally stopped, but Vanya couldn't sleep.

She lay in bed, wide-eyed, the ceiling above her swirling with phantom shadows cast by the streetlamp outside. The window remained slightly open—letting in the scent of damp earth, rain-soaked leaves, and something else she couldn't name. Something metallic. Like blood. The old neem tree outside creaked against the wind, whispering secrets in a language only nightmares understood.

Divya's voice from earlier still echoed in her head—half-laughter, half-warning.

*"You seriously need to stop sketching dead people, ya. It's creepy. Come to the café tomorrow. I'll buy you the most non-haunted chai in the city."*

Later that morning, she sat at the campus café, staring into a cold cup of chai. Divya waved a hand in front of her face.

“Hellooo? Earth to Miss Haunted Sketchbook?”

Vanya blinked. “Sorry.”

Divya leaned in. Her kohl-lined eyes narrowed. “You didn’t sleep again, did you?”

Vanya hesitated. “I had a dream. A bad one.”

“You’ve been having them for weeks, yaar. I’m starting to think we need to get you saged or something.”

Vanya tried to smile, but it cracked halfway. “You ever... feel like you’ve known someone before you met them?”

Divya raised an eyebrow. “You mean like, soulmates or... déjà vu?”

“Not romantically. Just... a sense. Like this person is tied to something older. Like a knot that never unravels.”

Divya’s face changed. Subtle. Almost imperceptible. She looked away.

“For someone who never took mythology seriously, you’re starting to sound like a Vedic textbook.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I,” Divya said, her voice quieter. “I believe some ties are older than this life.”

Their eyes met. Vanya’s heartbeat faltered.

It wasn’t what Divya said—but **how** she said it. As if she wasn’t just talking about fate.

But remembering it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Her sketchbook was closed now, but it pulsed in her mind like a living thing. She hadn't shown Rohit the others. The ones she kept hidden.

There had been five faces in total. All drawn before their deaths. All with a common thread—literally.

Red. Tied tight. Around their left wrists.

She hadn't told anyone that in her dreams, she saw it **glowing**.

And every night, the dreams returned.

The same thread.

Glowing in the dark like a cursed pulse.

*Tonight, please... just sleep. Just one night. No visions. No dead faces. No voices. No deaths.*

But the night didn't listen.

She closed her eyes.

And fell asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

She stood in a dense fog where she got the glimpse of a temple.

The ground beneath her was soft, almost spongy—like wet earth after a cremation. The air was thick, dense, humming with tension. The kind of silence that wasn't peaceful—but watchful.

She was barefoot. Wearing a white cotton saree, soaked from the knees down. The wind whispered against her skin, curling like fingers around her wrists.

And there—just as before—**was the thread**.

Thin. Crimson. Looping softly around her left wrist.

Tied tight in a sacred knot.

Her breath hitched.

This wasn't just a thread.

It was *pulling*.

Slowly, steadily, it moved forward into the fog, dragging her feet with it. She didn't resist.

She walked.

Each step forward was a step deeper into the unknown. Faces appeared in the mist—brief flashes. Familiar. Flickering.

The man from yesterday's sketch. Eyes wide in death.

The girl with the lotus tattoo. Her mouth frozen mid-scream.

A child. Blood around his temple.

Vanya clutched her chest. "Why are you showing me this?" she called out.

The fog didn't answer.

Only the thread moved forward.

And then she saw him.

Silhouetted through the mist—a man, tall, still, his features blurred but his presence unmistakable. The thread coiled from her wrist to his, like an artery, like fate itself.

He was watching her.

He had always been watching her.

"Who are you?" she whispered.

The wind answered in a voice not hers. Male. Deep. Echoing.

**"You already know me."**

She took a shaky step forward.

"I don't. I don't remember."

The man stepped closer, and the fog parted slightly. Enough for her to see his eyes.

Dark. Infinite.

They didn't blink.

**"You loved me. Once."**

Her knees buckled. The wind howled.

"Stop," she whispered, her throat closing. "Stop this."

The red thread began to bleed.

It seeped slowly, the crimson darkening like fresh cut flesh. It stained her saree. It coiled tighter around her wrist, biting into her skin.

"You broke the thread before."

"You chose someone else."

"This time... you must return to me."

She screamed.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Thunder rumbles in the distance. The ceiling fan turns slowly. Shadows cling to the corners of the room like forgotten memories. Vanya tosses and turns, trapped in the web of her dream—the red thread coiling tighter, that blood-streaked face, the echo of a name she does not remember saying...*

Vanya jerks upright in bed with a blood-curdling scream. Her breath comes in ragged bursts, her forehead slick with sweat. Her hands claw at her wrists, trying to pull off an invisible thread.

The room was hot. Her skin slick with sweat.

She looked down.

Her left wrist was **red**. A faint line where something had been tied tightly.

She scrambled to the lamp, turning it on with shaking hands.

No thread...No blood...Just skin. And silence.

She exhaled, pressing her palms to her eyes.

The dreams were getting worse. The voice more familiar. Like it lived inside her.

The scarlet thread wasn't a symbol anymore.

It was **a warning**.

\*\*\*\*\*

Door flies open. Radha rushes in, her dupatta falling off one shoulder. She doesn't turn on the light. She knows the dark is safer sometimes.

Vanya?! What happened? Are you hurt?

Vanya sobs uncontrollably, her hands trembling. She looks down at her wrists—there are faint red marks again.

Maa...It was him again... the red thread... I saw blood, I saw *me*—I think I did something terrible...her voice cracked while explaining things to Radha.

Radha hesitates for a moment. She had hoped this wouldn't return. But her eyes flicker—recognition, fear, and a trace of something deeper... guilt? She walks to the bed, sits beside Vanya, and pulls her into her arms.

Radha (softly, brushing Vanya's hair back):

Shh... you're safe now. It was just a dream.

No. It wasn't. It *felt* real. Like I've lived it before. And there was this man with a mark on his wrist. He said I used to love him. But his eyes—Maa, they were full of *betrayal*...

Vanya stiffens. The blood drains from her face, but she masks it quickly. She wraps her arms tighter around Vanya. Her voice is calm, but her pulse is racing.

"You're under a lot of stress, Vanya. Your exhibition, the pressures at work, the insomnia. That can do strange things to the mind.

"No, this was something else. I remembered places I've never seen. A temple without doors. And there was a *voice*—it called me by another name."

Radha pulls back slightly. Her face is pale, eyes wide in the half-light. A fine tremor passes through her hands.

Radha (whispered, almost involuntary): "Amaya"...

What did you just say?- Vanya startled.

Nothing. I said maybe your *mind* is playing games. You should rest. I'll make you some warm milk- Radha recovered quickly.

She gets up quickly, too quickly. She doesn't meet Vanya's eyes and left. In the hallway, Radha steadies herself against the wall. Her lips tremble. She whispers to herself—

It's starting again... after all these years...

\*\*\*\*\*

### **An Old Hill Top Temple- Early Morning- Mist Hung**

*The fog has not yet lifted from the earth. The stone steps leading to the temple are slick with dew and time. Bells chime lazily in the breeze, their echo carried across a silent forest. This is no ordinary temple—it is one that does not appear on maps. One must remember it to find it.*

Radha ascends the final step, her shawl clutched tightly around her shoulders. Her face is drawn, her eyes ringed with sleeplessness. She pauses at the threshold—a faint red thread tied around the ancient neem tree by the gate seems to pulse when she passes it.

Inside, the sanctum is dim. Oil lamps flicker against soot-blackened walls carved with symbols of karma, death, and rebirth. The priest sits cross-legged before the fire—his robes the color of ash, his hair coiled like a serpent atop his head. His eyes, however, are sharp and knowing.

You came later this time, Radha- Priest asked Radha without opening his eyes and looking up.

She remembered... last night. In fragments. The blood, the thread, the name.- Radha answered quietly.

“Then the thread has begun to stir. The cycle tightens. As it must.”

“No. It can’t. You promised me last time—that if I raised her away from Vasantgarh, if I kept her away from *him*, the thread would fray. She wasn’t supposed to remember!”

Priest (opening his eyes, calm and sad):

You misunderstood. Karma can be delayed, not erased. The red thread is not silk—it is *vein*. And you cannot untie a vein without spilling blood.

Radha flinches. Her breath catches. She folds her hands, half in prayer, half in desperation.

“Then tell me how to stop it. Please. If there’s a ritual, a sacrifice—I will do it. Just let her live this life without the past pulling her under.”

“You ask for mercy, but forget the truth: That silence stains your soul.”

And now you must watch the curse unfold in a different form. It is not punishment, Radha. It is remembrance. You are here not to stop fate—but to see it fulfilled *with awareness* this time.

What if it ends the same way? What if she gets the same fate again?

Priest (softly, eyes glowing like embers):

Then she would be free. Knowing the truth. That is the only freedom the thread allows.

*A bell tolls outside, a raven caws on the temple spire. Radha closes her eyes. Silent tears fall down her cheeks. She reaches into her purse and removes a small bundle—inside is an old red thread soaked in something darker than vermillion.*

“This was tied on her wrist when she met her fate. The thread that bled with her. I kept it. All these years.”

Priest (taking it with reverence):

Then the past is not buried. Only waiting.

So be it. If it must happen again, then let me suffer first- Radha whispers in a broken way.

## Chapter-6

# The Red Knot

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The sun hasn't fully risen, but Banaras already hums like an old mantra. Distant conches echo from the riverfront temples. Morning aartis ripple through the misty air, and the Ganga, vast and ancient, carries silence older than sin.

Inside a narrow ancestral house tucked behind **Tulsi Ghat**, Vanya's bedroom window lets in the filtered fragrance of **burning sandalwood**, temple flowers, and wet earth. Birds chirp like verses from an old bhajan.

Vanya lies curled beneath her thin cotton quilt, drenched in sweat. Her sleep was broken by that scream—hers. Again.

The red thread still feels like it's coiled around her wrist, even though there's nothing there. Her sketchbook lies tossed beside the bed, open to a frantic drawing of a temple—no doors, only shadows.

A soft knock.

The door creaks open.

Vanya? Are you awake?- Radha asked gently.

Vanya doesn't respond. Radha steps in quietly, carrying a brass tray with two earthen cups of tea—steam curling from them like incense from a forgotten shrine.

She sets the tray down on the nightstand. Her eyes pause on the sketchbook, then on her daughter's pale face.

Vanya sits up slowly, rubbing her arms as if still trying to peel something off her skin. Her eyes are heavy, rimmed with unshed tears.

Radha sits beside her, offering the chai. Vanya wraps her hands around the clay kulhad, the warmth grounding her. For a moment, silence sits between them like a guest.

“Banaras is full of old dreams, Vanya. Sometimes the city whispers things we don't remember asking to hear” – Radha said in a measured way.

No. This is different. It's not just the city. There was a man. He knew me. And I—I think I knew him too. But not from this life.- Vanya raised her voice by shaking her head.

Radha's hands tighten slightly around her own cup. The morning bell from nearby temple tolls faintly in the distance. She looks away.

“Maybe it's time you stepped out of this house for a bit. Go to Delhi. Change the air. See your old friends”- **Radha said in a low voice,**

Divya called this morning... she said my degree certificates are still with the college. I was thinking of going- Vanya startled.

Radha nods, a little too quickly. Almost like she had been waiting for this moment.

“Good. Sometimes, to quiet what’s chasing us inside, we need to walk away from the place where we keep hearing its footsteps.”

Vanya sips the tea. The taste is familiar—masala chai, just how Radha used to make it when Vanya was little. But today, it tastes older. Earthier. Like something steeped in a memory too ancient to name.

Ma... do you believe in past lives?- Vanya asked softly to Radha.

Radha looks at her daughter—truly looks. Her lips part as if to say something. Then she stops herself. She touches Vanya’s hair instead, brushing a lock behind her ear.

I believe some threads never really break. No matter how many lives we live- Vanya said with a soft smile that doesn’t reach Radha’s eyes.

A temple bell rings again—closer this time. And outside, by the ghats, a boatman calls out in an old dialect that hasn’t changed in centuries.

*"Aa re, manushya!*

*Saans toh tere paas hai, par kaal dekh raha hai!*

*Ek jeevan udhaar mein hai, ek maran mein chhupa hai.*

*Paar chalo, jab smriti bulaaye—*

*Pichhla janam abhi poora nahin hua!"*

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Her phone buzzes on the table.

Caller ID reflected the name of “Divya”.

Divya?- Vanya received the phone.

Madam! Still alive? I had to check because clearly ghosts return calls faster than you do!- Divya said in a cheerful voice.

Sorry... Things have been... weird- “Vanya said with a small smile.

“Yeah, I can figure it out. Listen, I won’t keep you long. Just a heads-up—your original degree certificates are still with the admin office. They were supposed to be sent, but apparently someone forgot to update their address after moving cities?”

“Wait, I thought that was sorted. That was over a year ago.”

“Nope. Still here. Tied up with red thread and bureaucracy. Literally. Come and get them before they toss them into some dusty archive.”

*Vanya pauses. Her fingers absentmindedly trace the red line on the edge of her palm. Her voice is distant.*

“Okay. I’ll come tomorrow.”

Also, I miss your face. Let’s meet after. Coffee? Nostalgia trip?- Divya teased her.

Yeah. I’d like that.- Vanya said quietly.

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(Delhi University/

The Delhi air hit her like a memory—thick, metallic, and unforgiving. After the monsoon rain, the roads glistened with puddles reflecting half-formed skies. Vanya stepped out of the auto

with her sling bag and folder of degree papers clutched tightly in one hand.

But her thoughts were elsewhere—not on the campus, not even on the faded congratulations of professors. Her mind was on the studio.

The old studio she had once painted in.

The one that burned down.

The one her mother never spoke of again.

Outside the old Fine Arts department, Divya was leaning against a neem tree, sipping iced coffee from a mason jar, oversized sunglasses hiding her eyes.

“Degree-wali devi returns. How’s Banaras? Still whispering ghosts?”

“You have no idea.” - Vanya gave her a brief hug.

“Try me.”

Vanya hesitated, then looked her dead in the eye.

They sat on a rusted bench inside the campus courtyard of Delhi University—beneath the peeling bark of an ancient banyan tree, its roots spilling down like forgotten truths.

Vanya watched a squirrel dart across a sunbeam, her voice softer now.

“I still can’t believe we never realized we were from the same city until second year.” -

Divya gave a small, knowing smile—one that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Banaras has a way of hiding people until they’re meant to meet.”  
“And here I thought you were just another loud Delhi girl who knew too many swear words and drank coffee like it was religion.”- Vanya laughs faintly.

“Excuse me! I still chant the Ganga Aarti better than half those priests near Ghats.”

They both laughed—easily, freely—for the first time in a while. But beneath the warmth, something stirred.

### ***FLASHBACK – 3 YEARS AGO***

The dormitory noticeboard was cluttered with flyers: lost ID cards, art exhibitions, flatmate requests. That’s where Vanya had seen it—the call for volunteers for an art therapy workshop.

She showed up to the orientation and found Divya already there, leaning against the windowsill, sketching on the back of a handout with the confident flair of someone who knew she was good.

“You’re from Delhi?”- It was Vanya who made the first move.  
“Nope. Banaras.”- answered Divya.

Vanya blinked, surprised.

“Me too. Tulsi Ghat side.”

“Kabir Nagar. Looks like the Ganga conspired.”- Divya said.

They didn’t become best friends overnight. But something clicked—like two threads quietly reuniting in the loom of fate. Their interest toward karmic cycles, temple myths, and uncanny coincidences brought them close, closer to each other.

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### **Back to Present – DU Campus Courtyard**

“You know what’s strange, Vanya? We were just a few mohallas apart in Banaras... but we never met there. Not once.”

“Or maybe we did. In some other lifetime.”

Divya glanced sideways. The light caught in her eyes, turning them a strange bronze.

“Do you ever get that feeling? Like this isn’t the first time we’re having this conversation?”

“All the time. Especially with you. And especially now.”- Vanya (nods slowly)

A silence settled between them—not awkward, but heavy. Dense with things unspoken.

“There’s more to us than friendship, Vanya. I don’t mean romantically, but... something old. Woven deep. Maybe even older than Banaras itself.”- Divya whispers.

Vanya could no look into her deep, dark koehled eyes so she changed the topic.

“I need to go somewhere. My old studio. The one near the Hauz Khas ruin. It burned down, right?”

Divya blinked. Her posture stiffened slightly, but she nodded.

\*\*\*\*\*

The late morning sun glinted off the shop signs and mosaic tiles, casting a burnished white light over the narrow streets of Hauz Khas Village. It was that liminal hour—too late to be called morning rush, too early for the lunch crowd.

**Vanya** and **Divya** moved through the cobbled lanes in silence, the weight of a thousand unsaid things hanging between them.

Cafés were opening slowly, their shutters groaning. A bored waiter stood outside a vegan bistro, rolling a cigarette. A street artist sprayed color onto a nearby wall, radio static humming in the background. The perfume of roasting beans mingled with sun-warmed concrete and the faint burnt scent still embedded in Vanya's memory.

They turned into a **lesser-known bylane**, once an art haven tucked between a boutique paper store and a shuttered bookstore—was quieter, narrower, forgotten by most. The further they walked, the more the crowd thinned, until even the street dogs didn't bother lifting their heads. **Vanya's old studio.**

The signage above the shutter had been scorched beyond recognition. Once vibrant yellow, the shutter now bore **black streaks**, like claw marks or shadows that refused to leave.

"I thought they sealed this place off." - Divya said by quietly, clutching her sling bag)

"They did. No one cared enough to guard it."

Vanya stepped forward. The lock was broken—**long ago**, probably by vagrants or curiosity-seekers. But no one had dared to enter for months.

They stepped inside.

The scent hit first—**ash, old paint, and silence.**

The daylight filtered through a cracked skylight above, casting odd, angular shadows over the wreckage. The **air felt warm**, yet the room was cold, still, dense with something **unspoken.**

**Canvas skeletons** leaned in crooked angles. A fallen easel lay cracked in half. The walls were scorched black—but there, on the back wall, remained a **fragment** untouched by fire.

A painted eye. Wide. Ochre. Watching.

Below it, written in hurried brush strokes that had half-melted in the heat:

*“You knew before you were born.”*

Divya stepped back.

Vanya stood still, trembling—not in fear, but recognition.

Did... did you write that?— Divya asked in a petrified voice.

“No”

Vanya knelt beside a pile of half-burnt sketchbooks. Her fingers, covered in soot, trembled as she reached for one — only for it to disintegrate at her touch.

Then she saw it—a single thread, half-buried in the ash. Red. Frayed. Tangled.

Outside, a school group passed by, their voices a distant echo. A fruit vendor shouted nearby, his cart bells tinkling. Morning life continued.

But inside, the world had paused—like a breath held too long.

“This place wasn’t destroyed by accident.” - said Vanya in a low tone.

She looked at Divya, something sharp in her tone.

“You knew, didn’t you? That this wasn’t just a studio for me. It was a gateway. A memory. A warning.”

“I didn’t know. But I felt it. And I was scared.”

“Of what?”

“Of who I might’ve been. And what I might’ve done.”

“Let’s go from here.” – said Vanya.

“Where?”

“Anywhere... Let’s just get out from here.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The sun was beginning to dip, smearing burnt orange across the Delhi skyline. Vanya stepped out of her narrow art studio, the air still thick with soot, memory, and something older than both. Her fingers were smudged with charcoal. Her lips pressed tightly shut.

Divya followed, clutching her bag and glancing back one last time at the blackened edges of the studio wall where an old painting—one Vanya didn’t even remember making—had reappeared, only to be scorched into near ash.

“You saw that, right? That wasn’t... just paint. That face looked like *you*.”

“Let’s just go Divya.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper. Her heartbeat still thundered.

They walked in silence, weaving their way through the lanes of **Hauz Khas Village**. The cafés were busy, crowds buzzed with laughter and clinking glasses, but it all sounded far away to Vanya—as if muffled through thick glass.

They entered the local market unconsciously, drawn by the need for distraction or grounding. A man selling chai offered them a cup, which they declined. A boy threaded marigolds into garlands. The scent of roasted corn and incense curled into the dusky air.

“Remember when we used to come here after college? You’d sketch random strangers and pretend you were psychic.”- Divya tried to lighten the mood.

“I wasn’t pretending.”- Vanya said by giving a fake smile to Divya.

Divya laughed. Then stopped. Because Vanya had stopped. She stood rooted to the spot.

“Vanya”?

Vanya’s eyes were fixed on an old shopfront hidden between a Tibetan jewelry store and a palm reader’s den. The wooden sign above the narrow door was cracked, faded—almost invisible in the evening light. But the words on it burned into her like a brand:

### ***“THE RED KNOT”***

The letters were painted in old gold. A red thread dangled from the door handle, swaying as if it had just been tied by someone unseen.

Vanya...You okay?- asked Divya by placing her hand on Divya’s arm.

Vanya read aloud and slowly.

The Red Knot...

“What is it?”- Divya said in a confused tone by looking at the board.

“I don’t know.” - said Vanya by no looking away. Her feet inched forward on their own.

“Vanya—don’t. We don’t even know what this place is.” - warned Divya.

But Vanya’s hand was already reaching for the doorknob, her palm trembling. A strange warmth blossomed along her wrist.

“I think I’ve been here before.”

“That’s not possible.”

“I didn’t say in this life.”

“And with that, she pushed the door open.”

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## Chapter-7

# The Man With the Mark

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*“Some wounds do not bleed. They burn.  
Through time. Through flesh. Through fate.”*

As Vanya and Divya stepped through the wooden door beneath the swaying signboard, they entered a world that felt detached from Delhi's chaos, as if the city outside had ceased to exist.

The air inside was cool and still, laced faintly with the scent of burnt sandalwood and something metallic—ink, blood, or memory, both of them couldn't tell.

The walls were painted in deep, muted tones—burnt sienna, smoky indigo, and a red so dark that it was looking nearly black. It wasn't a typical tattoo studio. There were no loud posters, no music, no sterile white light. Instead, the room felt sacred. Like a temple that worshipped forgotten truths.

A narrow hallway extended from the main chamber, vanishing into dimness. Small lanterns flickered along the baseboards, casting

dancing shadows across the floor. The light came not from above, but from within the space itself.

The main room was circular, like a ceremonial chamber. In its center sat a low, carved wooden platform, almost like a yajna kund, though it was used for sketching and preparation. Charcoal sticks, red pigment, and thick ink vials were arranged in geometric patterns. An intricately carved idol of a Goddess, draped in a red thread garland, stood silently near the back wall.

Along the curved walls were framed artworks—not just tattoos, but symbols, visions, and faces.

- A girl with a crimson thread tied to her throat.
- A burning tree with anklets buried in its roots.
- A sword held by two hands—one male, one female—bound together by red twine.
- A woman standing under a neem tree, eyes closed, head bowed.

The images spoke even in their silence. Some were ancient-looking, others freshly drawn.

In one corner stood a tall shelf filled with worn leather-bound books, incense cones, and brass bowls. An old radio softly played raag Bhairavi, its sound almost drowned by the beating of Vanya's own heart.

And yet, the strangest thing was the mirrors.

They lined the upper sections of the room—irregular in shape and placement, almost like puzzle pieces waiting to lock together. Some were cloudy, others pristine. But none reflected exactly what

they should. When Vanya looked into one, she thought she saw herself in a different sari, eyes lined with kohl, a gold nose ring glinting like firelight.

Beside the far wall was the desk on which everything was neatly placed:

A stack of sketchbooks wrapped in red thread, small vials of pigment labelled in Sanskrit, a pair of antique scissors that looked more ceremonial than functional, and pinned to the wall behind his desk, an array of portraits, each more haunting than the last. It was here Vanya's eyes paused.

She stumbled a step forward.

Divya, silent beside her, reached out to hold her arm.

"This place... it's strange. It feels... watched... Divya said in a low and uneasy tone. "No...It feels like it's waiting."- Vanya whispered.

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Vanya's eyes got stuck on the portraits, behind the desk.

*Two figures — a woman and a man in red with a trident tattoo over his heart, their hands almost touching, a red thread barely connecting them.*

Vanya (softly, to herself)

This can't be real...

*A soft creak from the hallway.*

**FOOTSTEPS.**

Measured. Barefoot. Coming closer.

*Divya tenses. Vanya freezes.*

From the dim hallway, **he steps into the light.**

Tall, Unshaven, clad in a dark kurta, sleeves rolled up, scar above his left eyebrow. His eyes — strange eyes — are ancient and unreadable, flickering with an ache that doesn't belong in this timeline.

When he sees her — truly sees her — he stops mid-step.

“You came back” - He whispered.

Vanya blinks, her breath caught in her throat. He was the same “man with the mark” of her dreams.

“I... I’m sorry. We didn’t mean to—Vanya left her sentence incomplete.

“No. You were always meant to return.” - He said softly.

A beat of silence stretches. His gaze never leaves her. It’s not recognition in the conventional sense — it’s deeper. Cellular. As if his soul just inhaled.

Divya shifts uncomfortably, edging closer to Vanya.

