

UNTIL THE HEART FINDS PEACE

WHEN DESTINY WRITES WHAT WE FEAR TO CONFESS

PRERNA R SINGH



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

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
India | U.K.

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BlueRoseONE
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

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

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7310-547-5

Cover Design: Shivam Gaur
Typesetting: Sagar

First Edition: December 2025

Acknowledgement

This book is a piece of my heart, and it would not have come to life without the many souls who walked beside me with quiet support and unwavering belief.

To my beloved husband and my family—thank you for standing with me through moments of doubt and delight. Your patience, love, and constant encouragement gave me the courage to keep turning pages even when the story felt heavy. Every word here carries a reflection of your faith in me.

My heartfelt gratitude to Tavleen, whose support throughout this journey has been invaluable. From proofreading and formatting to patiently addressing countless queries, her help and dedication made this process smoother and more meaningful.

To everyone else who contributed in ways big and small—through conversations, feedback, shared silence, or simple presence—you shaped this book more deeply than you may ever know.

And to my readers—holding this book today makes you a part of its journey. Thank you for welcoming these characters into your heart.

This story is mine, but its making belongs to all of you.

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Chapter 1:

Achievement

It was a hot April morning, and the Grewal household was bustling with the usual Monday chaos.

Rajiv Grewal, a stout man in his mid-forties with thinning hair and sharp, restless eyes, emerged from the bathroom searching for his shirt and trousers.

He was the proud owner of Gayatri Mills, the family's ancestral textile business. After his father's untimely death, Rajiv stepped in his place under the steady guidance of his mother, Gayatri Devi. Through years of hard work, he had grown the business into one of the most successful mills in the Delhi-NCR region.

"Sameeksha! Where are my clothes and shoes? I'm getting late. I have an urgent vendor meeting to attend," he called out from the bedroom.

"Just open the cupboard, Rajiv. All your clothes are ironed and hung up there. I'm busy making lunch," his wife responded from the kitchen.

Sameeksha, or Mrs Grewal, was a striking woman in her late thirties, elegant, modern, and ambitious. An extrovert by nature, she loved experimenting with new ideas. She was steadily climbing the corporate ladder at ICICI Bank, where she worked as a deputy manager, and was eagerly awaiting her promotion. With her sleek figure, bobbed hair, and sharp green eyes, she carried a presence that few could ignore.

Soon, Rajiv and their teenage daughter, Sarika, joined Sameeksha at the breakfast table, while Gayatri Devi, a dignified woman in her late seventies, sat on the sofa with the morning newspaper.

“Dad, don’t forget to bring my science project. It’s still in the room!” Sarika squealed, neatly spreading thick layers of butter on her toast.

Rajiv groaned. “Science project, maths homework—next you’ll make me sit in your exams too!”

Gayatri Devi chuckled from behind her newspaper. “At least then you’d learn something, Rajiv.”

“You all should hurry up and finish your breakfast... and Rajiv, don’t forget that you have to pick up Gayatri Maa’s medicine before leaving for the office,” Sameeksha responded from behind.

This was the Grewals’ daily routine: hurried breakfast, school-bus honks, and Rajiv rushing with Sarika towards the main door.

Sameeksha wrapped up the kitchen and went to her room to get dressed for work. Rajiv returned home after dropping Sarika off, placing Gayatri Devi’s medicines on the table.

He sat down next to her. “Maa, things aren’t going well at the mill these days. We are about to hire a new employee as well. I

want to aim for exceptional sales this year,” Rajiv said, laying his head down on her lap.

“Don’t worry. My blessings are always with you. We’ve come a long way, and your father must be very proud of you from up there,” she replied warmly.

“Maa, there’s *idli-sambhar* in the kitchen for your breakfast. Don’t forget to have your medicines as well. Sudha, make *jeera* rice and mixed-vegetables for lunch. Rajiv, let’s go. We’re getting late,” Sameeksha called out as she emerged from her room. They both hugged Gayatri Devi and left for work.

For over twenty years, Rajiv and Sameeksha had maintained the same routine: driving to work together in the morning and returning together in the evening. No matter the circumstance, Rajiv always waited for her so that they could go together.