“We really didn’t mean to barge in. The door was open, and—”  
"Divya’s words trail off as she meets Rudra’s eyes and something inside her tightens.

He isn’t threatening.

He doesn’t raise his voice or move toward them.

But he radiates something... ancient.

Not in age, but in presence.

Like someone not entirely of now.

Divya narrows her eyes, trying to place him. His face looks familiar in a way she can't explain — not from Delhi, not from college — but somewhere older, deeper.

"We saw the name outside. "The Red Knot." Her old studio burned down. We were just walking— Divya clearing her throat said.

"And yet... you followed the thread." - He referred to Vanya.

Vanya opens her mouth to protest, to ask what he means — but stops. Something about his voice... it feels like rain falling on a memory she hasn't yet recalled.

Do I... know you?

"You always ask that first" - he said with a smile on his face but with sadness in his voice.

He steps closer.

Divya steps in, breaking the trance.

Vanya, we should go. This place... I don't like how it feels.

She's not Vanya- He told Divya, but didn't took off his eyes from Vanya.

"What did you just say?" - Vanya exhaled.

"You don't have to remember now. But you will, soon"

*"But... Who are you" - Vanya shouted.*

**Aditya.**

By hearing the name Divya's breathing quickens slightly. Not enough for Vanya to notice, but inwardly she feels a strange

pressure behind her eyes — like a memory she never lived through pressing against her consciousness.

A sudden image: a neem tree, a scream in the distance, blood soaking into earth.

She blinks.

Divya looks at Vanya, sensing that something between Vanya and this man is already unfolding — like a door being opened in a room she was never meant to enter.

She nods stiffly, stepping back.

Her eyes flick once more to Aditya.

And even though she doesn't remember why — she doesn't trust him.

Not yet...Not ever.

Divya hurriedly made a move towards exit door. The faint chime of an old Tibetan bell above the door echoed as she pushed it open. Vanya followed.

Sunlight outside had shifted, a bit too yellow, almost unreal, making the narrow lane blur with heat haze and leftover incense from nearby stores.

**Divya didn't speak.**

Not immediately.

She walked fast, her sandals clicking against the uneven stone path. A crow screeched above them from an electric wire, and somewhere in the distance, temple bells clanged noon. Her breath was sharp, her face pinched — she looked like she'd seen a ghost. And maybe she had.

Vanya stumbled for a second, still inside herself.

She turned back — just once — toward the studio.

The narrow glass door had already shut, but behind its patterned vinyl, she could faintly make out the silhouette of Rudra, standing still inside the threshold. Watching. Not moving. That mark — the scar above his eyebrows — pulsed in her mind like a heartbeat.

"He knew you."- Divya's voice cracked at the end, not accusing but... scared.

"I've never seen him before in my life."

"Then why did he behaved in that manner."

Vanya paused mid-step.

"Just... a mistake. Maybe he's confused. Artists can be weird."

But the words rang hollow. Vanya's heart was racing again. A pressure in her temples built like thunderclouds.

They turned a corner, toward a quieter alley behind the cafés. The chaos of the main street muffled.

Divya sat on a rusted bench, next to a wall covered in peeling flyers and fading graffiti. She took out her pack of cigarette and finally lit one with trembling fingers.

"You don't feel it? That place... him... There's something *wrong*."- Divya said after a long drag.

"Or something unfinished."- Vanya answered back gently.

A pause.

"When he looked at me, I forgot where I was. And I swear, I saw... *fire*. A tree. The smell of wet soil. "There was fire. And a girl... she looked like you. Why would I remember that?"- **Divya said in an almost whispering tone.**

Vanya sat frozen. The same tree. The fire. The screaming. The scent of burning wood mixed with wet earth. The whisper of "Devika" in her sleep. It wasn't just her. **She wasn't alone in remembering.**

Divya's words landed like thunder.

Same dreams... how is that possible? Two people same dreams???

"I've had that dream too."- Vanya whispered.

Their eyes locked — not as artist and friend, but as two souls standing at the edge of a veil that had just begun to lift.

"How is that possible?"- Divya got completely shaken by Vanya's revelation.

"I don't know. But I think... we were there."

A silence. Thick, electric, ancient.

Suddenly out of nowhere a sudden gust of wind for just a second, brought to both of them the scent of **neem leaves**.

"I smelled neem"- said Divya by looking around as if trying to figure out the origin of the neem's fragrance.

"Me too"

Suddenly, a food delivery boy zipped past them on a scooter, honking. Life returned to the frame.

"Divya get up and Let's go home."

Divya didn't reply. She just nodded, crushed the cigarette under her foot, and they walked off toward railway station to get a train to Banaras. After the whole episode Divya made up a mind to accompany Vanya to Banaras—

Behind them, far in the distance, Aditya had moved from the doorway. He had returned to the hallway. To the room of sketches. And to the mirror that still held Vanya's reflection — though she was no longer there.

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## Chapter-8

# Shadows at the Platform

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Early morning the train pulls into Banaras junction with a muted groan, its wheels shrieking against the tracks like a warning whispered too late. The **blue-grey coaches** dragging along the platform like tired memories. The sky with the colour of pale turmeric, bleeding slowly into soft amber as the sun struggles to rise beyond the misty banks of the Ganga.

Vanya sat by the window, her sketchbook unopened in her lap. Divya sat beside her, quiet. They hadn't spoken much since leaving Delhi. Words had become too fragile—too dangerous.

As the train jolted to a stop, Vanya caught a flicker of motion on the platform. A shadow. Tall, lean. Someone standing half-shrouded in the steam hissing from the engine. A man in black kurta. She blinked. He was gone.

Vanya and Divya step off the train in silence, each carrying only a small overnight bag. The city greets them not with the usual

chaos—but with an eerie hush, as though the city itself knows something has returned.

They reached outside the station. Outside, the city moved like a slow tide. Banaras had its own rhythm—sacred, eternal—but today it felt... watchful.

"You okay?"- Divya asked Vanya by adjusting her bag.

"I'm not sure if I ever was."

"Ok...so call me once you're settled."

They shared a brief glance. Nothing more was needed. The dream, the portraits, Aditya — it all loomed too large.

Meanwhile, a figure standing across the street, half-hidden behind a fruit cart. It was Aditya... Not following... Just watching in silent and waiting.

\*\*\*\*\*

Auto stopped at the gate of Vanya's house. She paid the driver by UPI and stepped out from the Auto. The gate creaked open. Radha was standing at the door.

"Vanya! Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I was—" Radha said hurriedly.

She stopped.

Something in Vanya's face made her pause. The pallor. The slight tremble in her hands. The shadows beneath her eyes.

Vanya stood quiet.

Radha looked at her, deeply. A mother's eyes — the kind that sees more than words ever say.

Radha:

"Did something happen in Delhi?"

Vanya looked away. She stepped inside and lay exhausted on the sofa.

Vanya (after a pause):

"Have you ever heard of a place called *The Red Knot*?"

Radha flinched—almost imperceptibly.

"No. Should I have?"

But her voice cracked, just slightly. Vanya didn't notice. Or didn't want to.

\*\*\*\*\*

The cycle rickshaw creaked and clattered down the narrow lanes of Banaras, its wheels navigating past sleeping dogs, piles of orange marigolds, and fresh cow dung circled with rangoli marks. The city was just waking up.

Divya sat to one side, she had pulled dupatta over her head, shielding herself from the rising sun and curious glances.

The rickshaw puller, an elderly man with sinewy arms and a saffron tilak, pedalled wordlessly. He knew the route well—he had taken Divya here since she was a child.

The air was filled with the aroma of burning incense, wet earth, and boiling chai. Loudspeakers from a temple somewhere crackled out a distorted chant:

*"Har har Mahadev... Kashi ki dharti pe kadam rakho toh paap dhul jaate hain..."*

The rickshaw screeched to a gentle halt in front of a weathered blue gate, its paint peeling in long vertical strips like old skin. Above the door hung a hand-painted sign in fading black letters:

*“Shukla Niwas – Tulsi Ghat, est. 1917”*

Divya stepped down first. She paid the rickshaw wallah with exact change, but touched his feet before handing him the money. A small ritual she'd never skipped.

He gave her a quiet nod.

“Bahut din baad aayi ho, bitiya.”

She didn't answer.

They pushed open the heavy wooden gate together, its hinges groaning like an old spirit being awakened.

Inside, the courtyard waited—still, sunlit, yet expectant.

The moment Divya's feet touched the stone floor, a gust of wind stirred the ash from last night's incense burner. The house welcomed her, and warned her, all at once. A rustle above—a shadow moved behind the jali screen on the first floor.

“Dadi must be awake,” Divya murmured.

Divya entered her old room. Everything was just as she'd left it during college breaks—the walls still painted soft lavender, a few of her high school trophies gathering dust.

She stared into the mirror. Her reflection looked... different. Like it was watching her too.

A creak behind her. Just the window shifting. Or maybe not.

Her phone buzzed. A message from Vanya:

“He was there. He followed us. I know it.”

Divya's fingers hovered over the screen.

She didn't reply.

Inside Shukla Niwas, only two voices filled the silence now—  
Divya and her Dadi, Shakuntala Shukla.

Divya's parents had died in a car accident when she was sixteen, returning from a pilgrimage to Vindhyachal. Her younger brother, Aarav, had succumbed to dengue when he was barely ten. Since then, the old house had felt cavernous. Echoes lingered in the stairwells. Certain doors remained shut—not out of neglect, but memory.

Shakuntala Shukla—once a temple storyteller, now mostly silent after the losses—had been the keeper of rituals, herbs, old secrets, and tales that others in her family and neighbourhood had long forgotten. But she remained a strong figure—draped always in white, with a rosary in hand and a memory that bled into other lives.

Though Dadi and Divya speak little, their bond is **deep and intuitive**—they eat together, sit in silence, observe omens, and mark the moon's movement as though still living in another calendar.

Divya never left her for long. Even when she went to Delhi for her art degree, she would call daily. Her return to Banaras was not just about the dreams or the visions.

It was home keeping.

It was **blood-deep loyalty**.

Divya and her Dadi had always shared a connection that didn't rely on speech.

As a child, Divya had sat at her feet as she ground sandalwood, recited mantras from memory, or told her about spirits who waited under the peepal tree for lost lovers.

Where her parents scolded her for asking "strange questions" or drawing eyes inside bindis, **Dadi had smiled.** Where others dismissed her visions as dreams, **Dadi called them "rememberings."**

Dadi had been the first to recognize the red thread Divya tied around her wrist as something more than just a ritual.

She hadn't asked where it came from.

Only whispered:

*"Some bindings are older than birth."*

Divya entered quietly. Her footsteps made the faintest sound on the stone floor. She passed through the arched doorway and looked toward the kitchen.

Her Dadi stood by the stove, boiling milk in a brass vessel. She didn't turn, but her voice rose over the hiss of the flame.

"You're late. You always walk like you're carrying someone else's sorrow." - Dadi was draped in white sari, with Chandan ka tika on her forehead.

"Maybe I am" - Divya answered.

She set down her backpack and walked over. Dadi finally turned to face her. Her eyes studied Divya like an old map, pausing at her tired face, her wrists still bare of the sacred thread.

"Did the dreams follow you back?"

Divya didn't reply. She only nodded. Her shoulders slumped. Dadi walked over and touched her head gently and said.

"Don't run from what's calling you, Divya. But don't run to it blindly either.

The past... is hungry. It doesn't always want closure. Sometimes it wants revenge. You see too much. Like your mother did. But don't be afraid. We Shukla women were never meant to walk the same line as others.

\*\*\*\*\*

Aditya stood near Tulsi Ghat, cloaked in shadows, watching the evening aarti flames rise into the air.

He didn't belong to this time, but he'd followed the pull. Across cities. Across lifetimes. His mark burned beneath the sleeve of his black kurta. "She remembers. But not enough yet."- Aditya whispered to self. He turned, disappearing into the narrow lanes of Banaras. The red thread was tugging tighter.

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## Chapter-9

# The Investigation

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### *Flashback:-*

The city is abuzz with dread. A third body is found in the ghats, eyes open, mouth gagged with threads soaked in vermillion, and ancient language verses etched across the chest in blood and ash.

The red threads tied around their wrists, but the knots aren't priestly—they're *binding*, ancient, almost tantric in their configuration.

The body floats, half-submerged, in holy water made unholy by blood. A faint murmur of Sanskrit hymns floats from distant temples as dawn begins to glimmer in the mist. The surreal blend of sacred chants and police sirens builds a sonic dissonance—something divine, something violated.

### *Crime Scene- Moments Later*

A half-circle of bystanders, some with folded hands, others murmuring superstition, crowd near the water. Uniformed Police Officers push them back with measured force.

A thirty year old Sub Inspector squats beside the body. His face twitches—not from fear, but confusion. He took out his mobile and dialled the call to Crime Branch. Tell them it's... it's like the last two, but worse.

(looks up) And seal off the entire ghat. No priests. No bathers. No media.

Yes, sir!- junior constable answered.

Sub Inspector gestures, and two constables begin tying yellow tape between stone railings—a modern warning across ancient steps.

Minutes later flashing red and blue lights sweep the stone slabs as a Crime Branch SUV halts. Doors slam. Out steps: Forensics Officer, forensics technician and a photographer with camera hanging on his neck begins taking macro shots of the body. The corpse is slowly retrieved from the water and laid on a tarpaulin sheet atop the platform. The threads are soaked, sticky, and shimmer like coagulated vermillion.

The body's mouth was gagged with the red thread knotted tightly, lips cracked, vermillion bleeding into pale skin. On his chest ancient language carved—not scribbled, but carefully inscribed. Words smeared with ash, as if from a ritual fire. The red thread is knotted in tantra-like symmetry, not priestly spirals. Precise. Measured. Almost... reverent.

Forensic technician to Forensic officer: Sir... these knots. It's not rope. It's cotton. Dyed. Smeared in... may be kumkum and what looks like... turmeric?

"Vermillion base, definitely. And... yes, ash. Could be from burnt wood or... human remains." - Officer said.

"Look at his eyes. Open. Not glazed. Like he was awake. Watching." - Photographer whispered with gutkha in his mouth.

Officer gestures for swabs.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rohit Mishra's police jeep arrives, moving slowly through the narrow lanes. He steps out, calm amidst chaos. His eyes don't look at the corpse first—he looks at the threads.

He walks past the junior officers straight to the body, ignoring their salutes.

"Sir. Third body. Same modus operandi, the red thread, ancient language on the chest. But this one's... cleaner. Ritualistic." - Sub Inspector informed quickly to Rohit after saluting at him.

"No.(pauses) This one's closer to the source."

"He crouches. His gloved fingers trace the Sanskrit letters carved in blood. He doesn't wince. Instead, he leans closer and reads aloud softly:

*"Yasya smaranam matram, vimukti-karanam bhavet.* (The mere remembrance of Her brings liberation.)" - Rohit murmured in Sanskrit

A silence falls.

"Is it a prayer"?- Sub Inspector asked

“It’s a warning. And an invitation.” – Rohit said without looking up.

He stands, eyes narrowing toward the temple silhouette in the distance.

\*\*\*\*\*

As the sky breaks into orange, the crime scene fades into murmurs of the city. But something lingers.

One of the constables, cleaning blood from the stairs, turns over a discarded prayer bead mala near the riverbank—its red thread frayed.

He pockets it.

Far above, on a terrace overlooking the ghat, a shadowed figure draped in a dupatta watches the entire scene.

A flicker of vermillion on her wrist. The Crime Branch is baffled but Rohit isn't.

### ***Crime Branch Conference Room – Same day late night***

A dim light flickers above the long table cluttered with case files, photographs, and the ominous red-threaded board. Rohit stands at the head of the room, his sleeves rolled up, eyes sharp with obsession. A dozen officers sit around, weary but attentive.

Rohit grips the red string tightly, his knuckles pale.

“*Yugantar bandhan... samaapt hone ka samay aaya hai.*” - Rohit whispered in a low tone.

(The cyclical bond... time has come for its completion.)

He straightens, facing his superior — **ACP**, a grizzled officer with decades in service.

“Rohit, tum khud se baatein kar rahe ho ya humein samjha rahe ho?”

**Rohit** *ignores the jab, points at the photos of the victims bound with red thread*

“Sir, yeh koi ordinary serial killer nahi hai. Symbols dekhiye — yantras, blood marks jo kisi prachin rituals se milte hai. Ye case... it’s beyond conventional profiling.”

“Killer hai, paagal hai. Bas. Mythology ka lecture kyun chahiye? Murder investigation mein taantrik ko bulayenge kya?”- A Inspector said.

“Not a Tantrik. A scholar.” Rohit *snaps back, voice tight with conviction.*

*He places a file on the table, sliding it toward ACP.* Vanya Sharma. Master’s dissertation on Vedic cosmology and feminine archetypes. She’s published papers connecting ritual practices with gendered violence.

“A civilian? Tum chahte ho hum ek outsider ko case details dein? Media mein leak ho gaya toh?”- **ACP** *flips through the file skeptically.*

“Sir, agar hum symbolism ko samajh nahi paye, hum agle victim ko bacha nahi paayenge. Killer ek *narrative* follow kar raha hai. Uska har murder ek mythological paheli hai. Agar humne clues ko decode kar liya — hum usse rok sakte hain.”

“Aur tum keh rahe ho ek Master’s student humse zyada samajhti hai?”- ACP grilled Rohit.

“Woh bas student nahi hai, Sir. Vanya Sharma ke kaam ko international recognition mila hai. Maine uski dissertation padhi

hai — usne Devi archetypes aur karmic cycles ke upar jo analysis kiya hai... *sirf woh hi* yeh threads samajh sakti hai.”- Rohit answered firmly but forcefully.

ACP leans back on his large revolving chair, studies Rohit “Tum itne sure kyun ho?”

“Because I’ve seen these patterns before... in old manuscripts. She cross-referenced the same myths. Agar koi is puzzle ko samajh sakta hai, toh woh hai.”- Rohit hesitates for a beat, then covers. There was a tense silence in the room, only the sound of the fan was echoing.

“Theek hai. Ek consultant. Lekin zimmedaari tumhari hogi, Rohit. Agar kuch gadbad hui... toh tum jawab doge.”- ACP reverted in a gruffly manner.

Rohit’s eyes flicker with both relief and something darker — a personal satisfaction.

“That’s all I need, sir.”- **Rohit said** softly, almost to himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Police Station, Rohit's cabin – Next day afternoon**

The cabin is half-lit by the afternoon sun slanting through grilled windows. Papers, files, and the red-threaded photos cover Rohit’s desk, but it’s organized with almost ritual precision.

**Vanya** enters, adjusting the strap of her sling bag, her steps hesitant. She glances around at the stark official space — not where she imagined her academic work would lead her.

“I’m glad you came. Sit, please.”- Rohit said rising instantly with a smile on his face, looking at Vanya with a rare softness. His tone

was warmer than usual. Rohit gestured Vanya to sit on the chair lying in front of him and he himself also sat on his chair.

“You sounded... urgent on the phone. Is everything all right?”- Vanya asked Rohit after settling down on the chair.

Rohit leans forward, lowering his voice as though sharing a secret.

“You’ve always had a keen eye for stories buried in symbols, Vanya. The moment I saw the first red thread... I thought of you.” pauses, then adds carefully - “I even saw the victim’s face in your sketchbook.”

“That’s a strange thing to say, Inspector. My sketches are just... imagination.”- Vanya replied with half smile and half nervousness.

“Or intuition. Sometimes those are the same.”- **Rohit locked his eyes onto hers intensely.**

He lays out the **photographs** across the desk — shrine-like crime scenes where bodies are bound with crimson thread, blood smears echoing yantras. But before Vanya can recoil, Rohit gently slides his **leather notebook** over the most gruesome wounds, curating what she sees.

“Look Vanya!!!! I don’t want to overwhelm you. Just enough for you to understand the... pattern.”

Vanya leans forward, curiosity tugging stronger than her discomfort. She carefully picks up one photograph- a blood-scrawled verse on a religious kind of stone.

**Vanya**

(reading aloud, softly)

“Punarjanma shraap mukti.”

(looks up at Rohit)

Rebirth is the curse... liberation is death.

Rohit doesn't look at the verse. He watches *her*, his gaze steady, almost studying the shift in her breathing. "Tell me what it means to you. Not as police evidence... but as someone who's studied the myths."- Rohit said in a low and deliberate voice.

"It's a distortion. In most Vedic cycles, rebirth is the path *toward* liberation, not the curse. Whoever wrote this... they're rewriting dharma into something fatal. A personal vendetta cloaked as cosmic law."-

Her words hang heavy. Rohit's jaw tightens, his eyes glint — half pride, half something unspoken.

"Exactly why I needed you. My team sees only blood and rope. You see... the story."

"But Rohit, I'm not an investigator. I don't belong here."- Vanya tried to pull herself back slightly.

"You belong wherever the truth hides. And right now, it hides in these symbols. Help me decode them. Just this once."

Vanya hesitates, eyes flicking again to the verse, then to Rohit's unwavering stare. There's weight in his request, more than duty — though she can't name it.

"Alright. I'll try."- Vanya exhaled slowly.

Rohit smiles, not triumphant, but with a quiet satisfaction — as if this was always destined.

“That’s all I wanted to hear.” His gaze doesn’t waver — not from the case, but from *her*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Rohit begins taking Vanya to "key sites" linked to the murders—abandoned shrines, riverbanks near unmarked graves, temples without idols, where symbols from her dreams begin reappearing.

*The air is thick with the smell of damp stone and dried camphor. In the sanctum, a shattered idol. Sanskrit verses scorched onto the floor.*

"Why do I feel like I’ve been here before?"- Vanya (shivering slightly)

Rohit (watching her, voice low):

"Some places remember us... more than we remember them."  
*(He steps closer, offering her his coat. She doesn’t notice how long he holds onto her hand after she takes it.)*

Though grateful for his guidance—especially after her father's strange disappearance and her mother Radha’s descent into delusions and fear—Vanya can’t name the discomfort she feels around Rohit.

She assumes it's her own paranoia. After all, he's always been so helpful—dropping her to the hospital when Radha had seizures, fixing the water filter without being asked, bringing books on mythology “by coincidence.”

But there are moments that linger too long:

The way his eyes don’t blink when she talks about her dreams,  
The fact that he knows her favourite tea—even though she never

told him, A notebook he left open, with a sketch of her... in bridal attire, bound by thread.

One late night a gust knocks open the window. She finds a red thread tied loosely on the grill. She thinks it's her imagination. Rohit smiles in his own room next door, lighting a diya before a mirror stained with her name.

*No one suspects it's personal. But he's been preparing this moment.*

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## Chapter-10

# Where Shadow Remembers

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*“Some shadows are not cast by light... but by memory.”*

The sun bleeds its last light over the crumbling rooftops of Banaras. The **lanes near Tulsi Ghat** are veiled in a soft saffron mist. The air is rich with camphor smoke, marigold rot, and river musk.

**Inspector Rohit Mishra**, plain clothed but unmistakable in his quiet authority, walks slowly through the labyrinth of lanes. He isn't on duty. But his eyes scan sharply—habit, or something else?

A glimpse of familiar red fabric—**Vanya's dupatta**. His gaze snaps to attention.

She moves ahead, unaware. Her pace quickens.

Footsteps echo behind her. Soft. Measured. Consistent.

She stops suddenly.

The footsteps stop.

She turns. The lane is empty.

But the silence is too loud.

Rohit stiffens, instinct flaring. His hand brushes the inside of his coat—where his service pistol usually rests. But he holds still. Observing.

She stops. Looks back. Empty lane.

**Then—**

"Aditya..." - Vanya whispers

Rohit's brow tightens.

She begins walking again, turning down a quiet ghat path slick with algae and river spray.

Rohit follows silently—keeping to the shadows, ears sharpened.

**Vanya pauses. She feels him. Not Rohit. The other presence. The one she speaks to in dreams.**

"Are you following me... or haunting me?"

From behind the carved edge of a ruined wall, **Rohit sees him:**

**Aditya**—in black, cloaked in shadows, a man too familiar for comfort.

Rohit's jaw tightens. His pulse shifts—**jealousy wrapped in dread.**

Vanya turns to face Aditya. They're close. Closer than strangers should be. Closer than she's ever stood with him.

"This isn't fate, Aditya. It's madness."

"Maybe. But you're the only madness I ever believed in." – Aditya said gently.

Rohit steps back instinctively, shielding himself behind a crumbling temple arch. **His breath hitches** as he listens. Every word like a blade.

*"You leave sketches in my studio. You whisper things only dreams should know. What do you want from me?"*

*"I want you to remember. The ache. The echo. The name you never say aloud in this life." – Aditya said in a low and almost trembling voice.*

**Rohit's hands clench into fists.** There's a history here—something deeper than he's ever imagined. Something ancient.

*Vanya and Aditya have walked toward the **overgrown shrine near the banks**. Rohit follows silently, **never revealing himself**, caught in the ritual of eavesdropping on a past that doesn't belong to him—but devours him.*

*"Why me? Why not forget like the rest of us?"- Vanya sulked.*

*"You weren't a ghost to me. You were fire. And I died in it. You think this thread is romantic? No—it's a noose."- Aditya said in a broken tone.*

*He lifts his wrist. Rohit sees it too. **The faint glow of red.** "Every lifetime I find you. Every lifetime I lose you. But not this time. Not while I still bleed memory."*

*Rohit leans against the wall, chest heaving. A red thread? Rebirth? Memory bleeding across lifetimes?*

*This isn't just obsession. It's something older. And **he is outside it.***

*Vanya and Aditya stand in silence, moonlight glinting off the Ganga.*

*"If I remember everything... and I still walk away—will you finally let me go?"- Vanya gently said.*

*"Only if you look into my eyes and tell me you feel nothing."- Aditya answered back softly.*

*Rohit watches her but **She can't**.*

*A beat. Her lips part. **No words**.*

*The wind coils around them like a lover's breath. Between their wrists, **a red shimmer glows—alive and pulsing**.*

***Rohit sees it. The thread.** His world shatters silently.*

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***Rohit's room – Later that night***

He sits on the edge of his bed. Shirt soaked. Eyes red. **A red thread burns on his own wrist.** Not visible to others. But he sees it.

"She was never meant for me... was she?"- Rohit said to himself.

He opens the drawer beside him—inside, scattered pages from ancient texts, **tantric diagrams**, and a photograph of Vanya sleeping.

He presses his fingers to the paper. Whispering:

"You were fire, Aditya. But I... I am ash."

"In this life, I will not lose her.

In this life, I will not be the watcher...I will not be the watcher.

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## Chapter-11

# Fate finds its way

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Setting: Aditya's Sanctuary in Banaras

Location: *Chauraha between Shivala Ghat and Bhootnath Lane, Banaras*

Tucked away behind an old, crumbling haveli near the banks of the Ganga is "Vridha Vriksha Nivas"—an ancient guesthouse known to few and spoken of in hushed tones. Time doesn't flow here, it gathers, like dust on untouched scriptures. The walls are moss-covered, with fading murals of tantric deities and red thread patterns hidden under peels of lime wash.

Aditya rents the topmost room—Room 7, once a meditation space used by a reclusive sadhu, now converted into a minimal shelter. The window opens to the Ganga, directly facing the cremation fires of Harishchandra Ghat. Each night, the sky glows orange with burning light, and Aditya sketches the play of shadows on the water.

Vanya visits Room 7 for the first time during a power outage. The candles flicker. The room smells of oud and ash. On the walls: sketches of her from different eras—as a queen, a dancer, a warrior. Some wearing red thread. Some with a blade at her throat. All in love. All doomed.

*"Is this me? Or someone you imagined?"*- Vanya (touching one)  
*"Does it matter, if I remember the pain the same way?"*

That night, she stays for chai. Doesn't leave until the muezzin's first call.

The power cuts out again. The fan slows. The only light is from a brass oil lamp flickering wildly as thunder growls outside.

Vanya stands by the open window, her wet dupatta clinging to her skin. The monsoon rain lashes against the sill. Aditya approaches slowly, a shawl in hand.

*"You'll catch a fever again."*

She doesn't move. He drapes the shawl over her shoulders, but his fingers brush the bare skin of her nape—a small scar sits there, shaped like a crescent moon.

His breath stills.

*"You had this in the last life too... right before they hung you from the neem."* - Aditya (whispers)

Vanya turns, her eyes wide with something between terror and longing.

*"How do you know that?"*

*"Because I saw it. I failed to save you."* - Aditya said by touching her wrist, where the red thread is tied.

She lets his hand linger. A beat of silence. Then she places her forehead against his chest—eyes closed, breath shaking.

They stay like that. Nothing more. Yet everything shifts.

*After some time Aditya and Vanya separated from each other, Aditya said, Vanya, I will bring something to eat for you, you must be hungry, right? Vanya nodded in agreement, Aditya went into the kitchen and Vanya remained alone in the room. Then she saw the white papers lying on the table, she went near and picked up the papers, pencil and eraser were also nearby, Vanya pulled the chair lying near the table and sat there and started sketching something. Her fingers move almost without her. On the page appears Aditya, not as he is now—but as he was in the past life: a soldier-guard in tunics, eyes full of unspeakable devotion and courage.*

*She stares at the drawing. Her breath shallows. She doesn't remember drawing it.*

*A beat. She touches her lips—like they remember something her mind doesn't yet.*

After some time Aditya returns back from the kitchen with a breakfast tray in his hand. Vanya was busy in sketching, Aditya was looking at Vanya's drawing, holding the breakfast tray. Vanya looked up to find Aditya standing next to her, looking at his sketches in which Vanya had depicted him as a guard.

*"I don't know what this is... but I can't run from it anymore."- Vanya said in a very low tone.*

*"It's not madness, Vanya. It's remembering."*

She stood up and walks closer. Sees a sketch pinned on the wall: Her, smiling. Hair braided in jasmine. Dressed like a queen from centuries ago.

*"You've loved me across lifetimes."*

*"And I will love you in every one that follows. Even if you never remember me again."* Aditya said without flinching.

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A brass tray or thali glistens with the remnants of a simple breakfast—aloo paranthas, makkhan and steaming cups of chai. Vanya sits cross-legged across from Aditya, the morning sunlight filtering through the jaali windows, painting her face in dappled patterns.

They don't speak much. The clink of spoons, the rustle of leaves outside, and the occasional chirp of sparrows fill the silence. But their glances betray something deeper—an ease, a belonging.

Vanya finishes her chai, sets the cup down gently.

"It's too quiet to stay inside." - Vanya said hesitantly.

Aditya looks at her for a beat—then simply nods.

"Come."

Aditya took her to the river side. They walk side by side, the earth damp beneath their steps, temple bells faint in the distance. The river glimmers ahead like a silver ribbon under the sun.

There are no words. Just silence that understands.

The sound of water grows louder as they approach the steps of the ancient temple by the river. Faded murals of deities look down

from the stone walls, their colours softened by centuries of wind and rain.

Vanya inhales deeply, as if the air itself feels familiar.

Aditya pauses, his eyes catching a fallen lotus drifting near the edge. He wades slightly into the water, retrieves it, and without ceremony, tucks it gently behind her ear.

Vanya freezes, then blushes—not because she’s embarrassed, but because her body reacts before her mind does. Like it remembers this gesture, across time.

“It’s strange... how natural this feels.”- Vanya whispered to herself.

Aditya studies her, his voice low, steady.

“Love doesn’t always start.

(slight pause, with meaning)

Sometimes, it just continues.”

A breeze stirs the river. A red thread tied around the temple bell flutters—subtle, but watching.

Vanya looks at him, and for the first time, doesn’t try to explain the pull she feels.

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### *Vanya’s House- Morning*

The front door creaks open. Vanya steps inside with Aditya close behind her. Her hair is still a little wind-swept from their morning walk by the river.

From the kitchen comes the clink of cups and the aroma of chai. Unexpectedly, **Divya** emerges, balancing a steel tray with

steaming cups. She wasn't supposed to be here. Vanya hadn't called, and her phone had been unreachable all night.

The tray wobbles in Divya's hands when she sees Aditya.

"What's he doing here?"- Divya startled in a tensed manner.

Vanya squares her shoulders.

"He's part of my life now, Divya."- Vanya answered back Devika firmly.

Divya sets the tray down with a sharp clatter, her eyes cold.

"You don't understand. He's dangerous. He remembers too much."- Divya warned Vanya.

Aditya doesn't flinch. His voice is calm, almost haunting.

"Hello again, Divya." The neem still remembers, doesn't it?

"Stay away from her."- Divya said in a trembling manner.

Vanya steps forward, with a fire in her tone.

"No more secrets, Divya. Not from me."

**At that moment, Radha Sharma** enters from the inner courtyard. Draped in a faded cotton saree, she looks both relieved and angry.

"Vanya! Where were you since last night? Do you know how many times I called? Your phone kept saying out of reach."- Radha Sharma said with a voice edged with worry.

Vanya stiffens, caught between her mother's concern and the charged atmosphere in the room.

I... stayed with a friend. I didn't mean to worry you.- Vanya said softly, avoiding her mother's eyes.

Radha's gaze shifts from her daughter to Aditya, then back.

"And who is this?" - Radha asked Vanya in a flat and suspicious tone.

The silence hangs heavy. Divya quickly cuts in, her tone sharp-  
"A stranger who shouldn't be here."

Aditya meets Radha's eyes with calm respect, his voice measured.

"Not a stranger, Ma'am. Just someone... tied to your daughter's path." - Aditya said gently.

Radha frowns, uneasy with the cryptic answer. She looks at Vanya expectantly, waiting for clarity.

I'll explain, Ma. But please... trust me. - Vanya said in a convincing tone by placing her hand over her mother's shoulder.

Radha studies her daughter for a long moment, torn between maternal protectiveness and the quiet determination in Vanya's eyes. Finally, she exhales heavily, setting her worry aside—though suspicion lingers.

"Just don't forget—you owe me the truth." - Radha Devi said with a bit rudeness in her voice.

She exits slowly, glancing back at Aditya once more, as though she feels an unfamiliar weight in his presence.

The room is left with three figures again:

- Vanya, protective of her choice.
- Divya, bristling with warnings and secrets.
- Aditya, calm yet carrying the shadow of a memory that won't die.

A silence lingers, sharper now after Radha's exit—domestic concern giving way again to the storm beneath.

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The front door opens abruptly. **Rohit** steps in, still in yesterday's clothes, hair disheveled, eyes heavy from a sleepless night. He looks tense, searching—until his gaze lands on **Vanya** ... standing beside **Aditya**

For a heartbeat, Rohit freezes. His body stiffens as his eyes lock on Aditya.

**Rohit** became tensed and uneasy- "We've met before."- Rohit said in a low tone.

"Yes... we have. But not in this life."- Aditya said smiling faintly.

Vanya made a nervous laugh she tried to steady the air. Rohit... this is Aditya. He's... someone I've known for a long time.

The silence is taut. Rohit studies Aditya, his eyes flickering—**not just suspicion**, but something older, buried deep. A memory stirring. A warning.

Before either can speak further—

Radha enters the room again and go straight to Rohit with concern.

"Rohit beta, tum toh kal shaam bhi aaye the na... Vanya ko dhoondhne? Maine tabhi bataya tha—raat bhar ghar par hi nahi thi woh."-

Rohit stiffens. His eyes snap to Vanya - "Sach hai, Vanya? Tum... kal raat ghar par nahi thi?"

“Main... main bahar hi thi. Ek urgent kaam tha. Phone reachable nahi tha...” - Vanya stammered uneasily.

She avoids both men’s eyes, clutching her dupatta.

“Aur tumhari "kaam" ke saath Aditya tha?” - Devika probed quietly.

Vanya flinches. Rohit’s eyes cut to Aditya like knives.

Rohit’s jaw tightens. His gaze shifts back to Aditya, scanning him like a predator sizing up a rival.

“Aur tum? Raat bhar Vanya ke saath the?”

Aditya sips from his chai calmly, unbothered.

“Let’s just say... we walked the night together. Some journeys can’t wait till morning.” - Aditya answered in a soft and low tone.

The words hang in the air. Rohit’s fists clench at his sides. Something deep inside him stirs—the **Rajguru’s obsession, flickering like a flame inside a cave.**

Radha, oblivious to the storm brewing, cheerfully places parathas on the table.

“Bas bas, chalo jo hua so hua, itni baat mat kijiye. Subah-subah mehmaan aaye hain, khana khao sab.”

But Vanya feels it—the room is suffocating, the air heavy. The **past and present colliding** in front of her eyes.

Rohit and Divya’s stare remains locked on Aditya.

Aditya’s calm smile doesn’t waver.

And Vanya stands between them, heart pounding, realizing this morning has changed everything.

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After having breakfast, Rohit, Aditya left to their respective houses, only Vanya and Divya remained in Vanya's house.

"I used to think love had a beginning. A first glance, a first touch. But what if love is circular? What if we've been falling forever, just pausing between lives? I didn't fall in love with Aditya again. I just remembered."\*- Vanya said to Divya.

*"You're falling for him again. Just like before. And you're dragging all of us into the past."*

*"The past isn't the past, Divya. Not when it lives in our bones."- Vanya answered coldly.*

"I remembered what you did, Divya.

Divya is stunned. Her lips tremble.

"Tell me the truth. Or I'll remember it without you."- Vanya said quietly.

"You ran. You and Aditya ran and left me behind."- Divya **laughs bitterly.**

"And when they dragged me to the temple courtyard, I looked for your face in the crowd. But you weren't there."

*A flash of lightning. Vanya steps forward, guilt creeping in now, like a shadow stretching.*

"I didn't know..."

"Didn't you? You and Aditya were too wrapped in your red thread, in your *fated love*. And I—I was just the girl who held your secrets. Who held the torch while you made promises under moonlight."

*She approaches Vanya now, face tear-streaked but fierce.*

“The neem tree still remembers. Its roots are soaked with my blood.” - **Divya** *laughs bitterly-*

“You talk of fate like it’s holy. But what if your fate destroys everything around it? What if *you two* are the curse?”

*A heavy silence falls. Vanya finally speaks, almost a whisper-*  
“Then why are we here again?”

*Devika’s breath hitches.*

“To remember. So this time, when the thread tightens... I can cut it before it burns me again.”

*Vanya stares at her. Something inside her shifts.*

“Then help me remember, Divya. Help me see the truth, even if it shatters everything.”

The truth? You want the truth? - **Divya** *scoffs softly.*

*She moves to the sofa on which her backpack was lying, she took out her sketchbook and pulls out a faded **black-and-white sketch** — a drawing of **two girls under a neem tree**, one hanging in the background. Two are smiling. One is forgotten.*

“We were all just girls. But only *you* got to be remembered as the one who loved. I was the one who died alone.”

*She places the sketch gently on the table. Vanya stares at it, hollow-eyed.*

So no, Vanya. I didn’t betray you. ***You betrayed me.- said Divya.***

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## Chapter-12

# Vasantgarh: A kingdom of Silence and Shadows

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*“Before Banaras became the city of light, it was Vasantgarh — a city of shadows, secrets, and sacrifice.”*

Nestled between the sun-scorched ravines and sacred rivers of northern India, long before the clang of rickshaws and the chant of modern morning aartis, there stood the ancient and the forgotten kingdom of **Vasantgarh** hidden within the folds of what we now call Banaras. Vasantgarh, a land where myths bled into history and justice was measured not by law, but by lineage and legacy.

The kingdom was once celebrated for its saffron fields, honeyed neem groves, and temples carved from black stone, their walls inscribed with warnings older than the gods. But Vasantgarh bore a darker heartbeat beneath its gold-plated grandeur.

Perched along the same sacred banks of the Ganga, Vasantgarh was no less holy, but far more haunted. The city pulsed with a different rhythm—one of *rituals, forbidden love, and red threads binding souls through lifetimes.*

Maharaja Raghavendra Chauhan aka Maharaj Raghav, known to the world as “*the lion of Vasantgarh*”, ruled Vasantgarh with military prowess and chilling control. His name evoked both awe and fear. Under his reign, Vasantgarh saw no invasions, no famine—but also no mercy. Raghav was born a warrior and bred to uphold the **Blood Oath of the House of Chauhan**: *Legacy above love. Power above pardon.*

Maharaj Raghav was in late 40s with height 6 feet, imposing and upright, broad-shouldered, his complexion was dusky gold due to sun-warmed from battlefields and years under royal sunshades

**He possessed** a piercing black, and a sharp gaze that could silence courtiers, yet when alone, often rimmed with fatigue — as if carrying the burden of ancestral karma. His hairs were long, thick, and dark, streaked with early silver near the temples, always oiled and tied beneath a jewel-encrusted turban. His attire was of a rich, embroidered angarkhas of deep maroon, emerald, or ivory, heavy rajputana jewels — especially a tiger-eye ring and a pendant of Lord Shiva’s trident, symbol of his absolute rule. His voice was deep and commanding, with a measured cadence that carried both wisdom and warning. Raghav loved only two things: his crown, and the future it protected.

Raghav ruled not only with strength but with silence. He believed restraint was power — speaking only when words could alter fates. Every decision, from marriages to alliances, was made with the future of Vasantgarh in mind. He saw himself not as a man, but

as the embodiment of the throne's legacy. To protect the kingdom's purity and order, he would not hesitate to eliminate threats — even if those threats were his own blood. His most loyal men knew: *his kindness ended at the kingdom's borders.*

Maharaj Raghav's consort, **Maharani Radha Devi**, was in early 40s at the peak of her reign, her **height** was 5'6", statuesque and graceful, she was slender but commanding, her movements were like a trained dancer, yet presence like a storm beneath still waters. Her complexion was pale wheat, with a delicate glow, her skin often smelled faintly of sandalwood and crushed roses. In dark kohl-lined, almond-shaped and always watchful eyes she used to hide knowledge she could never voice. Her hairs were thick, jet black, usually braided and coiled beneath a silk dupatta. **She used to wear** Silk sarees in jewel tones — sapphire, wine, and jade — always layered with temple jewellery and antique kamarbandhs. Her neckline often bore a pendant of a crescent moon, symbolic of *Devi* energy.

**Her voice** was low, melodious, like veena strings which she rarely raised — but when it was, it carried the weight of thunder. She came from a southern priestly lineage, trained in the esoteric Vedas and dance forms meant to channel divinity. She was known to fast on lunar eclipses, conduct secret rituals under the neem tree, and surround herself with manuscripts instead of courtiers. But her softness was a performance. She bore Raghav a single child—**Amaya**—and vowed to protect her lineage from any corruption of love, rebellion, or fate. She believed herself the reincarnation of Goddess **Kali**—protector and destroyer of feminine dharma. She was the mind behind many of Raghavendra's treaties and ceremonial protocols. She read people like books — her ladies-in-waiting said she could “hear lies even before they were spoken.”

Yet she was also haunted by dreams, omens, and visions she never spoke of aloud.

While she loved her husband, she knew the throne always came first.

Folk songs of Banaras still sing of *the queen who danced to ward off curses*, who once silenced enemy kings with her words alone — but couldn't silence her daughter's heart.

The royal palace stood where Assi Ghat now breathes, overlooking the river's crescent bend. It was made of red sandstone and charred teakwood, built high with domes that mirrored the full moon. The palace had secret passages—one led to the underground Yajna-kund, where blood offerings were once made not just to gods, but to *silence truths*. The Neem Tree and the Execution Grounds Beneath a lone neem tree near what is today Tulsi Ghat, stood the execution grounds. It was here in Vasantgarh that “The Thread of Fate” legend first surfaced not as a tale of love, but of *punishment*—for those who dared to love against the ordained dharma.

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“Amaya” was Maharaj Raghavendra and Maharani Radha Devi's 19 year old daughter in blood, but not in spirit. She was born during an eclipse, under thunder, with a red mark across her chest like a thread burned into the skin. The palace priests whispered that she bore the mark of *punarjanma*—of those cursed to live and die again until their karma was complete.

While Raghav trained her in swordsmanship and Radha Devi in court rituals, Amaya grew increasingly distant from both. She was an artist. A dreamer. She often sneaked out at dawn to sketch the

commoners, the goats in the gully, the neem tree's shadows. Her eyes reflected lives she never lived.

Her face, ethereal and arresting, not conventionally perfect, but deeply captivating. A high forehead and sharp cheekbones gave her a regal, intelligent look. Her eyes—almond-shaped and wide—held a tragic depth, as if they had seen too many fates unfold before their time. Her eyes had a unique shade of **hazel-brown** with amber flecks, like dusk caught in a chalice. Often described by poets as “eyes that remembered too much.”

Amaya's skin wasn't merely beautiful—it was *luminescent*. It seemed kissed by something eternal, as if light lived beneath it, not on it. When she stepped into a sunbeam, she did not glow because of the light—**the light seemed to borrow its glow from her.**

It had the warmth of sandalwood and the softness of rose petals after rain. In the dim halls of Vasantgarh's palace, she was often mistaken for a sculpture—until she moved, and the radiance followed like a silent companion. To the priests, her skin was proof that she was “*touched by the Devi*”. To the women in the court, it was a dangerous beauty—powerful, unrepeatable, the kind of glow that could disrupt destinies. Her skin bore a faint, natural fragrance of sandalwood and jasmine—owing to the traditional oils used in her royal bathing rituals. Her hairs were long, **raven-black**, reaching the lower back. Often adorned with fresh mogra or red threads braided into secret knots during festivals.

She was having a full lower lip, but with an upper lip that was slightly arched, giving her a subtle, questioning expression—like someone constantly weighing the world's truth against its lies.

Her voice was soft but commanding, like a river flowing at midnight. When she recited verses or chants, even the birds quieted.

Amaya was often described as a girl who *felt the wind before it changed direction*. She sensed betrayal before it came, love before it was confessed. She had a healer's heart but a strategist's mind. She could console a dying soldier and moments later question the morality of a king.

Though born into a throne, she found politics suffocating. Her spirit belonged to the forests, libraries, and temples, not the marble halls of manipulation. Amaya had vivid dreams from a young age. She often saw things before they happened, including her own death. Her connection to the red thread and the sacred feminine energy made her both revered and feared in court. She didn't shout. She defied with her silence, her gaze, her refusal to comply. Her stillness carried more rebellion than a thousand swords.

Amaya loved her parents deeply. She admired her father's voice during court sessions—how it carried across stone halls like thunder wrapped in silk. She admired her mother's eyes—calm, calculating, never weeping even in grief.

To Amaya, her father was first a **god**, then a **king**, and finally—just a **man afraid of losing her**.

He doted on her in her early years—lifting her onto his warhorse, calling her *“Rajya ki shakti”* (the strength of the kingdom).

But when the prophecies began—whispers of her dreams, her karmic thread, her rebellion—he began to fear her power more than the kingdom's enemies.

He loved her deeply. But his love became **possessive**, filtered through politics and paranoia. He wanted to *protect her from destiny*, not realizing **he was part of the fate she feared most**.

**With Maharani Radha Devi**, he was respectful and intellectually bonded. Their marriage was forged through strategic alliance, but a silent admiration grew between them over time. However, they were *co-rulers*, not romantic lovers in the traditional sense. Their unity was built on shared control—not surrender.

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Maharani Radha Devi adored Amaya—but **on her own terms**. She saw in her daughter both her greatest creation and her greatest threat. Maharani Radha Devi was warned by royal astrologers and tantric priests that **Amaya's fate was entwined with fire and rebellion**—that she would not be a ruler in Maharani's image, but in opposition to it. That she would love someone "forbidden" and that love would **overturn the dharma of the land**.

To Maharani—who had spent her life safeguarding the sanctity, legacy, and divine order of Vasantgarh—this was not a daughter. This was a living threat to order.

She often bathed Amaya herself in the sacred river, tied red threads on her ankles as a child, and told her tales of Durga and Sita before sleep. She would whisper, *"You are not born of me but out of the flame."*

She tried to mould her daughter into a **queen**, not a prophet. Tried to tether her to rituals, duties, alliances. But Amaya slipped through her grasp like smoke from an incense stick—always sacred, never still.

From a distance, they seemed divine—like idols carved from destiny itself. Regal, elegant, inseparable. But the closer one got to the heart of their palace, the more one sensed the *unsaid*, the *unsettled*, and the *unraveling*. This was not a family bound only by blood. They were bound by prophecy. And fate, as always, asks for sacrifice.

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The golden sun spills across the palace stone. Farmers, potters, weavers, and children have gathered inside the a sprawling palace courtyard in the morning through the palace gates. Silken banners of deep crimson hang from towering pillars. Carved lions guard the entrance. The scent of sandalwood and rose water lingers in the air. Nobles, ministers, priests, merchants, and villagers from across Vasantgarh have gathered under the courtyard. Courtiers in muted tones stand to the side. A heavy silence sits in the air, broken only by the soft rustle of feet on polished stone.

At the far end, on a raised **gaddi** (throne) carved from teak and inlaid with lapis and ivory, sits **Maharaja Raghvendra Chauhan**, cloaked in royal indigo. His face is stern, but his eyes flicker with fatigue. Beside him, in elegant poise, is **Maharani Radha Devi**, adorned in pearls and white silk, her gaze observant and unreadable.

Princess Amaya (19) steps out from the marble archway.

She isn't veiled.

She isn't flanked by guards.

She walks barefoot on the sun-warmed stone, her anklets a quiet song.

Her dupatta is simple, saffron cotton. Her forehead carries only a dot of white ash, a nod to the temple rituals she often joins with the people. Close behind her walks **Devika (20)**—her handmaid, dressed in muted indigo, carrying a small cloth satchel and a silver water vessel. But Devika isn't ordinary. Her sharp eyes scan the crowd like a hawk. There's affection, but tension too. She carries something unspoken—*like she's protecting Amaya from more than just the sun.*

The crowd parts gently.

A **child with a cracked clay bird** stands frozen, staring at her. She kneels beside him.

“What's your name, chhote”? – Amaya asked softly  
“Veer... My bird broke. It doesn't sing anymore.”

Amaya smiles and takes the toy. In one fluid motion, she ties the wings together with the red thread from her wrist. Then shakes it gently. It *chirps* again. The boy's eyes widen.

“There. Even broken wings remember how to sing.”

The crowd laughs gently. An old potter folds his hands in gratitude and murmured “She's no princess... She's Shakti in gold.”

**Princess Amaya** sat on a smaller throne.

“Maharaj... hum Vasantgarh ke kisaan hain. Do saal se baarish nahi hui. Zameen pathar ban gayi hai. Kar chukana namumkin hai. Raham karein...”- A poor villager is brought forward by two palace guards. He falls to his knees and folded his both the hands and said in a trembling voice.

*“Rajya niyam se chalta hai, daya se nahi. Kar maaf hua toh rajya ka dhan kaise badhega?”* - Maharaja Raghvendra replied in a flat but controlled tone.

A heavy silence follows. The villager bows lower, his tears were staining the marble.

Suddenly, **Princess Amaya** speaks. Her voice rings across the courtyard—steady and clear.

*Maharaj, agar praja bhookhi ho... toh rajya dhan ka kya karega? Sona rajya mein chhupa rahe aur log mitti khayein?*

The court gasps. Maharani slightly narrowed her eyes.

*“Rajkumari ki karuna sarahniya hai, Maharaj. Par kya ye vidhi ke niyam se upar hai?”* - Rajguru Ishaan who was sitting next to the throne of Maharani Radha Devi said calmly, to the king.

*“Niyam wohi hote hain jo rajya ko jeewit rakhein. Agar niyam mar gaye, toh hum sab bhi toh lash ke samaan hain.”* - Amaya answered by looking straight at the Rajguru.

Raghavendra looks at his daughter—pride, irritation, and foreboding all crossing his face in flickers. He taps the lion armrest slowly.

*“Rajkumari ke vichaar jwalant hain. Par dhyan rahe—rajya ke samne swayam ko rakhna... ghamand kehlata hai”*:- Raghavendra said in a soft yet dangerous tone.

*“Ya sach ke liye khade rehne ki himmat kehlata hai.”* - Amaya said fearlessly.

Silence again. The court murmurs. Ministers look away awkwardly.

**Maharani** leans subtly toward **Rajguru Ishaan** and whispers:

*“She is becoming dangerous. The people watch her more than they watch the throne.”*

“More like a serpent preparing to coil.”- Rajguru Ishaan said with a smile- “Then perhaps it is time the people watched a wedding instead of a rebellion.”

**The words hang in the air.** A storm is coming, but for now, the court disperses with ceremonial chants. The drums begin to beat. The villager is escorted out. **Amaya rises and walks out, Devika followed her. Amaya’s footsteps echoing with dignity and defiance.** Eyes follow her—not just of the court, but of fate itself.

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Rajguru Ishaan (30) was born into a high-caste **Shaivite Brahmin family**, who were the part of an old **tantric lineage** traced back to Kashmir and Kashi. His ancestors were spiritual advisors to kings but veered into **left-hand Tantra (Vamachara)** over generations—publicly upholding dharma, secretly practicing occult rituals. His father died in mysterious circumstances after delving into forbidden rites. He resides alone in the **ashram behind the palace**, surrounded by scrolls, oil lamps, and **a locked chamber** where no one enters.

Having a dusky bronze complexion, weathered by rituals performed under moonlight and fire. His skin carries faint burns and ash stains near the wrists and neck—scars of penance, or darker deeds.

**He has got** intense and hooded eyes like molten coal—burning with ancient knowledge and unspoken lust. One eye slightly smaller than the other, giving him a perpetually watchful, hawk-

like glare. His face is long, gaunt face with a sharp jaw and high cheekbones. A long forehead marked with a **tripundra** of white ash and a blood-red dot at the center—both religious and menacing. Hairs down to shoulder, thick, and matted into small locks at the back, often covered by a saffron cloth. The front is oiled and pulled back severely, accentuating his severe appearance. His teeths turned slightly yellowed from years of smoking herbs and chanting near sacred fires. His smile is rare, and when it appears, it feels calculated.

Rajguru Ishaan stayed unmarried by choice. He claimed celibacy, though whispers suggest otherwise.

Always draped in **saffron and deep ochre** robes—loose, layered cotton dyed with turmeric and sandalwood. A **rudraksha mala** coils around his wrist and neck. Carries a **wooden staff (yoga danda)** etched with snakes and fire—symbol of both spiritual authority and silent threat.

Rajguru Ishaan does not raise his voice often—but when he speaks, the court listens. His tone is **measured**, hypnotic, **like chanting even in conversation**. When he enters a room, the temperature seems to drop a degree. Candles flicker near him. Dogs grow restless in his presence. Flies avoid him. So do children—**except Amaya**, who once challenged him with a fearless gaze as a child. He never forgot. He is considered "**a holy man to the world, and a feared man to the court**".

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## Chapter-13

# No one of Importance

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**I**t was one late afternoon. The royal chariot, flanked by six palace guards, travels through a narrow forest path on the way to Shivkund, a sacred temple 20 kilometers from the Vasantgarh palace. Sunlight cuts in shafts through the thick canopy of neem trees, their scent hanging heavy in the air.

The gold-plated wheel of the chariot snaps, and the convoy comes to a halt near a clearing bordered by thorny bushes and overgrown roots.

*"The axle's cracked, Rajkumari. We'll need a smith or spare wood—"One of the palace guard shouted.*

*"Then send someone to get it. I'm not waiting in the middle of nowhere for a wheel."* Amaya gets annoyed, and stepped out in her maroon riding attire.

She walks a few paces ahead into the clearing, flanked by two guards. The air is too still. Even the birds seem to have vanished.

Suddenly—

TWANG!

An arrow pierces through the throat of the forward guard.

He falls without a sound—his blood splashes across the golden trim of her attire.

**Amaya freezes.**

Time slows. The world narrows to the sound of blood dripping, hooves clattering, and the deafening beat of her own heart.

**Eyes wide**, she instinctively steps backward, bumping into a thorny branch. Her breath catches. She looks down at her palm—a **small gash bleeds**, but she barely notices.

Screams erupt. Horses rear. The charioteer is dragged off and disappears into the forest. Bandits—masked, lean, brutal men clad in leather and black turbans—emerge from all sides with swords, axes, and bows.

A bandit leader makes eye contact with her- Grinning. Advancing.

*"Royal blood spills easy too, men! Take the princess alive!"*

He's maybe twenty feet away, swinging a curved sword dripping with blood. Her legs feel heavy. Her chest tightens.

*"Move, Amaya. You're not some fragile doll. You're a daughter of fire..."* Amaya said to herself, trembling.

She forces herself to pick up a guard's fallen dagger—**hands shaking, breathing ragged.**

As the attacker lunges, she **slashes clumsily**—grazes his arm. He growls and backhands her across the face. She falls to the dirt. Dust in her mouth. Blood on her lip. The sky spins above her.

A bandit charges at her—sword raised.

And then—

From the thick of the forest behind her, a body hurtles forward like a shadow loosed from the trees.

**ADITYA.**

Shirtless, barefoot, smeared in sweat and dirt, A rusted iron staff in hand, banded with copper, Eyes sharp like a hawk in a sandstorm.

**CLANG!**

He blocks the sword with his staff, flips it sideways, and breaks the attacker's arm with a clean crack.

The man screams. Another comes at Aditya—he kicks his knee inward, disarming him and sending his sword skidding to Amaya's feet.

*"Pick it up if you want to live."* - Aditya to Amaya without looking at her.

She hesitates—then grabs the blade.

Aditya becomes a blur- Spins, Knees to face, Staff through ribs. Three men down in ten seconds.

*"Who are you?!"* - Amaya shouting over the chaos.  
*"Doesn't matter. Keep your back to the tree. Don't run."* - Aditya (panting)

A bandit lunges at Amaya—she slashes blindly, grazing his arm. He snarls and grabs her wrist.

Before he can twist it—Aditya tackles him full force, sending both crashing into the earth.

Blood sprays.

Aditya stabs the man with his own dagger, then turns to her—his face smeared, eyes wild.

More bandits pour from the trees. Aditya grabs Amaya's arm and pulls her behind a thicket of rocks.

"Stay low. Count to fifty. Then run south. The river's that way."- Aditya said by gritting teeth.

"And you?"-

"I'm the distraction."- Aditya glancing back at the fight. Before she can speak, he charges back out, spinning the staff like a flaming wheel. One of the attackers draws a bow—

TWANG—

The arrow speeds toward Amaya.

**She gasps. Stares.**

Aditya turns mid-swing—

Grabs the arrow in mid-air with a bruised palm.

In that moment, she sees him **not as a peasant**, not a stranger, but as something **divine**, carved from pain and fire.

He growls in pain but stands tall, defiant.

The remaining bandits flee, spooked by the ghost-like warrior who fights like a storm and bleeds without flinching.

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Amaya walks out slowly, dagger still in hand. Aditya is kneeling, catching his breath. Bleeding from his shoulder.

Their eyes meet.

*"You saved me."*

*"Didn't mean to...I was here to gather neem bark. Wrong place, wrong time."- Aditya replied in a dry tone.*

She lets out a laugh—a fragile sound in the silence.

The remaining guards, bloodied but alive, rush toward her. One sees Aditya and raises his blade.

*"Stop. He's with me."*

The guards freeze.

*"But Rajkumari—he's not... of the palace."- Guard said in a confused manner.*

*"Then perhaps it's time we let the palace see what bravery really looks like."- Amaya answered back with her eyes still on Aditya.*

"No one of importance, Rajkumari. Just a shadow who owes a debt to the land that feeds him."

"You saved my life. And yet you look at me as if I am not royalty."

"I've seen kings spill more blood than thieves. Respect must be earned."

That moment imprints itself on her mind. His defiance. His raw strength. His refusal to kneel. Unlike any man she's met.

*"What's your name?"- Amaya asked in a soft but commanding voice.*

*"Aditya." - glancing up he replied.*

*"Bring him to the palace. He's under my protection now." - Amaya to her guards.*

She turns away, but not before one last glance at him—long, unreadable.

In her eyes: *fear, gratitude... and something burning just beneath the surface.*

*As she walks past the remaining guards, they exchange stunned glances. No one expected her to survive this. No one expected her to **fight**.*

*They begin to follow.*

*"She didn't run."*

*"She held her ground."*

*"She shielded one of us."*

*Even the **commander**, wounded and bleeding, salutes her—unprompted.*

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### ***Outside the Cremation Ghat***

The horizon bleeds orange into grey as the last light of day surrenders to smoke and silence. Funeral fires crackle along the Ganga's edge, their flames licking the air like mourning tongues. Crows caw overhead, circling low as ash drifts like ghostly confetti. The sacred river is swollen, tired. A conch sounds in the distance—someone's soul being ferried away.

A potter girl of about 17, barefoot and slender, walks steadily along the embankment, balancing a stack of fresh clay pots on her

head. Her cotton saree is faded, dust-streaked. Her eyes, though downcast, are alert—used to the glares of men in narrow alleys.

As she crosses the stone steps near the burning ghat, a palace soldier, thick-necked, his armor half-loosened and breath stinking of mahua liquor, steps into her path. He wobbles slightly, gripping a brass jug.

“Even the gods must be jealous... all this clay, yet you're shaped like desire itself”.- The soldier said in lustful manner.

“Move aside, *sarkar*. I have to reach home before the light dies.”- The girl said in a firm and steady manner.

He laughs and leans in, brushing a strand of hair from her face with calloused fingers. The gesture is gentle in mockery, not affection.

“What’s the hurry, *mitti wali*? Stay a little. Let someone worship you properly.”

He grabs her wrist—not hard, but possessive. A dangerous kind of playfulness.

“Let me go!”- The girl made an unsuccessful attempt to free her hand from the clutches of the palace soldier.

The clay pots rattle dangerously atop her head.

Suddenly—

A sharp shing cuts through the stillness.

A rusted blade presses cold against the soldier’s neck, just under his jawline. His grin evaporates.

A 6 feet tall, figure steps out of the drifting smoke—barefoot, hair matted, chest heaving from a silent rage. He is lean, sinewy frame,

hardened by labour, not luxury, skin with bronze-toned with soot-stains that never leave his fingers, short, jet-black hair. His eyes, deep-set, smoldering brown, like dying embers.

**He is Aditya** (21), His dhoti is frayed at the edges, blood-stained and stiff with old dirt. He holds the sword like it's a part of his body.

"Touch her again... and I'll send your soul where these pyres burn."

The soldier blinks, caught between fear and disbelief.

"You dare draw steel on a soldier of the crown?"- Soldier said while scuffling.

He shoves the girl aside and pulls out his sword with a flourish—polished, clean, royal.

Aditya doesn't flinch. His grip tightens. No stance. No formal guard. Just intent.

The soldier lunges.

It's over in **seconds**.

Aditya sidesteps, grabs the man's sword-arm mid-air, pulls him off balance—and **drives the rusted blade across his thigh**. The soldier screams.

Aditya knocks him to the ground and places his foot on the man's chest.

He raises the blade again—ready to kill.

"No! Don't... please"- The girl cried in a shaking voice.

Aditya hesitates. The firelight dances across his sweat-soaked skin.

He lowers the blade.

The soldier moans, clutching his leg, blood seeping through velvet.

Aditya stares down at him with disgust—then tosses the blade into the river behind him. It spins once in the air and vanishes with a splash.

The palace guard groans on the stone steps, his **arm broken**, his sword tossed into the river by the crowd.

The villagers who gathered there due to the commotion watch in stunned silence.

**Aditya**, breathing steady, stands over him—not as a victor, but as a man who did what had to be done. The potter girl, kneels beside the broken pitcher, tears in her eyes.

The sound of boots thudding grows louder.

A platoon of palace soldiers arrives, led by a stern-faced officer in polished armor.

"Who assaulted the King's guard?!"- Palace Officer shouted. No one speaks.

The potter girl opens her mouth, but Aditya stops her with a glance. He steps forward.

"I did."

"And you admit it?"- Palace Officer sneers.

"Truth doesn't need hiding."- Aditya calmly answered.

The officer eyes him. No fear. No plea. Just defiance carved from stone.

"You dare lay hand on a royal guard?"

"I didn't lay hand on the palace. I lifted one off its people."

The crowd stirs.

"You speak like you're owed justice."- Officer said by moving closer to Aditya.

"No. I'm owed nothing. But if your court has ears, I'll speak. If it has eyes, let it judge what it sees."

The officer signals. Guards seize Aditya, binding his wrists with coarse rope.

"He's no criminal! He saved me!"- Potter girl shouted with the tears in her eyes.

"Saving or not, he'll answer to the throne."- Officer said in a cold manner.

Aditya turns to the potter girl, his face still composed.

"Don't fear for me. If the palace calls itself just, let it see who I am."

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### ***The same night at the palace courtyard***

Aditya is led through the gates, shackled. His shadow stretches long behind him—the shadow of a man with no place, no name among the nobles.

He looks up at the high palace walls.

*"In the fields, they say the palace is a mountain made of men who forgot the soil. That justice wears silk and eats gold. But I've seen another face of power—drunken, rotting, hiding behind armor."*

*"Let them see me, then. Let them see what rises from the dirt."-Aditya murmured.*

He was taken to the palace prison the same very night.

**Aditya sits alone**, a single torch was flickering above him. Across the corridor, two guards whisper about him.

**Guard 1**

"He broke Balaram's arm like a twig. Unarmed."

**Guard 2**

"He could've run but he stayed."

**Guard 1**

"He asked for an audience with the King."

**Guard 2**

"Foolish. Or mad."

**Guard 1**

"Or something else."

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***Palace – King's Private Chamber – The same night.***

King Raghavendra, sipping from a silver goblet, listens as his chief advisor recounts the incident.

"The boy didn't flinch, my lord. Said he'll speak in the court if the throne is just."

"And what caste does he claim?"

"None. Possibly one of the Nishads. Or lower."- Advisor told in an awkward manner.

"Lower in blood, higher in spine."- King Raghavendra chuckled while getting up from his throne.

"Let him come. This kingdom has enough men who bow. Let's hear one who won't."

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### **Daytime- Inside Royal Court or The Diwan-e-khas**

The **Diwan-e-Khas** gleams in gold and marble, its high dome catching the echo of every movement. Incense coils lazily in the air. Courtiers stand in semicircles, their silks shimmering.

At the far dais, **King Raghav** sits in carved sandalwood splendor, **Queen Radha Devi** beside him—composed, her expression unreadable.

To the king's right, in robes of deep saffron and heavy rudraksha beads, **Rajguru Ishaan** stands—his tall frame casting a long shadow. His eyes, kohl-lined and intense, rarely blink, and when they do, they land often—too often—on **Princess Amaya**.

At Royal Gallery Amaya sits in a cushioned seat to the left, her posture regal but her curiosity piqued. **Devika** stands behind her, the posture of a handmaiden, but her gaze sweeps the court for something—or someone.

**Aditya** stands barefoot on the polished marble, a plain tunic hanging loose, a single leather strap across his chest. Dust clings to him from travel, but his eyes are sharp, steady.

“They say you can wield a sword. Here, only deeds speak. Face my men, and we shall see”.- said King Raghav to Aditya in a flat tone.

“But.. Maharaj he is the one who saved my life from the bandits”- Amaya said in a surprised tone after seeing Aditya in the palace that too in such a situation.

**“But he is also the one who attempted murder on the palace soldier..another brash youth, Maharaj... the court has no shortage of them.”- Queen** uneasily said.

“And yet... some blades are hidden until the right fire tempers them.”- Rajguru Ishaan referred to in a soft, low voice, to the king.

His gaze flickers—not at Aditya—but at Amaya, as if weighing a dangerous thought.

**After sometimes the fight begins.**

The **Court Herald** strikes his staff to the ground.

**HERALD**

Let the trial commence!

The first royal guard charges—Aditya pivots, grabbing the man’s wrist, twisting the sword free in one fluid motion. The guard stumbles, unarmed.

A second comes from the side—Aditya blocks, strikes the hilt into the man’s ribs, sending him sprawling.

Gasps ripple through the court...**Amaya’s eyes narrow in interest.**

“This one moves like he’s danced with death before.”- **Amaya murmured to herself.**

**Meanwhile...** Devika...with her lips part and recognition dawning.

“Aditya” - Devika whispered to herself.

Amaya glances back at her.

“You know him?”

Devika blinks, the question catching her off guard.

No... I’ve never—responded too quickly.

Devika stops herself while her eyes flicked back to Aditya, lingering just a second too long which was noticed by Amaya. “Never? You looked as if you did.” - Amaya said after passing Devika an arch look.

“Only because men like him don’t usually survive the guards. He fights... like he’s done this before.”

Devika somehow managed to control her heart beat.

Amaya studies her friend, sensing the faint shift in her tone. Devika forces her gaze away from Aditya, hiding a flicker of something — recognition? Guilt?

Down below, Aditya’s eyes lift, scanning the balcony. For a heartbeat, his gaze locks with Devika’s before sliding to Amaya.

Devika’s breath catches. She drops her eyes quickly, as if burned.

“Interesting.” - Amaya whispered smiling faintly to herself.

**Then came the third guard**

The largest steps forward, snarling. Their swords clash—steel sings in the marble chamber. Aditya sidesteps, kicks the man’s leg from under him, and the guard crashes to the ground, winded.

Aditya stands tall, sword point lowered and breathing controlled.

A courtier announces Aditya's victory. The crowd chants his name.

Rajguru Ishaan watches, stroking the beads in his hand. His expression is unreadable, but his mind is calculating – “Skill such as this should not be left untethered, Maharaj. A wild blade cuts both ways. Keep him close... where we can see his every move.” Rajguru Ishaan said quietly to the king. “Agreed”- King Raghav nodded slowly.

The king rises, his voice carrying over the murmurs.

At the center of the hall, **Aditya** dusty from combat, chest rising and falling from the duel's exertion. The broken spears of the royal guards lie stacked to one side, a silent testimony to his skill.

“Aditya... son of a potter of the lower quarters.”

Aditya bows his head respectfully.

“Today you have bested the finest warriors of my guard. Strength alone does not earn a man my trust... but you fought with discipline, honor, and restraint.”

A ripple of murmurs among the courtiers. A few guards shift uncomfortably, bruised pride still fresh.

Aditya gaze is steady, but there's no arrogance — only the quiet composure of a man who knows his worth.

“From this day, you will serve not merely as a soldier... but as the **personal guard to my daughter, Princess Amaya**. Her safety will be your life's duty. Her word, your command.”

Gasps ripple through the hall — it's an honor usually reserved for the noblest-born warriors.

On the **balcony**, **Princess Amaya** straightens, surprise flickering across her face. Her eyes lock on Aditya — assessing him, testing him silently.

Beside her, **Devika** stiffens, fingers tightening around the edge of her dupatta. She forces a smile, but her eyes betray unease.

“Are you certain? He is... new to our world.”- Radha Devi asked in amusement to the king.

“Sometimes the new are less corrupted than the old.”- King Raghav said after taking a deep breath.

A palace servant steps forward with a ceremonial **red-and-gold sash** — the mark of a royal guardian. The King takes it and drapes it over Aditya's shoulder.

“Guard her well, Aditya. Fail, and you answer to me.”-

“I will protect her with my life, Maharaj.”- Aditya said after bowing before the King.

He steps back, but his eyes briefly meet Amaya's — a silent acknowledgment, an unspoken promise.

From her place, Devika watches — and in her chest, something unsettled stirs.

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Devika was born in *Padmapur*, a small farming village two days' ride from the capital of Vasantgarh. Her father was a respected Brahmin scholar — the village's teacher, keeper of sacred texts,

and astrologer. Rudra was the son of a humble potter father and a weaver mother of rough cotton shawls.

Though the difference in caste and wealth meant they shouldn't have been close, Devika's father often hired Aditya's father to repair the family's clay lamps and ceremonial pots. Aditya, as a boy, would accompany his father and linger around Devika's courtyard.

From the start, they were mismatched companions — Devika in neat and clean cotton frocks, memorizing Sanskrit slokas whereas Aditya barefoot, shirt open, smelling faintly of clay and river water.

Yet, they shared an easy bond.

Aditya would teach Devika to climb mango trees and throw pebbles to knock tamarind pods down.

Devika would secretly read Aditya the poems from her father's scrolls, even though the Brahmin code forbade teaching lower-caste children sacred verses. They fished together in the shallow river, their laughter carrying over the reeds.

**Aditya** was fiercely protective. When older boys teased Devika for playing outside her caste circle, Aditya stood between them and her, even taking a beating once from the village headman's son.

When Devika was fourteen, tragedy struck — her father was accused of misreading an omen for a minor noble, which led to a failed harvest celebration. Though the charge was politically motivated, it ruined their standing. They lost most of their land, and her father agreed to send Devika to the capital as part of an “honourable service” arrangement to save face.

That was the last day she saw Aditya in the village. They met under the banyan tree by the river.

**Devika** (14) stands in a plain blue cotton *salwar kameez*, clutching a small cloth bundle. Her eyes are red from crying. From the slope of the riverbank, **Aditya** (15) runs up, breathless, hands covered in traces of clay.

“I heard... they’re taking you tomorrow. Is it true?”

“Father says it’s an honour. Service to the queen. But it’s just... leaving.”

Aditya looks at her for a long moment, jaw working as if to stop words from spilling out.

“The palace is far. What if you forget Padmapur? Forget... me?” - Aditya said in a sad tone.

“You think I can forget the boy who dragged me up mango trees and made me fall in the mud?” - Devika said with the tears in her eyes.

Aditya steps closer, pulling a red-dyed cotton thread from his pocket. It’s frayed, uneven — clearly dyed in the village river with hibiscus petals- tying it around her wrist.

Then keep this. A promise. When you see me again, you’ll know the river hasn’t washed me away.

Devika swallows hard, then removes one of her small *paya* bells from her ankle. She presses it into his hand.

“**And** when you hear this sound again, you’ll know it’s me.”

A moment of silence — just the rustle of the banyan leaves.

“I’ll find you, Devika. Even if the palace walls are taller than the hills.”

“And I’ll remember... even if they dress me in silk and call me “lady.”

They stand there, neither moving, both knowing the village will never be the same tomorrow. A distant shout from the village breaks the moment.

Devika backs away slowly, her eyes locked on him until the last possible second — then turns, vanishing down the narrow path toward home.

Aditya remains under the banyan tree, the copper bell warm in his fist. She was taken away the next morning in a bullock cart, her family’s hopes tied to the royal palace.

In Vasantgarh, Devika began in the *outer palace* as a laundry maid. Over the years, her quick wit, delicate speech, and ability to read and write set her apart. She caught the attention of **Queen Radha Devi**, who valued quiet loyalty and intelligence in those serving her daughter.

By the time Devika was twenty, she had risen to be **Amaya’s personal handmaiden** — responsible not just for dressing and attending to the princess, but also for accompanying her to court and on excursions.

The palace had polished away much of her village roughness, but under the silks and formal speech, Devika still carried the memory of a boy with clay-stained hands and a crooked grin.

Years later, when Aditya strode into the royal court and bested the king’s guards, Devika’s breath caught.

He had changed — taller, harder, with eyes that had seen more than the riverbanks of Padmapur.

But the way he held the sword, the slight tilt of his head when listening — that was still Aditya.

The boy who had once promised her they'd meet again.

Only now, fate had placed him at Amaya's side... not hers.

Years later — **Devika** stands behind **Princess Amaya** in the gallery. On the marble floor below, **Aditya** fights like the river he once spoke of.

Her fingers brush her own wrist unconsciously — no red thread remains, but the memory burns fresh.

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## Chapter-14

# Two Witnesses

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### *Royal Gardens- Full Moon Night*

The gardens shimmer silver under the moonlight. White jasmines bloom, their fragrance thick in the cool night air. The palace walls rise tall in the background, but the garden feels like another world — secret, hidden, alive with whispers of leaves.

**Devika** , holding a brass water pot, moves quietly along the path. Her face looks weary — for days she has noticed *changes in Amaya*. The princess has grown restless, distracted during lessons, eager to dismiss attendants early. Devika's heart, though heavy, has sensed what her eyes now fear to confirm.

She pauses. Ahead, near the marble fountain, two figures stand half-hidden by trees.

**Princess Amaya**, draped in a soft moonlit veil, and **Aditya**, standing close, his hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword —

as though protecting her even here, in the safety of her own gardens.

Their voices drift softly.

Aditya... if someone finds us—Amaya whispered nervously.

“Then let them. I was sworn to guard you, Amaya. My life, my honor, my every breath is already yours.”- Aditya after a brief pause answered firmly.

Amaya’s eyes glisten. Her hand trembles, but she places it on his chest, just over his heart.

“Not just my guard... something more.”

Aditya exhales sharply, torn between duty and desire. But then the distance collapses — he cups her face with reverence, and under the white gaze of the moon, their lips meet in a hesitant, aching kiss.

The world seems to still.

Behind the trees, **Devika watches**, frozen. Her water pot slips slightly, tilting, water spilling silently into the earth. Her breath catches — not from surprise, but from the sharp sting of recognition.

Her childhood friend. Her secret love and her princess — the one she served, adored, and protected.

Tears brim in her eyes, but she does not make a sound. She presses her hand against her chest, as though steadying the storm inside.

“So this is the truth... fate has tied them, not me.”- Devika whispered to herself.

She watches as Amaya rests her head against Aditya's shoulder, and Aditya closes his eyes as though he has finally found peace.

From another angle of the garden, cloaked in saffron, **Rajguru Ishaan** also watches the romantic kiss between Amaya and Aditya. His eyes blaze, not with heartbreak, but with *murderous fury*. His nails dig into his palms, drawing blood as he grips the wooden beads of his mala too tightly.

The kiss ends. Amaya leans her head against Aditya's shoulder, her smile tender, her body safe in his arms. Aditya exhales, finally at peace.

But Ishaan's breath comes ragged, wild.

"No... no! She is mine! She was promised by the stars... by the gods!"

He takes a step forward, nearly breaking cover, but stops himself, teeth gritted, eyes feverish. His lips curl into a vow, a curse.

"**Amaya**...if fate ties you to him... then I will cut the thread with blood."- Rajguru whispered with the burning eyes.

The moonlight catches his face, half-lit, half-shadowed, twisted with obsession.

Meanwhile, Devika, unseen by Ishaan, slips away into the darkness — her face wet with tears, her heart heavy with sacrifice.

"I love them both... and so I must give them up."

The moonlight falls on her like a cold blessing. She bows her head, clutching the edge of her dupatta to muffle her sobs.

"If my heart must break so theirs may beat as one... let it be so."

She turns and walks away into the darkness, her footsteps echoing faintly — a silent sacrifice witnessed only by the moon.

Two hearts broken by the same sight — one choosing sacrifice, the other choosing destruction.

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A dark, cave-like chamber within the palace complex. No windows. The air is thick with sandalwood, ash, and camphor. A large circular yantra is drawn in blood-red paste across the black stone floor. At its centre: **a burning lamp**, unmoved by the still air.

On the walls hang scrolls—**ancient palm-leaf manuscripts**, diagrams of **kundalini paths**, **chakras pierced with red thorns**, and a detailed sketch of **Princess Amaya's face**—rendered not from life, but memory.

**Rajguru Ishaan**, bare chest, sits cross-legged inside the yantra. His back is scarred with vertical burn marks—ritualistic.

In his hands: a **small, wooden effigy of Amaya**, wrapped in red thread and smeared with sandal paste.

He chants under his breath:

*“Ya devi sarvabhuteshu... mohini-rupena samsthitaa...”*

He ties a new **red thread** around the doll's waist and places a **drop of blood from his thumb** on its forehead.

**Rajguru Ishaan to effigy**

You are fire. You are storm.

But storms too bend to the mantra.

You came back... but not to him. Not again.

Such beauty... not meant for mortal men. Not meant for him. From a hidden niche, he pulls out a silken handkerchief — embroidered with the royal seal — the very one Amaya had dropped in the courtyard a month ago.

“The stars have bound you to me, Amaya... Mine...Mine...Mine You are only mine. No guard, no beggar-soldier, can take you away from me.

He paces, muttering feverishly.

“The gods chose me... not him. A lowborn wretch — he dares touch what is sacred? He dares claim what belongs to me...the Rajguru? If she cannot come to me willingly, I will burn every path that leads her away. His eyes glint”.- A plan begins to form. His hand tightens around a ritual dagger, knuckles white.

“Aditya... your life is the offering the gods demand.”

“Amaya... my queen, my goddess. You smile for the court, but you belong to me. Only me.”- Rajguru was trembling with anger. Blood for bond. Fate for love. I will bind you across lifetimes... even if the gods scream against it.

His voice rises, half chant, half madness. He presses a ceremonial blade to his palm, cutting shallowly, letting blood drip over the veil. The red stains spread into the silk like veins.

No matter how many lives... no matter how much blood... Amaya...you will be mine.

He stands, eyes locked on the clay bust, as though already planning how to remove every obstacle — mortal or divine — that stands in his way.

Suddenly some footsteps echo faintly from the far corridor.

Ishaan was busy in murmuring the same name under his breath, again and again:

Amaya... Amaya... Amaya...

The footsteps fade after sometimes. His expression changes — from longing to cold calculation.

“I know whose footsteps are in the corridor” - Ishaan said to himself by extinguishing the central flame with his breath. He finally tilts his head slightly toward the doorway —He brought a smile on his face...cold and triumphant.

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## Chapter-15

# A Crown's Pawn

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### *Royal Private Chamber during night*

The chamber is dim, perfumed with sandalwood smoke. A golden lamp burns steadily between **King Raghavendra** and **Queen Radha Devi**, who sit opposite each other at a carved ebony table. Their faces are grave. Heavy drapes shut out the moonlight, keeping this council truly private. Only **Rajguru Ishaan** stands before them, head bowed, his shadow long on the marble floor.

The queen's jewelled fingers drum softly on the table.

"The whispers have reached us. Our daughter, the Princess... and her guard. Do you deny it, Rajguru?" - Queen said in a cold voice.

"I do not deny, Maharani. For my eyes, too, have seen the closeness that grows between them. A dangerous fire, if left untamed."

“Her honour is not just her own — it is the crown’s. If the people believe she lowers herself to a soldier, they will laugh at the throne.” - King Raghav said with disgust.

Ishaan raises his eyes, voice dropping with measured intensity.

“There is only one cure, Maharaj. Wed her quickly. Bind her to one whose devotion to this throne is unshaken.”

He steps closer, lowering his voice to a hushed plea.

“Give her to me.” - Ishaan said in a secretive manner by looking at both king and queen.

The words hang in the chamber like smoke.

“You? How dare you! You are Rajguru — guardian of her spirit, not a claimant to her hand.” - Queen became furious.

“Silence, Ishaan! This is treachery of thought. You insult us by even imagining it.” - King Raghav shouted at Rajguru.

Ishaan bows sharply, but the humiliation stiffens every line of his body. His lips tremble against the words he cannot voice.

“We will marry her to the Prince of Ratanpur. Weak in rule, weak in will — but through her, he shall be ours to command.” - Queen said in a calculative tone.

“And through Amaya, Vasantgarh reach will stretch beyond its borders. That is the throne’s will.” - The King expressed his ambition.

Ishaan presses his forehead to the marble floor — not in obedience, but to mask the fire in his eyes.

“As you command, Maharaj. Maharani.” - Ishaan said in a quiet and controlled manner and left the chamber and the glint of his

eyes betrays the storm within — rage curdling into obsession, humiliation sharpening into vengeance.

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### ***Rajguru Ishaan's Chamber – Dead of Night***

The chamber is suffocating with incense smoke, thick enough to blur the painted likeness of **Princess Amaya** that dominates the altar. Her eyes, rendered in lifelike detail, seem almost alive in the flickering glow of **dozens of oil lamps**.

A copper bowl filled with **fresh goat's blood** simmers, thin streams of steam curling upward, staining the air with iron and rot. At its rim, black sesame seeds float like restless eyes.

**Ishaan** kneels bare-chested, his ribs heaving. Sweat streaks down his temples, mixing with the white ash smeared across his forehead. His fists clench so hard they tremble against his thighs.

"They would give you to a pawn... when you were meant for me. They insult my devotion.

They insult the gods themselves." - Ishaan's dangerous voice was shaking with rage.

With a jerk, he takes a **red cotton thread** and begins knotting it around the painted doll's wrist. The knots are violent, teeth-gritted, as though he binds the princess herself. Each pull leaves his fingers raw.

"If I cannot claim you, Amaya... no one will...Not Aditya...Not some weakling prince" - Ishaan said to himself in a cracking, fevered and almost weeping tone.

"Amaya you are bound to me — by fate, by fire, by blood."

his fingers trembling in ecstasy and madness.

The flames of the oil lamps **flare violently** as if caught in a sudden wind. The shadows on the walls elongate, writhing like serpents — twisting into shapes that resemble clasping hands, strangling necks, bleeding eyes.

“Even the darkness agrees... you are mine.

“Mine.”- **Ishaan** said in half-laughing, half-sobbing way. His voice rises, echoing unnaturally in the chamber, as if the stone walls themselves carry his vow.

He bows low, pressing his forehead into the blood-smeared floor, chanting in rapid Sanskrit, words of **binding and destruction**. His chant grows guttural, animal-like, until it breaks into ragged silence.

The lamps settle. The smoke stills. Yet the air feels heavier, cursed — as if something ancient has just answered his prayer.

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### ***Palace Garden- Moon Light***

The palace gardens lie quiet, bathed in silver light. The jasmine bushes spill fragrance into the night air. A marble fountain trickles softly, its water catching the moonlight like liquid glass.

**Aditya** stands near the fountain, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, scanning the shadows out of habit. His guard's instinct never leaves him.

From behind, **Amaya** slips in quietly, her anklets barely making a sound. She watches him for a moment, her lips curving with a secret smile.

“Must you always stand like a statue, Aditya? Even the moonlight looks afraid to touch you.” - Amaya teased him.

“It is my duty, Princess. Shadows carry secrets, and I would not let them reach you.” - Aditya turned and replied her softly.

Amaya stepped closer to Aditya and in a low voice said- And if the shadow was me?

Aditya falters. For the first time, his soldier's discipline cracks. Amaya takes his hand, gently lowering it from the sword-hilt, her fingers brushing his calloused palm.

They stand inches apart, the **fountain's silver spray catching in Amaya's hair**, making it gleam like threads of moonlight.

“You should not... not here. If someone saw—”

“Let the whole world see. When I am with you, Aditya, I do not feel like a princess.

I feel... alive.” - Amaya interrupted in between.

She lifts her hand to his cheek. For a moment, Aditya fights the storm inside him — torn between loyalty, fear, and the fierce pull of her touch. Finally, he gives in. His hand cups the back of her neck, drawing her closer. Their lips meet, tentative at first, then deepening with the urgency of two hearts who have too little time.

The night itself seems to hush around them — the fountain quieter, the breeze still.

“Even if the world turns against me, I would guard this moment... forever.” - Aditya whispered against her lips.

“Then promise me, Aditya... Promise you'll never let them part us.”

“On my life. On my soul.” - Aditya with burning eyes gripped his hand on her back.

The two lovers hold each other, unaware that in another part of the palace, **a man drenched in blood and madness has just vowed the same — but in the name of destruction.**

The moon glows serenely above, the silent witness to love and to doom.

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## Chapter-16

# The Crimson Pyre

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### *Royal Coutyard – Evening – Wedding Ceremony*

The palace is drenched in splendour. Oil lamps burn bright, garlands of marigold and jasmine hang from every pillar, and the courtyard echoes with the sound of conch shells, temple bells, and the chanting of Vedic mantras.

The Prince of Ratanpur, regal and confident, sits on the ornate stage beside the sacred fire, awaiting his bride. The assembled nobles, courtiers, and common folk crane their necks to glimpse the union.

Drums roll as the Bride—face hidden behind a heavily embroidered veil—walks slowly toward the groom with two of her friends by her side, anklets tinkling beneath her red silk lehenga.

The Maharaja Raghavendra and Maharani Radha Devi exchange proud glances. Beside them, the Rajguru Ishaan

watches with burning eyes, whispering his mantras, his gaze fixed not on the stars—but on destiny bending to his will.

The priest begins chanting louder.

“Let the sacred knot of dharma and love bind the two kingdoms together. May their union prosper”— The priest raised his voice over the fire crackles.

Suddenly, the Prince chokes mid-smile, clutching his chest. Gasps ripple through the gathering. He staggers, collapses forward into the fire-pit—lifeless.

A terrible silence falls. The crowd panics. The Maharaja leaps from his throne.

“Guards! What treachery is this?”- Maharaja commanded in a booming and terrified voice.

Two guards rush forward, but freeze as the priest himself screams.

“The omen... the stars warned...!”- Priest shouted by getting terrified.

Suddenly in the ongoing chaos the veil is lifted from the bride’s face in the chaos—

It is not Princess Amaya.

It is Devika.

The court gasps.

“Youuuuu—? Where is my daughter?”- Maharani Radha Devi shockingly asked Devika.

Devika trembles, her lips started quivering.

“She begged me... to take her place. She went to Aditya... to meet him for the last time... she swore she would return before the

vows...”- Devika with tears in her eyes answered in a trembling voice.

“Foolish girl... Aditya is in prison as he dared to love the princess of this state”- Raja Raghavendra said in anger.

The dead groom lies covered. The court is restless, whispers hissing like snakes. The Maharaja and Maharani stand thunderstruck.

“I only wished to protect her! Amaya wanted only to save Aditya. Please, forgive her—blame me—“- Devika pleaded before Maharaja and Maharani by going down on her knees.

“Forgive her????? Amaya is a disgust and threat to the throne, to us...A royal daughter in love with a servant? A man born of no name? It is not just scandal. The astrologer spoke of fire, of rebellion, of a bloodline cursed if she marries beneath her fate.”- Maharaja Raghavendra shouted filled with hatred towards his very own daughter, Amaya.

*A long silence. Raghav clenches his fists.*

“We must end this. Her... and him.”- Maharaja Raghav continued.

The Rajguru steps forward to Maharaja and Maharani , his tall frame casting a long shadow, his voice rising like a storm.

“This is not mere folly. This is *fate*. The stars warned of ill omens. An unholy union has poisoned this wedding. The prince’s death is not coincidence—it is curse! To cleanse this land, to protect Vasantgarh’s honour, to restore balance with the heavens— a *sacrifice* must be made.

He points a finger at Devika. The courtiers murmur in fear.

“This girl. She who deceived the court, who brought shadow in place of the princess. Let her blood be the offering. Only then will the wrath of the heavens subside.”

The crowd erupts. Some cry in fear, others nod in agreement. The Maharaja’s and Maharani already gave their affirmation for the sacrifice. Devika looks around, trembling, tears streaking her face, realizing her fate has been sealed.

“Amaya... you left me here...to die”- Devika said to herself in a broken tone.

The Rajguru’s eyes glitter. For him, this is more than ritual—this is revenge, obsession, and power cloaked in the language of destiny.

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### *The Palace Prison Cells- The Same Time*

Chains rattle. Aditya, bruised and bloodied, sits in the dark cell. Suddenly, the barred door creaks open. A cloaked figure rushes in—Amaya.

“Aditya! Quick—we don’t have much time.”

“Amaya... you should not be here. The whole kingdom—”  
“whispered Aditya with great astonishment.

“Let them have their kingdom. I want only you.”

She unlocks his chains with a bronze key. Rudra grips her hand. They embrace fiercely, then run into the shadows.

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## *Temple Courtyard- Midnight*

The temple sits on the edge of the kingdom, where the dense forest meets the stony riverbank. Its towering gates are carved with depictions of goddesses, lions, and battle scenes worn down by centuries of monsoons. A flight of stone steps leads up to the courtyard, their edges cracked and moss-lined.

The **courtyard** is vast, enclosed by high stone walls. In the centre rises an **ancient neem tree**, its gnarled roots curling above the ground like serpents. Its massive branches spread wide, draped with **red and saffron threads**, bells, and faded cloth strips tied by villagers as vows to the Devi. Beneath its shadow is the designated **sacrifice ground**—a low, circular stone platform, stained dark by centuries of offerings.

At the northern edge of the courtyard stands the **temple sanctum**, its doors plated with brass, always locked except on ritual nights. Inside, the **idol of Devi** sits enthroned. She is carved in black stone, fierce and majestic, with eight arms holding weapons of war and blessing. Her eyes are set with rubies that glint red in the torchlight, giving the impression that she watches every movement. At her feet, garlands of marigold and lotus are heaped, but the scent of **blood sacrifices lingers heavier than the flowers**.

Around the courtyard, tall iron torches burn with **crackling flames**, their smoke coiling upward, mingling with the neem's dark canopy. At ritual times, the air fills with the **low, thunderous beat of nagadas** (war drums) and the chanting of priests.

When a sacrifice is decreed, the victim is brought before the neem tree. A **stone pillar** with iron rings stands beside it, where wrists

can be bound. Offerings of rice, sindoor, and ghee are poured at the roots. Then, under the Devi's gaze, the ritual is carried out.

Beyond the walls, villagers dare not cross after dusk—whispering that the neem roots drink not just blood, but also the **souls** of those taken.

The moon hangs heavy and pale. Torches burn in a circle around the **stone pillar** of the temple, where the Rajguru's priests chant in feverish rhythm. The courtyard is packed—nobles, guards, and trembling commoners all gathered to witness the cleansing of the kingdom.

At the centre, **Devika** is dragged forward in white garments stained with dirt and tears. Her hands are bound, her anklets broken. She looks small against the stone pillar.

The **Rajguru Ishaan** stands tall in black ceremonial robes, a crimson thread tied across his wrist, a dagger in hand. His voice booms, echoing against the temple walls.

"The heavens demand balance. Death has crossed the threshold of marriage, and only blood will restore dharma. Tonight—her soul will appease the stars!"- Rajguru Chanted.

The crowd murmurs prayers, fearful and spellbound.

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Meanwhile, Amaya and Aditya stumble through the shadows, breathless, their hands still clasped tight from the prison escape. The forest is thick with mist, the cries of night-birds echoing. Their footsteps crunch on dry leaves.

Suddenly—

From the direction of the **temple courtyard**, a **roar of voices** rises.

Shouts, drums, and the faint clang of metal. The wind carries the sound of **bells ringing violently** and the guttural **chants of priests**.

Amaya freezes, her chest heaving with the thought of an unpleasant incident.

“Aditya... do you hear that?” - Amaya’s voice trembled.

Aditya nods grimly, his jaw tightening.

“It’s coming from the temple courtyard... so late at night. Why would they—” - Amaya while trembling clutched Aditya’s arm.

Another swell of noise rises, **screams**, human voices, high-pitched, desperate.

Amaya’s heart pounds in her throat.

“Everyone knows what it means when there’s chaos in the courtyard...” - Amaya panicked

A sacrifice.

Her hands clutch his tunic desperately.

“**Aditya let’s** go and see what is happening. Please... I cannot—I cannot stand with this silence in my chest.”

Aditya looked towards her and then both started moving like a shadow through the trees toward the **temple courtyard wall**.

Through the trees, Aditya creeps forward until he can peer through a crack in the courtyard wall. His body stiffens instantly. His knuckles whiten as he grips the stone. His eyes blaze with shock.

Behind him, Amaya whispers, almost to herself—

Who... who is it they’ve taken?

The **drums thunder**, drowning her words. A woman's **cry for mercy** rips through the night—recognizable, aching familiar.

“Devika!”

Amaya gasps, the sound piercing her heart. Her body goes cold as realization strikes.

**Amaya and Aditya on the run hears lots of chaos and commotion**, cloaked in disguise, watch from the shadows. Their eyes burn with helplessness as Devika is tied onto the stone pillar.

“No! Please! I was loyal—I did only as my princess asked! Amaya! ...Where are you?” - Devika cried while struggling to get freed.

Amaya trembles with fear, her hand tightening on Aditya's arm.

“I should... I should go and save her—” - Amaya moved forward to go near the pillar.

“If you step forward, you will doom us all.” - Aditya pulled her back by her arms.

Amaya's tears flow, but she doesn't move.

Priests smear **vermilion and ash** across Devika's forehead.

“Amaya! Why... why did you leave me?” - Devika screamed.

Oil is poured upon her garments, the fire in the pit crackling higher.

“Mercy, Maharaj! Maharani! I was only a pawn... it was not my will!” - Devika pleaded.

The **Maharaja** and Maharani were sitting emotionless.

The **Rajguru** steps forward, voice like thunder.

“The prince’s death was no accident. Shadows have fallen upon this land because of her deception! Only her sacrifice can cleanse the kingdom.”

The priests begin to circle Devika, chanting louder.

From behind a column, **Amaya and Aditya**, veiled in cloaks, watch in horror. Their breaths are shallow, their bodies trembling.

Devika’s head lifts suddenly. Through the smoke and chaos, her eyes lock on Amaya. Recognition strikes like lightning.

“Amaya!!!! You’re here... watching me burn... and yet you hide?” - Devika screamed with her heart out.

Amaya covers her mouth with her one hand, tears spilling. Aditya pulls her closer, whispering urgently.

“Amaya... You never ask how many times I’ve watched you fall in love. You never ask how it feels to stand behind you in every life, holding the pieces of the world you break. How it feels to iron your silks while you whisper Aditya’s name. How it feels to light incense over your mistakes. How it feels to scream into pillows while your dreams devour mine. But why would you? You never saw me clearly. I was your shadow. Your servant. I loved you. Do you know that?

Not like you loved him. I loved you like breath loves lungs. Quietly. Always there... And always... forgotten. You both loved each other so loudly, so blindly, that you never saw what your love cost.

But this time, Aanya, this time... I will not stay silent”.

Devika does not look away. Her gaze is sharp, wild, filled with betrayal deeper than the flames rising around her.

“Cowards! You chose silence over me! You—Amaya—who I called my sister, my queen... And you, Aditya—who I loved once with all my soul. Her voice grows hoarse, but her curse carries like prophecy.”

“Hear me, gods! As I burn tonight, let my pain follow them! Let it bind their fates! In every birth, they will find each other... but never unite. Love will call them—but doom will claim them first!”- Devika shouted and howled like an animal.

The priests seize her arms, shoving her into the flames. The **fire roars**. Her screams pierce the night, mingling with the chants. Devika’s screams fade into crackling fire. The smell of burning cloth lingers. Her last words hang like poison in the air:

***“In every birth... you will meet... but never unite...”***

The crowd stirs in fear and awe. Many cover their faces, whispering prayers. The Rajguru lifts his arms, leading chants. All eyes are fixed on the flames. The scent of burning cloth and flesh fills the air as the crowd cowers, some covering their faces.

Amaya collapses against Aditya, sobbing uncontrollably. Aditya’s jaw clenches, his eyes glistening, but he does not move. Amaya cannot contain a choked sob. The sound echoes too loudly in the silence after Devika’s scream.

The guards whirl.

“Who’s there?”- The guard angrily whirled. The cloaks are torn away—revealing **Amaya and Aditya**.

The crowd erupts in shock.

“Amaya... my daughter?!”- Maharaja was stunned as well as devastated to see Amaya with Aditya.

Aditya pulls Amaya close, gripping his sword.

“You will not touch her!”- Aditya said in a defiant mode

But the guards swarm. Out numbered, Aditya fights fiercely, cutting down two men before being speared through the side. Amaya screams, holding him, but soldiers seize her by the arms.

The Rajguru steps forward, calm amidst the chaos, his expression unreadable. His eyes settle on Amaya—soft, obsessive, hungry.

“So... even fate brought you here. The stars demanded more than one sacrifice.”- Rajguru said with a wicked smirk on his face. He gestures to the iron pillar that was still wet with Devika’s blood.

“Bring them forward. Let their love burn with her betrayal. Only then will destiny be cleansed.”-

“Rajguruuuu... but you said...why Rajguruuuuu why...”- Amaya’s words got stuck in her throat. Her eyes got wide with despair and hatred.

***FLASHBACK – PRINCESS’S CHAMBER –Two nights before the wedding day.***

The chamber is silent except for the faint rustle of monsoon wind through the curtains. **Princess Amaya** sits by the window, her face pale, eyes swollen with tears. A half-burnt lamp flickers beside her.

The door creaks. **Rajguru Ishaan** enters, his robes whispering against the floor.

“Princess... word has reached me. The Maharaj has stripped Aditya of his guard’s post. He lies chained in the prison now”- Rajguru said softly and gently to Amaya.

Amaya's lips tremble. She does not answer, only clutches the bars of the window as though they could steady her breaking heart.

"I know your pain. To be caged from the one your soul longs for... the gods themselves would weep." - Rajguru stepped closer to Amaya and said in a low tone.

"Why must they punish us for love, Rajguru? He saved my life... yet they treat him as a criminal.

Ishaan bows his head solemnly — but his eyes glimmer with calculation.

"What if I told you... Aditya need not rot in chains? That I can put the key to his freedom in your hands?

Amaya spins to face him, startled.

"You... you would do that?" - Amaya said hopefully.

Rajguru nods slowly, his tone gets heavy with the false gravity — "But only if you trust me, Princess and do as I say. The path is dangerous — it demands courage."

He lets a pause hang in the air, drawing her deeper into desperation.

"Tomorrow, you are to be wedded to the Prince of Ratanpur. Yet he has never seen your face. Cloaked, veiled... how will he know if the bride beneath the veil is you, or another?

Amaya stiffens.

"Another?" - Amaya muddled.

Ishaan leans in, lowering his voice, as though sharing a divine secret.

“Devika... Your shadow, your companion since childhood. For one day, let her sit in your place. The ceremony will pass, the Prince’s honor will be saved, and no one will suspect. Meanwhile, you and Aditya... you will be far beyond these walls, joined by sacred vows.”

Amaya stares at him, torn between loyalty and longing.

“But... Devika? How could I ask her to bear such burden?”- Amaya’s voice shaken.

“It is not a burden, but a sacrifice for your happiness. Once you return with Aditya, the Maharaj and Maharani will see your love is true. They will forgive, and Devika will be restored.”- Rajguru persuaded her.

He produces a **bronze key** from his robes, letting it catch the lamp’s glow.

“Take it. On your wedding night...free Aditya. By dawn, you must be gone.”

Amaya gasps, tears brimming in her eyes as she accepts the key with trembling hands.

“Rajguru... may the gods bless you. You have given me back my life.”- Amaya said with the tears of thankfulness in her eyes.

Ishaan smiles faintly, lowering his gaze in mock humility.

“Yes... given you life, only to take it. When the flames rise, none shall escape.”- Rajguru whispered to himself, once she looks away with trembling hands clutching the key, unaware it is the seal of her doom.

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The fire from Devika's sacrifice still smoulders, smoke curling into the starless sky. The scent of burnt flesh lingers like a curse.

Bound in chains, **Amaya** and **Aditya** are dragged before the pillar, their feet scraping the stone. The **Rajguru Ishaan** stands at the head of the assembly, his black robes whispering in the wind.

Behind him, **Maharaj Raghavendra** and **Maharani Radha Devi** approach, their faces hollow with grief, their crowns gleaming faintly under torchlight. The crowd whispers in confusion—why the king and queen themselves?

The Rajguru raises his voice.

“The curse has revealed itself in full. Devika's fire was not enough—the heaven is still hungry. The princess and her tainted guard must be offered... only then shall balance return to Vasantgarh.”

A murmur of shock spreads. Amaya stares at her parents, eyes wide, pleading.

**Ma!!Pita J!!** You know my heart. You know I would never betray you—never betray this land!

Maharaj's jaw clenches. His eyes glisten with tears, but he does not look at her directly. The Maharani trembles, her hands shaking, but she steels herself.

“It is *he!* This snake, The Rajguru, who twisted the stars to his will! He killed Devika to hide his sins, and now you let him poison you against your own blood.”- Aditya shouted angrily by struggling to get freed.

“Would you let the people see their king and queen weak before fate? No. The sacrifice must be done by your own hands,

Maharaj... Maharani. Only then will the gods be appeased.”-  
Rajguru Ishaan said calmly without even looking at Aditya.

The priestly circle begins chanting again, their voices low and rhythmic, urging the king and queen forward.

The Maharaj grips the torch with trembling hands. His voice cracks.

“Forgive me, Amaya... forgive me.”-Maharaja murmured

Amaya sobs, shaking her head violently.

“No, Pita Ji! Do not do this! Please—if you burn us, the curse will live forever!”

The Maharani takes another torch, tears streaming down her face. She whispers, broken, as she looks at her daughter.

“My child I gave you life and now I must take it, for the kingdom’s sake. I can’t let my kingdom suffer due to your sins, you let us down, now you will have to die, law is equal for everyone.”

Aditya pulls Amaya close, defying the guards who hold him down.

“No curse is stronger than our love. Not Devika’s, not his. Even if we burn, I will find you... in every birth.”- Aditya said to Amaya by gazing into her teary eyes.

The Rajguru steps forward, his voice like iron.

“Now. End this.”

The Maharaj and Maharani step forward together, their hands trembling as they lower the torches. Flames lick the oil-soaked wood stacked beneath Amaya and Rudra.

The fire catches. Amaya screamed

The Maharaj turns away, unable to look. The Maharani covers her ears, her sobs lost in the roar of the fire.

Amaya and Aditya 's screams rise together, mingling with the chants. They hold each other tightly as the flames engulf them, their silhouettes merging in the inferno until both collapse into stillness.

The Rajguru closes his eyes, a twisted satisfaction playing on his lips. He lifts his hands to the crowd and announced.

“The heavens are appeased. The curse is broken. The kingdom is cleansed.” The crowd was standing in terrified silence. Maharaj and Maharani were sobbing but they were satisfied that they managed to save the kingdom from the curse of the stars. As the flames die down, the ashes of Amaya, Aditya, and Devika mingle together. Rajguru kneels down, whispering low, a confession to the night.

“Amaya now I answer you question why Rajguruuuu why??? I loved you but you loved that guard Aditya, your parents also rebuked me when I went to them with our marriage proposals, it was me who cast spell on the prince of Ratanpur and awarded him death, it was my chants that unveiled Devika. Next, Aditya, I silenced anyone like him who dares come between me... and you. And Amaya... you will never belong to him. If I cannot claim you in life, I will bind you in death. And lastly, Devika she knew too much. She has to burn. She was the one whose footsteps echoed in the corridor. Having too much knowledge can cost you your life.” - Rajguru revealed his secret in a chilling tone.

He scatters the ashes into the night air. They drift, glimmering faintly—like strands of a crimson thread—before vanishing into the darkness.

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## Chapter-17

# The Fall of Vasant Garh

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*Temple Courtyard- The same night of sacrifice*

### Temple Courtyard- The same night

The fire dies slowly. The charred altar is thick with smoke and the mingled ashes of **Devika, Amaya, and Rudra**. The crowd murmurs uneasily, unsettled by the horror they've witnessed.

Suddenly, a deep **rumble** rolls through the temple grounds. The torches flicker violently. The chanting priests falter, fear creeping into their voices.

Inside the sanctum, the **idol of the deity**—black stone, centuries old, adorned in gold and flowers—begins to tremble. Its jewelled crown rattles. A crack splits the temple wall.

Gasps rise as the idol itself begins to shift. Slowly, impossibly, it **turns its face away** from the sanctum, its eyes of stone glinting with

rejection. Then, before the stunned assembly, it slides from its pedestal, crashing to the floor with a thunderous roar.

The priests scream. The people fall to their knees in terror.

“The god has abandoned us!” - some villagers shouted in dread.

The Rajguru stiffens, trying to mask his own shock.

“Silence! This is a test! The deity departs only to cleanse the kingdom of impurity!” - Rajguru said by raising his arms.

But the Maharaj and Maharani look stricken. Radha Devi clutches her chest, trembling, as the truth dawns—this was no cleansing. This was desecration.

The idol, impossibly, slides toward the temple door, dragged as if by unseen hands. The garlands crumble. Its eyes glimmer faintly under the moonlight—cold, condemning.

When it reaches the threshold, it tips forward, crashing upon the stone steps. The head of the idol snaps clean off, rolling across the courtyard—coming to rest near the ashes of the three who were burned.

The crowd wails. Some cover their heads, others scatter in fear.

“The god has turned away... Vasantgarh is cursed.” - The horrified priests started whispering.

The Maharaj drops his torch, stared blankly at the fallen idol. The Maharani sinks to her knees, sobbing.

The Rajguru’s eyes flicker with unease—but only for a moment. Then, he straightens, voice sharp, commanding.

“Do not fear! The curse is broken! We are cleansed!”

But no one believes him. The murmurs of the crowd rise: “The god is gone... The kingdom is doomed.”

And above the altar, the pillar, where ashes swirl in the smoky air, faint crimson threads shimmer, intertwining—Devika’s curse, Amaya’s love, Aditya’s defiance—woven together into destiny.

“We killed our child... and with her, our kingdom.” - Maharani Radha Devi whispered with broken tone.

A distant roar shakes the chamber—stone collapsing as another palace wall crumbles.

The Rajguru stands in the shadows, clutching his prayer beads, his eyes wild. He whispers to himself—not to the gods, but to the memory of Amaya.

“Even if kingdoms fall... even if gods turn away... I will find you again, Amaya. In every birth, you will be mine.”

The chaos is beyond control. Fire, flood, and storm tear Vasantgarh apart. Screams rise from every direction.

The Maharaj and Maharani stand **among their people** in the temple courtyard. Their royal ornaments, once a mark of divinity, now glint like curses in the firelight.

The **sky tears apart** with blinding lightning. Thunder deafens. A cyclone of fire and ash whirls across the courtyard, sweeping men and women off their feet.

Roof beams crash down, crushing nobles and guards alike. Horses trample panicked servants. Mothers scream as children are dragged into the muck by floods of rain-turned-mud.

The **charred neem tree** finally gives way, collapsing sideways, its burning limbs scattering sparks across the crowd. Dozens ignite where they stand, their cries piercing the storm.

Radha Devi is thrown to the ground, her veil torn away. She stares at the sky as it bleeds red with fire.

“This is our punishment...” - Maharani wept.

The **temple spire**, cracked by lightning, sways violently above. Stones crumble.

Raghavendra looks up just as the entire spire tears free and comes crashing down into the courtyard. He tries to shove Radha Devi aside — but the weight of the collapsing temple crushes nobles, guards, villagers... and the royal couple themselves.

Dust and fire engulf the courtyard. Screams cut off in an instant.

The storm consumes the kingdom, Streets collapse into the raging Ganga river. The bazaar burns in sheets of fire. Floods carry corpses through alleyways. The palace walls fall inward like paper.

At the heart of it, the courtyard is nothing but smoke, ruin, and broken bodies — the Maharaj and Maharani included. The sacrifices of Amaya, Rudra, and Devika echo in the screams of the collapsing kingdom.

The fate of Vasantgarh is severed.

As the calamity rages — fire, flood, collapsing stone — the **Rajguru Ishaan** staggers forward, his saffron robes scorched, his sacred thread blackened. His forehead tilak runs with blood and sweat.

He sees the Maharaj and Maharani crushed. Panic flickers across his face — but quickly twists into madness.

No! Not me! I was your voice, Devi! Your servant! Your chosen!  
!- Ishaan, shrieking at the storm.

He runs toward the broken stairs of the temple, there he saw the cracked **idol of Devi** lies shattered. He drops to his knees before it, clawing at the broken stone.

“You cannot leave me! I gave you blood, I gave you fire, I gave you HER!”- Ishaan pleaded desperately by pointing at the ashes of Amaya mixed with the ashes of Devika and Aditya- I loved her more than any god ever could— A deafening thunderclap silences him.

From the fissures of the broken idol, a surge of flame and smoke bursts forth. The **red threads once tied as offerings whip up into the air**, twisting like serpents.

They lash around Ishaan’s wrists, his neck, his chest — binding him.

No—no, I am the Rajguru—your priest—your beloved—! Ishaan struggling and choking.

The threads tighten, searing into his flesh. Blood runs where they cut. His body jerks as if puppeted, dragged upward toward the collapsing spire and he was **hoisted into the air by the very threads he once used for sacrifice**. The storm roars. The threads pull tighter until— With a sickening crack—his body snaps.

His corpse hangs for a moment in the fiery rain, like an offering rejected, before the burning spire comes down and crushes him into the rubble.

The red threads that killed him disintegrate into ash, scattering on the wind.

*The Devi accepts no false devotion.*

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## Chapter-18

# Beneath the Calm, the Curse

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Rohit was born and raised in **a crumbling ancestral haveli** in the outskirts of Banaras, near the old ghats where the air always smelled of damp incense and forgotten prayers. His home was large but hollow—like a palace built for rituals, not laughter.

His father, **Omprakash Mishra**, was a stern priest at a little-known tantric temple—**a man obsessed with rituals, astrology, and cosmic justice**. Cold and distant, Omprakash rarely spoke to Rohit except to recite shlokas or correct his Sanskrit pronunciation. His mother, **Shravani**, died under mysterious circumstances when Rohit was only five. Some say she drowned in the Ganga. Others whisper she was a *sacrifice*. Her death was never truly investigated. Rohit remembers her vaguely—**a scent of jasmine, anklets, and lullabies that always ended before they were complete**.

After her death, **Rohit was raised among shadows and scriptures**. Omprakash immersed him in spiritual discipline—no cartoons, no festivals, only holy texts and ancient scrolls.

*While other children played, Rohit traced yantras in the dust.  
While others learned cricket, he was made to memorize the  
shlokas.*

*His lullabies were replaced by chants. His toys by sacred malas.*

By age 12, Rohit had already learned many matras, At 15, he secretly read from his father's forbidden "**tantric pustakas**"—especially those that spoke of **binding souls and reversing karma**.

He never had friends. His classmates at school found him "too serious," "strange," or "creepy."

His eyes always seemed to stare through people, not at them. He learned to **mask his hunger for connection** with polite detachment. But inside, a storm brewed—the **desire to be loved, chosen, touched**. When no one gave him that, he turned to the only thing he understood:

***Control through rituals.***

His father died when Rohit was in his early twenties—alone in the temple, mid-chant. Some say the ritual backfired. Others believe he was *taken*. Rohit never shed a tear on his death.

Instead, he cremated his father himself—**chanting the same mantras Omprakash had drilled into him**, but with hollow eyes. Then, he locked away the temple, and started living in the neighbourhood of Vanya. He joined the police force

"To serve dharma through law," he told them.

But deep inside, it was never about law.

It was about **control, order, and punishment**—just like his father had taught him.

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Rohit lives alone in a small, overly tidy house of two rooms—filled with, brass idols smeared with sindoor, a framed, cracked photo of his mother, a locked wooden box containing his father’s final *tantra pustak*, red thread rolls neatly stacked in drawers next to case files.

He tells people he prefers solitude.

But the truth is, **he has never known anything else.**

When he saw Vanya , it wasn't just attraction—it was **recognition**. The first time her voice echoed down a corridor, something ancient inside him stirred. **Love**, to him, is not a gift. It's a **debt the universe owes him**.

Senior Inspector Rohit Mishra, posted in the Banaras Crime Branch, is widely respected for his razor-sharp instincts and an almost prophetic ability to anticipate criminal behavior. At thirties, he’s one of the youngest officers to hold such a senior position—known to crack complex cases with minimal fuss and maximum precision.

Always impeccably dressed in neatly pressed khakis, his badges gleam with quiet pride. His boots never carry dust, and even during brutal investigations, his uniform carries a calm dignity—clean, controlled, exact.

Tucked into his left chest pocket, just above his heart, are prayer beads—a habit many think is for meditation or focus. What they don’t know is that he often uses them during occult rituals, chanting mantras under his breath in dead languages, asking for guidance not from God, but from the dark forces.

Rohit exudes a **calm, collected authority** that puts both civilians and officers at ease. To those around him, he seems a **man of restraint and compassion**. He is a good listener, always listens before he speaks. He never raises his voice. He pauses, looks people in the eye, and seems to **understand pain better than most**.

But **beneath that surface** lies a furnace of repressed intensity. He keeps **records of ritualistic symbols, patterns in the murders, signs others ignore**. In the privacy of his quarters at the station, he studies palm leaves, death charts, yantras, and ancient Vedic diagrams—not just to understand the murders but to **bend fate to his own desires**.

He **suffers from vivid dreams** and insomnia, often spending nights awake, pacing the narrow corridors of the police station or kneeling before a mirror etched with red thread markings, whispering names from the past—**Amaya... Aditya... Ishaan...**

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To the world, Rohit is **just a caring neighbour**, the kind of every woman would wish for her aging mother.

He carries Vanya's groceries when he sees her returning from the market. He **checks on her mother when she's not home**, sometimes bringing medicines, or calling a plumber without being asked. He keeps an **extra umbrella at the gate** in case she forgets hers. He once fixed her scooter's mirror silently, and only mentioned it after weeks, as if it were nothing.

But **his affection isn't kindness—it's control**. He watches her from his window—never when the light is on. He knows her habits, what time she leaves for her yoga class, how she

ties her hair when she's upset, what is the colour of her feet's nail polish, her favourite perfume.

He records her laughter in the background of neighbourhood calls. He follows her secretly when she travels out of town—always just close enough to protect, but never close enough to be noticed.

He calls her by her past-life name, "Amaya," in his dreams. He believes she is **meant to be his**, that fate wronged him in another lifetime. He seeks to **correct that cosmic error**, through **ritual**, through **devotion**, and if needed—through **violence**.

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To his juniors and the public, Inspector Mishra is the very model of police integrity.

A man of discipline. A hero who doesn't chase limelight but **gets results**. Locals say he once entered a sealed house where five people were murdered—and came out with the name of the killer just from the smell of the air and the angle of the corpse's neck. His **sixth sense is legendary**, and some officers **fear him as much as they respect him**. They whisper about the **room behind his office**, where he keeps red strings, a locked black wooden box, and a stone idol covered in sindoor.

They talk about how he's often seen **walking barefoot in the streets of Banaras at 3 a.m., reciting shlokas under his breath**.

One constable claimed to see him standing motionless in front of the Ganges with red thread wrapped around his wrists, muttering to the river, as if asking for someone to return. They dare not question him. Because when Rohit speaks, even the most stubborn suspects **confess**—sometimes crying, sometimes

screaming. He knows **what lies beneath the skin**, not just the crime—but the **soul behind it**.

Though grateful for his guidance—especially after her father's strange **disappearance** and her mother Radha's descent into **delusions and fear**—Vanya **can't name the discomfort** she feels around Rohit.

She assumes it's her own paranoia. After all, he's always been **so helpful**—dropping her to the hospital when Radha had seizures, fixing the water filter without being asked, bringing books on mythology “by coincidence.” But there are moments that linger too long- The way his eyes don't blink when she talks to him. The fact that he knows her favourite tea—even though she never told him. A notebook he once left open by chance, with a sketch of her... in bridal attire, bound by thread.

*The space behind his drawing room is dim. A copper kalash, sandalwood ashes, a carved idol with three faces—Kaal, Prem, and Paap. Rohit whispers to it.*

"She was mine once. She will be again. Aditya cannot have her. Not again. Not this life."

*(He opens an old file labelled: "VASANTGARH – 1846 – Princess Amaya, Royal Rajguru Ishaan, Execution Record." He runs a trembling hand across the page, his name burnt into destiny.)*

By day, Inspector Rohit's apartment looks spartan and clean—neutral walls, government-issued furniture, a neatly folded khaki uniform on the hanger. But **past the locked study door**, behind thick red curtains and incense-smoked shadows, is a room **untouched by light** or reason.

The walls are strung with red thread—webbed into intricate yantras and mandalas. Within them are pinned hundreds of sketches of Vanya. Some are traced from photographs, some sketched from memory, and some... seem drawn from lives she hasn't lived yet.

At the heart of this chamber lies an altar made of black stone, etched with sacrificial symbols from ancient Vasantgarh—where fate once turned cruel, and he, as Rajguru Ishaan, lost the only woman he desired.

*A single diya flickers. On the floor, Rohit sits cross-legged, his chest bare, smeared with ash. He wears only a white dhoti and red thread. His eyes are rimmed in lamp soot. Before him, a book bound in decaying hide lies open, its pages pulsing in candlelight like living flesh.*

The cursed book came to him years ago—smuggled from Vasantgarh's ruined temple, written by a nameless tantric said to have pierced the veil of lifetimes.

Its language is fragmented Sanskrit fused with Prakrit, stitched in vermilion ink, the margins riddled with footnotes in blood.

*It speaks of souls tied through karma, of threads soaked in memory, of rituals to reverse destiny—not through prayer, but possession.*

Rohit believes this book chose him, just as Vanya's soul once belonged to him—and Adiya stole her.

**Rohit (reading aloud):**

*“Ya devi yasya hridaye sansthitā...*

*Tasya manah bandhya bhavati, punarjanm bhi uska bandhan hota hai...”*

*(She who resides in the heart of one... Her mind becomes his prison. Her rebirth, his eternal bond.)*

Every Amavasya night, Rohit performs his deepest ritual. He mixes: Ashes of sacrificial wood and funeral pyres, drops of his own blood, powdered kumkum, soaked in sandalwood oil, a lock of Vanya's hair—stolen from her comb when he visited her mother "accidentally"

He bathes in the ash, draws a circle of protection, and lights seven candles, each wrapped in red silk thread soaked in ghee and sandal.

As the flames flicker, shadows dance across the wall. He murmurs the ancient invocation:

“Darshan de mujhe... sapno mein, uske drishtikon se. Jahan woh dekhti hai, main dekhu. Jahan woh bhoolti hai, main yaad rakhun.”

And then, it begins. His breath shallows. The room contracts. He sees: Her asleep in bed, her hand twitching. Her dream—an old palace, a neem tree, a woman sitting on the pyre. **Aditya's hand reaching for her**, just before the dream snaps. Rohit jerks awake, bleeding from his palm. He **slashes a line** through Aditya's sketch.

**Somewhere...Aditya (to himself, softly):**

"He's found her again... But this time, I know the rituals. This time, I will win."

Rohit's mind has split—one part the officer, calculating and clear-headed; the other, **the eternal lover**, bound by a karmic curse. He **no longer sees Vanya as separate** from him—her body, her dreams, even her fears are signs of their ancient bond trying to

**resurface.** *He sees himself as Ishaan, standing on the palace balcony, watching Amaya (Vanya) being dragged to the neem tree. Aditya holds her hand. She screams his name. "Ishaan... ruk jao!"*

*But he chants instead, invoking a curse. He wakes up, sweating, whispering her name.*

"Not this time. This time I will cleanse fate. This time... you will be mine willingly."

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Rohit performs **occult practices by night**, alone in his house, walls covered in red thread patterns and sketches of Vanya. He owns an old, **tattered manuscript**—a cursed granth believed to be authored by a tantric of Vasantgarh. This book guides him in manipulating fate, invoking shadows, and connecting lives across births. He bathes in ashes, draws symbols with his own blood, and whispers ancient hymns to control memory and bind souls. On certain nights, he uses a **red silk thread soaked in ghee and sandalwood**, which he ties around candles to “see” Vanya’s dreams.

He believes Vanya belongs to him—not just now, but across lifetimes. To Rohit, his obsession is not *wrong*—it is righteous reclamation.

*“What the world calls madness, the scriptures call penance.”*  
*“She was mine. Aditya broke the thread. Now fate brings her back. Is it not my duty to complete the knot?”*

He sees every manipulation, every watchful moment, not as violation—but as acts of divine orchestration. He believes the red thread of fate was severed in Vasantgarh—by

Aditya, by her betrayal, by karma—but that now, through ritual and devotion, it can be rewoven.

In his mind, Aditya is the usurper, and Vanya is lost, bewitched by a past she doesn't remember.

He sees himself as the guardian, the one who remembers the ancient bond she must be made to feel again. Hidden behind a wooden bookshelf in his apartment, there's a false panel that opens to a shrine of obsession. Newspaper clippings on the wall, of Vanya winning a school debate, Vanya's art exhibition at DU. A photo of her in a candlelight protest. A lock of her hair, tied with a red thread, inside a copper amulet. A map of Vasantgarh, with markings in red, including the neem tree, the ruined palace. Dozens of sketches of her in various time periods: A Mughal-style miniature of her in royal silks, A sepia-toned image of her as a freedom fighter, shawl blowing in the wind, A tribal priestess figure and the most significant and the most prominent is of Princess Amaya, standing under the neem tree, her hands tied with a red thread, looking at someone who is not visible on the page.

*(Rohit has never drawn himself into the frame. Only watches her from beyond the edge.)*

Each sketch is titled "Amaya", and dated not by calendar—but by cosmic alignment:

*"Krittika Nakshatra – 1792"*

*"Ashwin Amavasya – 1846"*

*"Chaitra Purnima – Present"*

He keeps a journal beside this wall.

In it, he writes: "The thread frayed. The soul wandered. But I found her. And she will find me. If I must tie her soul to mine with blood and ash... I will."

"I will protect her from Aditya, from karma, from herself."  
"Amaya. Amaya. Vanya. One soul. Nine lives. Mine."

Rajguru Ishaan, clad in black robes, ash on his forehead, he was feared and revered. The king of Vasantgarh sought his counsel before every war. The queen offered him gold and garlands in secret.

And in the shadows of the fire, "he" sought only one thing—  
**Princess Amaya...** was... reborn as **Rohit Mishra.**

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## Chapter-19

# Storms of the Heart

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### *The River Side Café: Evening*

The sky bleeds into shades of violet and gold as lanterns flicker to life. The river glitters under the rising moon, silver spilling like a secret across its surface. Inside the café, half-empty and hushed, **Vanya and Aditya** sit close by the glass wall, a teapot steaming between them.

“Vanya, You’re staring at the river like it has all your answers. Should I be jealous?” -

“May be. The river never hides anything... it carries everything away. Sometimes I wish it could carry the past too.”

“Let it carry it, then. Whatever chains us — it doesn’t matter. What matters is here. Now.” - Aditya leaned closer with a low voice.

He brushes his fingers across hers. She doesn’t pull away. Their touch lingers, fragile but deliberate.

“I’ve seen how the past finds ways to bleed into the present, Aditya. What if... what if it does again?”

“Then we’ll face it together. Vanya... in this life, I want you. Not as a fleeting dream. Not as a secret. But as my wife.”- Aditya gave a firm look to Vanya with eyes locked on hers.

*Her lips part at his words. For a moment she looks away, the silvered reflection of her face in the glass overlaying with the faint shadow of **Princess Amaya**. She almost gasps, but Aditya’s hand cups her cheek, grounding her.*

“You’re not afraid? Of what might come for us?”- Vaanya whispered in a vulnerable tone.

“Afraid? Yes. But more afraid of losing you. And if the past dares to chase us again—”

Aditya smiled gently and with a pause, tightening his grip on Vanya’s hand—we’ll write a new story. One where no one tears us apart.

*Vanya searches his eyes, the weight of his promise pressing against her doubts. Her heart races, her throat dry.*

“Say it again. Please.”- Vanya said softly, with tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I want you as my wife, Vanya. This time... fate doesn’t get to choose. *We do.*”

*She leans closer, her forehead against his for a brief, trembling second. Then their lips meet — soft, lingering, more a vow than a kiss. Outside, their silhouettes are cast against the glass, moonlight painting them as two eternal figures bound together. For a*

*moment, their reflections flicker into **Amaya and Aditya**, the past bleeding through before fading away. Neither of them notices.*

*Their kiss deepens, the world shrinking to nothing but their joined breath, their promise unbroken.*

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### ***Rohit's House: The same night***

The room is quiet, too quiet. The hum of the ceiling fan and the ticking of a wall clock echo louder than they should. Rohit sits at his small work desk. His work files, normally in perfect order, are shoved to the side. At the center lies a single sheet of paper where he's scrawled and re-scribbled sentences, crossing them out in frustration. A velvet box lies open beside him, the modest ring glinting faintly under the lamp.

Rohit leans back, running a hand over his face. His eyes are weary, but restless — filled with hunger that love alone cannot explain.

"Mrs. Sharma... I've stood by your family. I've cared for Vanya. Let me promise her a safe future." - Rohit rehearsed softly.

"No...No... No...too formal... too weak"- Rohit pauses and shakes his head

He grips the ring box tightly, staring at it as if it might answer him.

"Radha Sharma won't refuse me. She can't. Haven't I proven myself? Every knock at midnight, every danger that crept near her house — who was there first? Me. Always me. Not Aditya. Me."

His voice trembles between longing and rage. He presses the box against his chest, eyes closing as if in prayer.

“I’ll protect her. Even from herself, if I have to. She doesn’t see it now... but she will. She’ll understand.”

For a fleeting moment, his expression softens as he imagines Vanya smiling. But slowly, the smile in his mind shifts — her features blurring, turning into Princess Amaya’s face. The vision jolts him. His jaw clenches.

“Why does it always come back to her? That face... that same defiance. Even now, after centuries... she looks at me like I’m the villain.”

He grips the desk edge until his knuckles whiten, his voice growing darker.

“I was the one who truly loved you, Amaya. I prayed for you, bled for you. And you chose him...him...him... Aditya.”- Rohit gritted his teeth.

(He leaned closer to the ring box, whispering almost madly) But not this time. In this life, you’ll be mine, Vanya. You have to be. Fate owes me this much.

He flips open the ring box again, staring at it with obsession, his reflection in the ring’s glint distorted, almost sinister.

“She won’t slip away this time. She can’t”

“Aditya... the outsider. The interloper. He doesn’t know her like I do. He didn’t grow up watching her laugh across the courtyard, or holding her when she scraped her knees. He didn’t wait in the shadows, making sure no harm touched her. He doesn’t deserve her.

”- Rohit murmured in a low but bitter voice.

Then he leans back on his large chair, running a hand through his hair, his eyes wild with the intensity of his thoughts.

“If he were gone... she’d see me. She’d finally see me.” - His voice falters, but then steadies with eerie calm as if convincing himself.

“You’ll thank me one day, Vanya. You’ll see I was the one who stayed. Not him. Me. Always me.”

His voice trails into silence, his hand trembling on the box. The ticking clock grows louder, filling the room with an oppressive rhythm, like a countdown. The lamp flickers. For an instant, Rohit’s shadow on the wall stretches unnaturally tall, its outline resembling the robed figure of **Rajguru Ishaan**, whispering through time. Rohit notices it — but instead of fear, a faint, almost reverent smile spreads across his lips.

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### ***Divya’s House: The same night***

The storm rattles the city. Rain lashes furiously against the windows, each gust howling like a scream from another world. The **oil lamp** on Divya’s table flickers, throwing warped shadows across the cracked walls. She kneels before the fractured mirror, clutching the faded **neem-leaf bracelet** she unearthed from her grandmother’s trunk — brittle, ancient, impossible to let go of.

Her knuckles whiten around it. Her breath trembles between sobs and rage.

“You think you’re blessed, don’t you, Vanya? The dutiful daughter, the angel everyone trusts. Just like her... Amaya.” - her tone gets bitter and hardens.

All eyes turned to you. All hands reached for you. And me? I was the shadow, the afterthought. The one left to starve on scraps of affection.

She presses the bracelet against her chest, voice cracking as she slips into half-delirious fury.

“He looked at you the way he should have looked at me. Aditya... belongs to me. He was meant for me.” - Devika’s voice was rising and trembling as well.

Her hand shakes violently. She slams the bracelet to the floor, scattering its beads. They roll across the tiles, some bouncing against the feet of the **goddess idol** on the table. The flame flares unnaturally high, shadows surging like claws across the wall.

“You walk around as if lifetimes of betrayal don’t stain you. But I remember. My soul remembers. Every tear, every wound, every night I begged the gods for justice.” - Divya hissed in a venomous tone.

(leaning closer to the mirror, whispering to Vanya/Amaya’s imagined reflection)

You said you’d stand with me, always. But you broke me, Amaya. You betrayed me, Vanya. And for that...

She drags her finger across a broken shard, slicing her skin. Blood trickles down, falling onto the scattered beads. The flame bends toward her, as though feeding on her vow.

“...for that, I’ll steal every smile from your lips. I’ll rip every joy from your hands. I’ll make sure the man you love watches you die in despair.” - Her voice rises, thunder booming outside, shaking the glass.

“Do you hear me, Amaya? Even across lifetimes, I will not forgive you! You’ll never escape me. Never!”

Her reflection splinters — in one shard, she sees her own wild eyes, in another, Amaya’s terrified face, and in a third, blood dripping from Aditya’s chest. Divya stares, then begins to laugh — low, broken, but triumphant.

“If the gods won’t punish you... then I will. I’ll be your shadow, your curse, your end. This thread will tighten around your throat until it chokes you.”

The lamp suddenly extinguishes. The apartment plunges into darkness. Only her laughter mingles with the storm, echoing like Devika’s voice reborn.

### *Devika took birth as Divya*

The storm rages outside. The room is still dark, the oil lamp extinguished. Divya breathes heavily, sweat and tears streaking her face. Slowly, she crawls toward her phone lying on the bed. She unlocks it — the screen’s glow the only light now.

Her fingers, trembling, scroll aimlessly through social media — until she freezes. A photo fills the screen: **Vanya and Aditya at the riverside café**, laughing over tea, his jacket draped over her shoulders. The caption reads: **“Together, always. ♥ #NewBeginnings”**

Divya’s eyes widen. The storm outside cracks like a whip. Her hand trembles violently, gripping the phone so hard the glass almost cracks under her fingers.

“There it is... again. The same smile. The same betrayal. The same stolen heart.” - **Divya’s voice broke**

*She zooms in on the photo, her nails scratching against the screen as if clawing Vanya's face.*

“You flaunt him, don't you? Just like before. A princess in one life, a goddess in this one... always taking what should have been mine.”

*Her breath quickens, turning into ragged sobs. But her sobs harden into a growl, then into laughter — sharp, unhinged.*

“No. Not this time. You won't marry him, Vanya. You won't smile that way for long. I'll tear this happiness from you piece by piece, until you remember who I am.

*She lifts the phone higher, the screen illuminating her twisted smile. In the mirror behind her, the reflection no longer matches her movements — instead, the figure of **Devika in royal garb** stares back, blood dripping from her hand, whispering silently in sync with her words.*

That Aditya was mine. This Aditya will be mine. And you... you will die remembering my name.

*Thunder booms. The phone flickers strangely, as if the storm itself runs through it. On the screen, for a split second, the photo of Vanya and Aditya glitches — their faces warping into **Amaya and Aditya's**.*

*Divya gasps, then laughs again, her voice rising with the storm. her laughter echoing like a curse.*

## Chapter-20

# The Ring Left Behind

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**T**he tick-tock of the wall clock is the only sound. A tray of tea cools on the table, steam long gone.

**Rohit** sits upright on the sofa, his **police jacket folded neatly** beside him like a badge of honor. His posture is rehearsed — shoulders stiff, hands clasped — but his eyes betray him: restless, burning, almost pleading. The air is heavy, still. On the centre table, a **velvet ring box** gleams under the tube-light. Beside it rests a **carefully folded janampatri**, tied with a sacred red thread.

“Aunty ji... I’ve stood with your family through everything. I’ve been here whenever you needed me. Vanya... means more to me than life itself.” - Rohit said in a soft, composed and well rehearsed manner. After taking a brief pause and swallowing his spit-  
“Aunty ji... today, I’ve not come as an officer, not as your neighbour... but as a man (beat, pushes the ring box forward) I love your daughter. More than life itself. I’ve come to ask... for

her hand.” He places the **janampatri** beside it, his voice tightening with certainty.

“Pandit ji has matched our charts. It’s a perfect union — written in the stars.” smiles faintly, with pride – “And this ring... it’s for her.”

Radha’s hands stay in her lap. She looks at the objects — the ring and the janampatri — as if they weigh a thousand tons.

She lifts her gaze, her voice calm, but with an unshakable firmness. Radha studies him, her expression unreadable. She folds her hands in her lap, weighing her words carefully.

“Rohit beta... you’ve been like a son to me. Truly. But marriage... it isn’t built on loyalty or gratitude. It’s built on love. And Vanya’s heart... it belongs elsewhere.” - She slides the janampatri back toward him. Silence. The words hang like a knife.

Rohit’s carefully practiced smile falters. His jaw tightens, muscles twitching. He grips his knee so hard his knuckles whiten, as though restraining an eruption. Rohit stares at the janampatri, unmoving. His jaw clenches, veins rising on his temple. The faint smile fades — replaced by something darker. He lets out a low, bitter laugh.

“Some things... can be changed, Auntie Ji, hearts can be guided” - Rohit said after controlling his anger.

Radha meets his gaze unflinching, her voice calm but edged- “No, Rohit. Hearts can only be broken when forced. I won’t let Vanya’s be one of them.”

Silence hangs heavy between them — suffocating, tense. Rohit’s breathing grows shallow, his composure cracking at the edges.

Just then — the front door creaks open.

Laughter floats in: light, warm, effortless. **Vanya** and **Aditya** step inside, from their morning walk, sharing some private joke. Their voices die instantly when they spot Rohit.

The room thickens with unease.

Rohit's gaze fixes on them — first at their clasped hands, then Vanya's flushed smile, then Aditya's casual protectiveness. His eyes darken, a storm rising beneath the calm mask.

“Inspector saab, here, early morning?” - Aditya said politely but cautiously.

Rohit rises slowly, deliberately. Every movement is measured, his silence heavier than words. His eyes flicker to Radha, then back to the couple.

“I have my answer. No need to say more”.

Rohit said bitterly. He picks up his jacket and his janampatri. His face is pale, but his eyes glint with something dangerous.

“Rohit... please, try to understand—” - Radha said gently while rising from her seat.

“I understand Auntie Ji... I understand everything.”

His voice echoes in the stillness. Without another word, he strides toward the door, his boots heavy on the floor. He storms out, the door slamming with such force the tea cups rattle.

The velvet box remains on the table — unopened, heavy with menace.

Vanya stares at it, shaken. Aditya slips his hand over hers. Radha, though composed, closes her eyes for a moment — as if she knows this refusal has awakened something dangerous.

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Rohit storms out of the Sharma house, his breath ragged, eyes burning with humiliation. Radha's refusal leaves Rohit shaken. Vanya and Aditya's arrival rubs salt into his wound — their laughter, their closeness. He kicks a loose stone, the sharp clatter echoing through the silence. Rohit trying to steady his breath. Rage and heartbreak swirl in his eyes.

From under the shade of a neem tree nearby, a figure slowly steps forward. **Divya aka Devika**, draped in a faded shawl, her hair loose, face pale yet sharp. Morning light cuts across her features, glinting in her mocking eyes.

"So the great officer was turned down like a schoolboy. She doesn't want you, Rohit. She never did."- Divya taunted in low voice with a half smile.

Rohit stiffens, tightened his jaw, he turns sharply toward her, his shadow stretching long in the morning sun.

"Keep your tongue in check, Divya."- Rohit

"Or what? You'll arrest me too? You forget, Inspector — obsession stinks. And right now... you reek of it.

Her words drip like venom. Rohit's nostrils flare, his face darkening with every syllable.

"No horoscope can force love. No law can bend destiny. Remember that."- Divya said loudly with a sharp voice. I know love denied festers. I know betrayal tastes like blood. You ache for Vanya... I ache for Amaya. Both threads end at the same place — Vengeance. You want her to need you, don't you? To look at you the way she looks at him. I can make that happen. But only if

you dare to break the thread that binds her fate.” - Divya whispered in a hypnotic tone.

“If fate won’t give her to me... I’ll take her.” - Rohit hissed in a dangerous way. Devika’s smile curves into something sinister.

Then our pact is sealed. You’ll have her. And I... I’ll have my justice.

The **wind howls through the neem tree**, as if remembering blood already spilled in another life.

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The **first golden rays of the sun** stream through the lace curtains, softening the tension that hangs in the air. Their was heaviness in the room left behind by the Rohit. **Radha Sharma** sits stiffly on the sofa, her face is pale, unsettled, eyes darting to the door Rohit just slammed shut.

**Vanya** paces near the window, arms crossed tightly across her chest. She looks shaken but defiant. Behind her, **Aditya** stands close, his presence protective yet cautious, his eyes watching Radha more than Vanya.

## **RADHA**

(voice trembling, breaking the silence)

“He... came here with a ring and his janampatri, Vanya.” - Radha broke the silence with a trembling voice. Her voice grows sharper,” Do you understand what that means? He wasn’t just... visiting. He came to claim you.”

“Claim me? Maa, I’m not some prize he can walk in and take. There is a big NO for him.”

“And do you think saying no is that simple? He is no ordinary man — he is the police, he holds power. Do you think he’ll just walk away after this insult?”

Vanya falters, her eyes dropping. Aditya steps forward, his voice calm but firm.

“Aunty, with all respect... power or no power, Vanya has the right to choose. And she’s chosen. (he glances at Vanya, then back) I won’t let anyone force her into something she doesn’t want.” Aditya said by looking at Radha.

Radha’s eyes flick to Aditya . A mother’s suspicion tightens in her gaze.

“And you... you appear out of nowhere, with secrets and shadows following you. How can I trust that you are not another mistake?” - Radha asked suspiciously to Aditya.

Vanya exhales sharply, stepping between them, her voice trembling with suppressed emotion, pleaded and almost cried. “Maa, please. For once, trust me. Rohit is not what he seems. Every time he looks at me, it’s like... like he’s trying to bind me, trap me. Aditya... he’s the only one who feels like freedom.”

“Freedom has a price, beti. And Rohit does not strike me as a man who forgives easily.”

The silence stretches, heavy with dread. Aditya gently places a hand on Vanya’s shoulder. She grips it, as if anchoring herself against the storm building outside.

From the distance, a faint sound of a **police siren** drifts into the morning calm — a reminder that Rohit’s shadow still looms over them.

Radha's eyes open again, glistening, torn between maternal fear and her daughter's plea.

"What have you pulled us into, Vanya...?"- Radha almost whispered to herself.

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## Chapter-21

# The Monster in the Uniform

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### *Vanya's house: Late evening*

The dining table is warm and intimate. Plates of steaming dal, sabzi, and rotis spread across the table. Aditya sits beside Vanya, both laughing softly over a silly joke. Radha watches with quiet happiness, a mother finally at peace seeing her daughter smile. Radha drifts into a deep, sensory flashback triggered by the intimacy of the moment. She remembers her life as **Radha Devi, the queen of Vasantgarh**, who alongside King Raghav ordered Amaya and Aditya's deaths to preserve power and avoid scandal.

Radha recalls the **prophecy**, the fear, and her jealousy of Amaya's love. She also remembers how Devika (her handmaiden then) was killed for knowing the truth. These memories come not as a peaceful recollection but as a flood of guilt — layered over her present life as Radha Sharma. Seeing Vanya's smile at the dinner table fills her with bittersweet relief — as if the universe has given

her a chance to atone. She resolves silently: *she will protect Vanya at all costs now, no matter the price.*

“Forgive me, Amaya... forgive me, Aditya . This time, I will not let fate take her happiness away.”- **Radha whispered to herself, unheard by the Aditya and Vanya.**

Her eyes glisten as she watches Aditya tuck an extra roti on Vanya’s plate, and Vanya shyly push it back toward him.

For Radha, it’s more than just young love — it’s the universe giving her a second chance.

The warmth of the dining table is suddenly heavy with unspoken vows, reincarnated sins, and a mother’s desperate hope for karmic balance.

For a moment, it feels like a normal family dinner. The sound of **a car screeching outside** cuts through the calm. The doorbell rings—harsh, impatient.

Radha looks up, startled. Vanya frowns. Aditya wipes his hands on a napkin and starts to get up.

Before anyone can react, the **door bursts open.**

Rohit storms in, flanked by two constables. His eyes burn with authority—and something darker.

“Rohit beta? This... this is our home! What’s going on?”

Rohit’s gaze doesn’t even shift to her. His eyes lock on Aditya.

“Aditya Sharma. You’re under arrest for the murders plaguing this city.”- Rohit announced in a freezing manner.

The table goes silent. Vanya gasps, pushing back her chair.

“What? That’s insane! He’s done nothing—”

Rohit slams a set of handcuffs on the table with a metallic clang.

“Don’t interfere, Vanya! The evidence is clear. His wallet, his prints, his hair— all found at the crime scene.”- Rohit snapped.

Aditya rises, fury in his voice “This is madness, Rohit! You’re framing me!”

“Oh yes, of course. Everyone’s always innocent until the truth bleeds out of them.”- Rohit mocked Aditya.

He grabs Aditya by the collar, yanking him across the table. A glass crashes to the floor. Food spills everywhere.

Radha cries out.

“Rohit! At least listen—this can’t be true! I know this boy—he’s good, he’s decent!”- Radha pleaded.

Rohit twists Aditya’s arms brutally behind his back, snapping the cuffs shut with deliberate force.

“Then pray for your daughter, Radha-ji. Because she’s been living with a murderer. Aditya struggles as Rohit drags him out.

“Vanya! You know me! I’d never—never hurt anyone! Please, believe me!”- Aditya shouted and Radha (**pleading**). Tears streak Vanya’s face, torn between her love for Aditya and the authority of Rohit. The door slams. Silence fills the broken dinner table.

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### *Inside Police Station- Interrogation Cell- Night*

A dimly lit room. Bare walls, a single chair bolted to the ground. Aditya sits cuffed, bruised already from Rohit’s rough handling.

Sweat glistens on his forehead. Rohit enters slowly, rolling up his sleeves. No constables now—just him and Aditya.

He circles him like a predator.

“You think you can take her from me? Sit at her table? Make her laugh like she’s already yours? You fool... destiny has chosen me.” - Rohit hissed in a low but dangerous tone.

“This isn’t about justice, is it? It’s about Vanya. You’re sick, Rohit.”

Rohit’s fist slams across Aditya’s jaw. Blood splatters.

“Don’t you say her name with that mouth!” - Rohit exploded.

He grabs Aditya by the hair, slamming his head onto the table. Aditya groans in pain.

Rohit takes out the bloodied red cotton thread from his pocket, dangling it in front of him.

“Every thread ties her to me. Not you. You’re just... a sacrifice.” - Rohit whispered like an insane person.

He strikes him again, this time with a baton. Aditya doubles over, gasping.

“She’ll... she’ll see the truth. She’ll see what you really are...”

Rohit kneels close, his voice cold and venomous.

“She’ll never believe you. By the time I’m done, you’ll be the monster. And I’ll be her saviour.”

Aditya’s face was bloodied and broken, as Rohit stands tall, his shadow stretching over him like fate itself.

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### *Inside Police Station- Waiting Room*

The station is dim, buzzing with the clatter of typewriters and ringing phones. Vanya and Radha Sharma rush in, panic etched on their faces.

They approach the duty constable.

“My fiancé... Aditya Sharma. He was brought here. We need to see him.” - Vanya said everything in one breath, she was nervous and was drenched in sweat from head to toe

Before the constable can respond, Rohit emerges from the interrogation wing. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, knuckles faintly reddened.

“Beta... please. He’s a good boy. Don’t punish him for something he hasn’t done.” - Radha pleaded by folding her hand and almost cried in front of Rohit.

Rohit’s expression hardens. He shakes his head slowly. “This is a murder investigation, Radha-ji. You’re civilians. No visitors allowed. Interference will only make it worse for him.” - Rohit said in a strict and freezing tone.

Vanya steps forward, trembling with anger.

“He’s innocent! You know it, Rohit. Let me see him, just once”

Rohit raises his hand, silencing her.

“No. Go home, Vanya. Trust me. I’ll protect you.”

His eyes linger on her a second too long, his tone shifting almost tenderly. Vanya recoils from the intensity. Constables gently usher Vanya and Radha back. They leave helpless, their faces pale with dread.

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### *Inside Police Station- Interrogation Cell- Night*

Aditya is slumped in the chair, blood on his lip, his wrists raw from the cuffs. Rohit enters again, closing the door behind him with a heavy clang. He takes out a baton, tapping it against his palm.

“Your beloved came... begging for you. You should’ve seen her eyes. So worried. So beautiful. But not for long.”- Rohit said while laughing venomously.

“She’ll see you for what you are... a monster hiding in uniform.”- Aditya glares, his voice turned hoarse.

Rohit swings the baton hard into Aditya’s ribs. He gasps, collapsing sideways in pain.

“No. She’ll see me as her saviour... when you’re nothing but a stain on her memory.”- Rohit whispered while leaning forward to Aditya.

He grips Aditya’s jaw, forcing him to look up.

“And tomorrow... I’ll put my ring on her finger.”- Rohit said with pride by emphasising more on the word “my”.

After giving a sarcastic smile to the broken Aditya, Rohit left the interrogation cell, the sound of the baton scraping against the floor.

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### *Vanya’s House...Next Morning*

The doorbell rings. *Radha hesitates, then opens it.* Her red and swollen eyes widen. Both mother and daughter could not sleep throughout the night because of Aditya’s arrest. Standing there is

Rohit, immaculate in uniform, his expression calm and dignified as if last night's violence never happened.

In his hand—a small velvet box.

“Aunty ji, today I've come to settle everything... once and for all. I've come to ask for Vanya's hand... to protect her, to cherish her. Forever.” - Rohit gently said with a smile masking his obsession.

Radha's hand trembles on the doorknob. Behind her, Vanya appears, her face tense, eyes flickering with anger. *She freezes when she sees the ring box in his hand.*

Rohit opens the box, revealing the same glittering ring which he brought earlier. His smile is warm, but his eyes burn with obsession.

“This is destiny, Vanya. Say yes... and I'll make sure nothing ever hurts you again.” - Rohit locked eyes with Vanya.

The air in the room is suffocating—love twisted into possession, protection poisoned by cruelty.

“Listen to me once more, Vanya. One yes... just one word, and Aditya will walk free. I'll withdraw every charge, I'll erase every trace of him from the police files. You'll have your precious Aditya back... but as your “*brother*, nothing more. “*I*” will be your husband.” - Rohit said while opening the box

“Rohit beta... this isn't right. This is not love, this is... force.” - Radha whispered with the teary eyes.

“It *is* love, Aunty ji. A love strong enough to fight fate itself.” - Rohit said firmly with eyes fixed on Vanya.

“Love? Don’t you dare call this madness love! You’re a disgrace to your uniform, Rohit. You hide behind the law to twist lives, to torture Aditya, to trap me. Do you think I’ll ever respect a man who stoops this low?” - Vanya said with disgust.

*Her words pierce him. His smile fades, replaced by a trembling rage. His jaw tightens, his hand closes the ring box with a snap.*

“Careful, Vanya. You’re insulting the only man who truly loves you.”

“No, Rohit. The truth is simple— *I despise you.* I’d rather die than wear that ring.”

*Rohit’s face darkens. His breathing grows heavy. In a swift, desperate motion, he pulls out the gun from his belt. Radha gasps, clutching her chest.*

“Rohit! What are you doing? Put that down!” -

*Rohit steps toward Vanya, pointing the gun at her chest. His hands shake, torn between love and fury.*

“If you won’t come with me willingly... then you’ll leave me no choice.”

*He grabs Vanya’s wrist harshly, pressing the cold barrel against her side. Radha tries to stop him but he shoves her back. Radha stumbles onto the sofa, crying helplessly.*

“You think scaring me will make me yours? You’re weaker than I thought, Rohit. Pathetic.” - Vanya still being defiant despite gun on her chest.

“Enough! You’ll understand my love... even if I have to drag you into it!” - Rohit snarled.

*In a storm of rage and desperation, he yanks her toward the door, gun still at her ribs. Radha screams after them.*

“Rohit, don’t! Please leave her! Somebody help!” - Radha cried for help.

*The door slams shut as Rohit forces Vanya into the broad daylight, abducting her at gunpoint.*

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### ***Isolated Farmhouse, Outskirts of the City – Night***

The road is silent except for the screech of ROHIT’s jeep tires. Inside, Vanya sits in the passenger seat, wrists tightly bound with his handkerchief. The gun rests in his lap, his other hand clenched on the steering wheel. Vanya glares at him, her eyes filled with both fear and fire.

“You won’t get away with this. My mother saw you... the whole world will know.” - Vanya said through gritted teeth.

“Let them. By the time they find us, you’ll already belong to me.” - Rohit said in a cold way.

*He presses harder on the accelerator. Cut to: a rundown farmhouse surrounded by tall, swaying trees. Crickets chirp in the dark. He drags her inside, pushing her into a dusty chair. A single lantern burns, casting eerie shadows.*

“Why do you force me to do this, Vanya? I offered you everything—love, safety, freedom for that boy. And what did you give me? Humiliation.” - Rohit snarled.

“Because love isn’t bought with threats. You disgust me, Rohit. You think tying my hands and pointing a gun makes you powerful? It makes you pathetic.”- Vanya chewed her words.

*Rohit slams his fist on the wooden table, the lantern shaking.*

“Enough! Don’t push me, Vanya! You’ll learn to love me—just like fate intended. You’ve always been mine... in this life and the last.”- Rohit shouted at her but after few seconds *his voice softens, almost breaking. He kneels before her, holding up the ring box again, trembling.*

“Say yes. Wear this ring and I’ll set you free. No more blood, no more fights. Just you... and me.”- Rohit desperately said.

*Vanya stares at him, silent for a moment. Then she leans closer, her voice a whisper laced with venom.*

“I’d rather wear shackles than your ring.”

*Her words stab deep. Rohit’s face twists with wounded rage. He stands abruptly, pacing like a caged animal, then points the gun at her once more. His breathing grows ragged.*

“If you won’t be mine by love... then you’ll be mine by fear.”- Rohit threatened her.

*Vanya meets his gaze without flinching, her voice steady despite the danger.*

“Kill me then, Rohit. But remember—once a man stains his hands with this kind of sin, he never escapes it. Not in this life... not in the next.”

*For a moment, Rohit freezes. Her words echo through him, pulling at the buried truth of his past life as Ishaan. His hand*

*trembles on the trigger. He squeezes his eyes shut, torn between obsession and an old, karmic guilt. He knows time is running out. He grabs Vanya by the arm, dragging her toward the back exit of the farmhouse.*

“No one will take you from me, Vanya. If I can’t have you alive... I’ll take you where no one else can touch you.”

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## Chapter-22

# Sins of the Queen

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The door creaks open. Radha, her eyes swollen from crying, steps inside the house. The air is heavy with incense smoke. On the walls are strange paintings of red threads, broken idols, and a neem tree in the shadows of the moon. Divya aka Devika, sits calmly at the table, sipping tea as though she has been expecting her.

Divya... please, you're the only one who can help. Rohit has taken Vanya... my daughter's life is in danger- Radha pleaded trembling.

Divya's lips curl into a slow, mocking smile. She sets the teacup down, her eyes gleaming with cruel amusement.

"Your daughter's life? Your daughter's? Ohhhh Radha... how quickly you forget the past. How easily you play the victim now."- Divya mocked her with low voice.

Radha frowns, confused and shaken, clutching her hands together nervously.

“What are you saying? This is no time for riddles. Please... she’s innocent.” - Radha stammered.

“Innocent? Just like I was... under that neem tree. Do you remember, Radha? Or should I remind you—when that Rajguru Ishaan ordered my death and you, your husband and infact your coward daughter was also watching my death show from the crowd, because I knew too much? Because I dared to speak of Amaya and Aditya’s forbidden love?” - **Divya laughed bitterly.**

Radha gasps, covering her mouth, the memories flashing in fragments. The sound of chains, the neem tree, Devika’s screams.

No... no, that... that was another life. That wasn’t me... **Radha whispered horrifically.**

“It was you. Radha, the queen. And your Raghav, the mighty king. You silenced me... buried me beneath that cursed tree. And now you come here, weeping, begging for my help?- Divya leaned closer, with voice sharp like a blade.

Radha trembles, tears streaming down her cheeks. She falls to her knees before Divya, her voice breaking.

“Forgive me... I didn’t know what we were doing then. The prophecy... the fear of scandal—“ - **Radha said** sobbing.

“Don’t you dare justify it! You killed me to protect your throne, your name. And you let your own daughter burn in sacrifice!” - Divya cut her off in between.

Radha shakes her head violently, clutching her ears as if trying to shut out the truth. Divya circles her slowly, almost predator-like, her voice echoing with centuries of hatred.

“And now you ask me to save your precious Vanya? Why should I? Why should the betrayed save the betrayer’s bloodline?” - Divya mocked her.

“Because she is not me. She is not Radha. Please, Divya... punish me if you must, but not my daughter. She’s already trapped in this cursed cycle of fate, she’s trapped into the clutches of that monster.”

*Divya stops, her smile fading into something colder, darker. She crouches in front of Radha, tilting her head.*

“Ahhhhh... but punishment is sweetest when it spreads across generations. May be watching your daughter suffer will finally make you understand what it feels like... to lose everything.”

*Radha lets out a heartbroken cry. Divya rises, her silhouette towering, framed against the red thread patterns on her wall. Her eyes gleam with a strange fire.*

“I won’t help you, Radha. Not now. Not until you’ve repaid every drop of blood spilled beneath that neem tree.”

*Radha collapses on the floor, sobbing uncontrollably, while Divya turns her back, sipping her tea again—calm, almost satisfied. Radha remains collapsed on the floor, clutching the edge of Divya’s black crumbled cotton sari like a child begging its mother. Divya doesn’t move, her expression carved in stone. The incense grows thicker, filling the room with an oppressive heaviness.*

“Please, Divya... please... you were once like a sister to my Amaya. Don’t punish her now. If not for me, then for her—” Radha’s throat chokes while sobbing.

“Enough! Do not dare to speak of Amaya. She loved me once, yes. She trusted me and she betrayed me, by watching me from the crowd getting torched.

*She leans forward, eyes blazing, her words dripping with venom.*

“Do you know what it feels like, Radha, to be dragged beneath the neem tree? To feel the burnt of fire while your so-called queen watches without a tear? To know your death is not for justice but for pride? That is the curse you set in motion. And now it blooms... in your daughter’s fate.

*Radha shakes violently, trying to block her ears, but Divya’s voice cuts through her sobs like a blade.*

“I was weak... blinded by fear... I thought we were protecting the kingdom...”

“No. You were protecting *yourselves*. And for that—karma demands payment.” - Divya snarled.

*Divya rises from her chair, her figure silhouetted against the lantern’s glow, casting long, jagged shadows across the wall. She walks to the window, pushing it open. The night wind carries the faint sound of police sirens far away in the distance, as if mocking Radha’s desperation.*

“Get out you bitch!!!! Go watch fate devour your daughter just as it devoured me. You ask me for help, but I am not here to save you. I am here to *witness*. *She turns, her face cold and merciless.*”

“Let karma finish what it began.”

*Radha kneels on the floor, trembling, begging for mercy. Divya towers above her, eyes dark with centuries of bitterness. The lantern flickers, shadows of red threads painted on the walls dancing like nooses.*

“Divya... you were my daughter’s friend. You knew her heart better than anyone. Then why... why this hatred? Why punish Vanya for sins she did not commit?” - Radha sobbingly said.

“Because I never got to live to see your daughter’s fate. Do you understand, Radha? I died first.” - **Divya laughed bitterly stepping closer.**

*Radha looks up at her, confused, her lips trembling.*

“I was dragged beneath that neem tree, tied like an animal, because I spoke the truth. I told you and your king what Amaya and Aditya shared. And for that—my life ended that night. I saw her, Radha! I saw Amaya in the crowd. Her eyes locked with mine while the flames consumed me. And she did nothing. She let me burn, so she could run away with Aditya. She betrayed me! I saw her eyes... and she saw mine. That is why I burn still.” - Divya’s voice trembled with rage. *Her eyes glisten, the bitterness of centuries shining through.*

*Radha shakes her head, choking, unable to meet Divya’s piercing gaze.*

“No, don’t say it” - Radha whispered.

*Radha’s tears fall freely. Her hands tremble as she presses them together in supplication. She was sobbing uncontrollably. Divya straightens, her voice calm again but laced with a chilling finality.*

“No, Divya... you don’t know the whole truth. You died too soon. You never saw what came after.”- Radha pleaded in a broken voice. Divya narrows her eyes, her mocking smile faltered.

“What are you saying?”- Divya said in an icy tone.

Radha lifts her face, streaked with tears, voice shaking.

“Amaya didn’t escape. Neither did Aditya. After you died... after your screams faded beneath that neem tree... the king and I ordered them to be silenced too. Their pyres burned... just like yours.”

Divya stiffens, her tea cup trembling in her hand. She takes a slow step back, her lips parting in shock.

“No... no, that cannot be... She was alive... she ran. She betrayed me, she chose Aditya over me”- Divya frowns with the wide eyes.

“No. She was dragged back. They tied her with the same ropes, lit the same flames. She burned, Divya. Your Amaya... your sister... she burned just like you.”

Divya staggers, her face pale, her eyes glistening. She clutches her chest as though the air has been ripped from her lungs.

“All these lives... all these centuries... all these years...this hatred... and she... she suffered too?”- tears rolled down from Divya’s cheeks.

“Yes. We killed you all. Out of fear, out of pride, out of prophecy. We damned you... and now it has damned us. Please, Divya... let the cycle end. Don’t punish my daughter for sins that were mine.”

Divya's eyes glisten with unshed tears, but her face hardens again, shadowed in lantern light.

"No, Radha. Karma doesn't end with confession. You watched me burn. You watched Amaya burn. And now you will watch Vanya burn — not in flames, but in fate. Only then will you know the weight I carried." - Divya's sharp voice broke down.

Radha collapses, sobbing uncontrollably, while Divya turns to the window. Her hand trembles as she blows out the lantern kept on the window, plunging the room into darkness.

Divya spent centuries hating Amaya, believing she betrayed her. Radha's confession reveals Amaya actually suffered the *same* fate. Divya is shaken, almost softened — but instead of forgiveness, she doubles down her anger, because to her, this truth only proves how cursed they all were.

## Chapter-23

# The Burning Goodbye

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### *Gangster's farmhouse- Night*

The farmhouse, located on the outskirts of the city, was originally seized in a raid against a notorious gangster — *Jagdish “Jagga” Singh*. Known for his illegal liquor dens and weapon smuggling, Jagga was arrested years ago, and this property should have been sealed.

But Rohit Mishra, abusing his police authority, took a hefty bribe to tamper with the case records. The farmhouse was quietly “released” back into Jagga’s family’s hands, but unofficially, Rohit kept access to it for his personal use. It has tall boundary walls with broken glass shards cemented on top, **Iron gates** with heavy chains and a rusted lion emblem — symbolic, intimidating, **overgrown gardens** with wild weeds, broken fountains, and crumbling statues, **guard posts** at each corner, with makeshift floodlights and armed men always stationed. A **garage shed** housing black SUVs and bullet bikes for quick getaways. The outside is crawling with

armed men, their rifles glinting under dim lantern light. The silence of the night is pierced only by the occasional bark of dogs in the distance.

Inside the atmosphere is grotesquely festive. a large hall with **velvet sofas, low wooden tables, and gaudy carpets**, garlands of marigolds and roses drape across the walls. Fairy lights blink in uneven patterns, giving the whole farmhouse a surreal, eerie glow. At the centre, a makeshift mandap is built. Firewood crackles in a havan kund. A nervous priest, mid-50s, adjusts his shawl, glancing around uneasily.

Rohit enters. He is dressed in a dulha's sherwani, his face gleaming with sweat and obsession. His eyes dart toward the corridor. Two women enter, supporting Vanya between them. She is drugged, her body limp, her eyes half-open, barely aware of her surroundings. The women have dressed her in a red bridal lehenga, her wrists heavy with bangles, her neck weighed down with jewellery.

One woman whispers nervously: Saab... she's barely conscious. She cannot even sit properly.

Rohit's jaw clenches. He takes Vanya's hand and presses it hard.

"She will sit. She will be mine. Fate has tied us together for lifetimes... and tonight, no god, no man will stop me."- Rohit whispered in a low and intense voice.

The women carefully made Vanya sit down on the mandap. Her head droops slightly, as though she's drifting in and out of consciousness.

The priest frowns by looking at Vanya and then back at Rohit.

“Yajmaan... she seems unwell. Marriage rituals cannot—”

Rohit’s hand slips into his sherwani pocket. He flashes the handle of a gun beneath his embroidered shawl. His eyes burn into the priest’s.

“Chant the mantras. Now...”- Rohit said cutting priest in between.

The priest gulps, his voice faltering as he begins reciting the mantras. His eyes flicker with fear, yet he dares to glance at Vanya again—her glazed eyes, her trembling lips. Something in him knows this is wrong.

The rituals begin. The fire crackles louder, sparks flying. Rohit takes Vanya’s trembling hand, forcing sindoor between his fingers.

“Look at me, Vanya... even if your soul resists, tonight you become mine. No red thread, no destiny, no past life can keep you away.”

Suddenly, Vanya’s vacant eyes—her pupils dilated, her lips muttering almost unconsciously, as if she’s slipping into a flashback of her past life. Images of Amaya, Aditya and Ishaan flicker faintly in her mind.

The priest hesitates again, his chants breaking mid-sentence.

“Bet... if your heart does not accept, this marriage is no—” - Priest said to Vanya in a low and broken voice.

Before he can finish, one of Rohit’s armed men cocks his rifle. The sound silences the priest instantly.

Rohit smirks. He lifts the mangalsutra, his hands trembling with triumph.

“For lifetimes, For centuries I waited... tonight the universe bends to me.”-Rohit’s voice was breaking with obsession and possessiveness.

As he lowers the mangalsutra toward her neck, Vanya’s lips part, almost murmuring a name from her past. The priest’s eyes widen with helplessness. Rohit’s hands shake with mad desire. The fire flares violently, as though nature itself revolts. The havan fire crackles wildly, shadows dancing on the mandap walls. The priest’s trembling chants fade into silence as heavy footsteps and a crash of doors echo through the farmhouse.

BAAAAAAM! The door bursts open.

Aditya and Radha storm in, their faces pale but determined. Behind them stands Devika, her eyes burning with restrained fury, flanked by a squad of Policemen with rifles drawn.

Aditya was released from prison after Devika presented evidence of Rohit’s bribe and manipulation to the higher authorities. The police, armed with warrants, stormed the gangster’s farmhouse. At the heavily guarded gate, the police pressed forward with force. The gates were finally breached, and with Radha, Devika and Aditya close behind, they pushed inside toward the mandap where Rohit awaited.

The room explodes in chaos—armed goons raise their weapons, but the sight of police makes them hesitate.

Rohit jerks up from the mandap, his sherwani dishevelled. He grabs Vanya, pulling her to her feet though she can barely stand with one arm, he yanks her close, with the other, he whips out his gun and presses it against her temple.

*“Koi aage nahi badhega!!!!!!”*- Rohit yelled while his voice cracked.

Everyone freezes. Even the fire seems to pause.

“I did everything... everything to keep Vanya with me. Don’t you see? It was me! Main hi tha woh laal dhaage wala qaatil!!!! The Red Thread murderer! Every drop of blood was shed so that she could never leave me, she could stay with me for the investigations of all those murders!

A stunned silence grips the room. Aditya’s face hardens, rage and horror mixing. Radha gasps, her hand flying to her mouth.

The Police Officer steps forward.

“Rohit Mishra! Put the gun down. I said Drop it now!”

“No! You don’t understand! You never will!”- Rohit’s voice started breaking down.

(presses gun tighter to Vanya’s head)

She is mine—only mine! Not Aditya’s, not anyone’s! Lifetimes have kept us apart... but I broke destiny with my own hands!

Vanya, barely conscious, stirs. A faint whisper escapes her lips-  
“R... Rohit... stop... please...”

Her voice, fragile but pleading, cuts through his mania for a flicker of a second. His grip falters—then tightens again, fiercer.

“You’ll thank me, Vanya. One day you’ll see...”- Rohit with glistening eyes said.

“Enough, Rohit! You killed innocent people for your madness. You call this love? This is poison!”- Aditya furiously stepped forward.

Rohit's face twists with jealousy, veins popping on his temple.

"Shut up! Don't say her name! She never belonged to you!"- Rohit shouted.

The police officer signals quietly to his men. Guns click into readiness.

"Rohit... put the weapon down. Don't make this your end."- The police officer said calmly.

But Rohit only laughs—a broken, hollow laugh.

"My end? No... no, sir. This is my beginning. Tonight fate bows to me..."

He begins dragging Vanya back toward the mandap, the gun never leaving her head. His sherwani brushes against the scattered marigold petals, his madness framed against the sacred fire.

Devika finally steps forward, her eyes piercing into Rohit.

"Rohit... stop this madness. In every life you tried to claim what was never yours... and in every life, you destroyed yourself"- Devika said in a cold and steady voice.

Her words cut him like knives. His breath hitches, for the first time, a flicker of doubt flashes in his eyes.

The fire crackles louder, the priest whispers a desperate prayer under his breath.

The fire in the havan kund suddenly flares, crackling unnaturally loud. The air turns heavy, suffocating. The marigold garlands hanging on the pillars wilt and darken as if touched by unseen flames.

Rohit, dragging Vanya, freezes for a second, his grip faltering. His gun trembles in his hand.

“No... no one will take her from me. Not again.”

Devika steps closer, her eyes glowing almost otherworldly in the reflection of the fire.

“Rohit... fate always finds its way. You thought you could cut the thread, but tonight, the knot pulls tight.”

The flames of the havan roar upward, licking the mandap pillars. Sparks scatter across the floor.

Suddenly, Vanya stirs. Her eyes flutter open fully for the first time. Her breath catches—her vision blurs into flashes of past lives: Amaya, standing in bridal red centuries ago, Ishaan (Rohit’s past self), eyes dark with obsession, Devika screaming under a neem tree, flames consuming her, Amaya herself and Aditya, bound in fire.

“No... Amaya... that was “me”... and you—(looks at Rohit)... You were Ishaan...

Her voice echoes like thunder, layered with her past self’s cries.

Rohit stumbles back, shaken. His eyes widen in shock. His sherwani is damp with sweat, his eyes bloodshot with madness.

“No... don’t remember! Don’t say that name! You’re mine, Vanya... only mine! No one will take her! I crossed lifetimes for this night. Fate belongs to me!”- Rohit’s voice was trembling.

But the fire has other plans. The mandap ignites fully—a blazing inferno. The heat is unbearable. Armed men scatter in panic. Police back away, shielding their eyes. Suddenly, the fire surges

upward in a radiant column of golden light, showering sparks that float like glowing threads of red. The atmosphere shifts — not destructive, but sacred, protective.

Vanya stirs, her half-conscious eyes clearing. She sees visions in the fire:

- Amaya walking through a palace courtyard.
- Aditya holding her hand.
- Ishaan (Rohit's past self) standing alone, his eyes twisted with jealousy.
- Devika, betrayed, watching from the shadows.

The memories rush back. Vanya gasps, her tears catching the firelight.

“Rohit... no. You were Ishaan. You carried this curse. But tonight... it ends.” - Vanya said firmly in a low voice.

Rohit freezes, shaken by the weight of her words. His grip on her falters.

“No... Vanya, don't remember that! Don't leave me again...”

The fire suddenly bends toward him like a living force, licking the edges of his sherwani. He panics, batting at the flames, but they crawl higher, encircling him.

“Drop the gun! Now!” - Police Officer yelled.

Rohit ignores him, thrashing. He reaches for Vanya one last time, his face twisted in anguish.

“If I burn... Vanya you will burn with me! I'll take you with me” - Rohit screamed with tears in his eyes.

But the golden flames part — almost like invisible hands — pushing Vanya safely toward Aditya and Radha. She collapses into their arms.

The fire surges back around Rohit, engulfing him completely. His screams echo as his body becomes a dark silhouette in the light, then crumbles into ash.

The havan fire dims back to a calm glow. The mandap steadies. The armed men drop their weapons in fear. Silence settles — not heavy, but peaceful.

Vanya, trembling, clutches Aditya and Radha, her eyes wide, whispering brokenly: “It... it was never love. It was punishment... carried across lifetimes.”

Devika, standing near the doorway, looks down at her hands — untouched by flame. Her dupatta, which had caught fire moments ago, is now whole again, as though the fire itself spared her. She falls to her knees, tears streaming... “The curse is lifted...”

Vanya and Devika looks at each other, not with hatred, but with quiet understanding. Their eyes meet, centuries of pain passing silently between them. Vanya lifted Devika by both her hands and hugged each other.

The priest, shaken but awed, folds his hands.

“This was no ordinary fire... this was Agni Devta himself. He ended the darkness.”

Vanya and Devika whispered together

*Panditji... it was you...?*

The Priest lowers his gaze humbly. Beti, I only prayed silently.

*“Agni devta, rakshak ban jaiye... shudh karo is pavitra mandap ko... jo adharm hua, uska ant kijiye...”*

It was Agni Devta who answered. Who came and protected Dharma. When dharma is broken, fire itself becomes the judge.

The glowing embers in the havan kund — soft, golden, no longer violent — as if the god of fire had come, punished Rohit, and left peace behind. The red threads of fate, burned to ash, drifting upward into the night sky.

“Vanya... you’re safe now. You’re with us.” - Aditya gently cups her face, and she collapses against his chest, clinging to him like someone who has just escaped a nightmare. Radha wraps her arms around both of them, tears flowing freely.

A few steps away, Devika was standing. For a long beat, she just stares at Aditya. Her breathing quickens. Memories flood her — *a child Aditya playing with her, A younger Aditya smiling at Amaya... her own heart breaking in shadows, her betrayal, her burning beneath the neem tree.*

Her lips part, trembling.

“Aditya...” Devika whispered in a broken voice.

Aditya lifted his head slightly from Vanya’s shoulder, meeting Devika’s gaze. His eyes soften with recognition — not entirely conscious, but some echo of his past self flickers through.

“Devika...” - Aditya said quietly.

That one word, heavy with centuries of unsaid things, hangs in the air.

Devika's eyes glisten. For a moment, anger flickers — the old wound, the betrayal. But then, as if the flames themselves have burned away her bitterness, her expression shifts. Her jaw loosens. A single tear slides down her cheek.

“It's over... finally. No more fire...No more blood... No more chains of fate.”- Devika's voice trembled like she finally surrendered.

The Priest steps closer, placing a hand gently on her shoulder.

“Beti... Agni devta did not burn you tonight. He spared you. Perhaps because your penance was complete.”- The priest said wisely and softly.

Devika closes her eyes, inhaling shakily. She looks once more at Aditya and Vanya together — the sight stings, but she no longer resists it. Instead, she bows her head, as if releasing centuries of pain.

“Then let them have their peace... and let me find mine.”- Devika whispered to herself.

Vanya clutches Aditya and Radha, her hand brushes against Aditya's, their fingers intertwining gently. Devika finally calm and the priest standing over them, silently reciting mantras of closure. The smoke rises toward the sky — carrying with it the ashes of Rohit, the curse of lifetimes, and the last remnants of the red thread of fate.

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**THE END**