The tall iron gates of Gayatri Mills swung open as Rajiv’s car rolled inside. The workers paused to greet him with folded hands and warm smiles. The faint hum of looms and the earthy smell of cotton filled the air. For Rajiv, this wasn’t just a factory—it was the empire his father had built and his mother had saved. Every brick and every thread whispered of legacy.

He headed to the production unit to decide and instruct the others about the day’s routine. Rajiv ran his hand across a freshly woven roll of fabric, inhaling the faint scent of cotton and dye.

The mill had recently undergone some changes. In the last board meeting, the majority had voted to hire a fabric expert to address some minor inconsistencies in production and expand their outreach to more vendors. Though hesitant at first, Rajiv had eventually agreed.

After multiple interviews, Yuvi Chauhan had been appointed. In his mid-thirties, Yuvi carried a round, cheerful face and a well-toned physique. His vibrant smile was infectious, and his sense of humour could light up any room.

Rajiv sat behind his large teakwood desk, adjusting his tie as Yuvi stepped into his cabin for the first time. The morning sun filtered through the blinds, throwing stripes of light across the room.

“Come, Yuvi. Sit down,” Rajiv said warmly, gesturing to the chair opposite him.

Yuvi obeyed, his posture relaxed but his eyes quick, scanning the cabin. He looked at the photograph of Rajiv’s family on the table, the awards lined neatly on the wall, and the files stacked with precision. He took it all in with the silent calculation of a man mapping his battlefield.

Rajiv opened a folder and began. “Your role here is crucial. As the Fabric Head, you’ll oversee quality checks, vendor relations, and client satisfaction. I built this mill on trust, and that’s something I don’t compromise on.”

Yuvi nodded, his lips curving into a faint smile. “Of course, sir ji. Trust is the strongest fabric, isn’t it? Stronger than cotton even.”

Rajiv chuckled lightly at the metaphor, but Yuvi’s eyes glinted with something incomprehensible.

“You’ll also coordinate with the accounts team. Suresh will provide you monthly data, but I expect you to be on top of every number,” Rajiv continued, tapping the desk for emphasis.

Yuvi leaned forward, his voice smooth. “Numbers don’t scare me, sir. In fact, I prefer them—they never lie. It’s people who do.”

Rajiv paused at the remark, caught off guard for a moment, then smiled it away. “I like your confidence. But remember, this is a family business. Loyalty is just as important as skill.”

Yuvi inclined his head respectfully, but the word “family” echoed in his mind like a challenge.

“Don’t worry, sir ji,” he said, his smile widening. “I’ll treat Gayatri Mills as my own.”

Something in the way he said “my own” made Rajiv look at him for a moment longer. But then, the phone rang, breaking the silence.

Keeping to his word, Yuvi was very sincere with his work. He worked overtime, guided his co-workers to adhere to the timelines. Often when Rajiv came to work, he found that Yuvi had worked the entire night to do quality checks and make sure that the orders were completed on time. Rajiv would sometimes ask Yuvi to get the timeline extended, but Yuvi was very rigid about not asking for extensions.

“Sir, I want Gayatri Mills to deliver what we commit to. No delays in orders,” Yuvi would respond.

“It’s really commendable the way you have handled everything, Yuvi,” Raviv appreciated him.

Because of these results, both the trust of the vendors and the client list increased.

Within a few months, Yuvi had raised the standards of production and pushed the sales up. Rajiv was deeply impressed by his skills and his persuasive charm.

One evening, as Sameeksha and Rajiv cleared the dining table, she asked him, “So, how’s the new Fabric Head doing at the mill?”

Rajiv’s face lit up. “Brilliantly, Sameeksha. The production has shot up in just three months. The vendors are happier, and even the board is impressed. Honestly, I don’t know how we managed without him all these years.”

Sameeksha smiled, pouring him a glass of water. “Hmm... he does seem very efficient. And I must admit, he has a way with words. Even Maa was admiring him the other day. The way you keep praising him the entire day and telling us about him, it feels like we have already met so many times.”

Rajiv leaned back, satisfied. “That’s the best part—he’s not just good with work, he’s winning everyone’s trust. I feel like I can finally share some of my responsibilities with someone without worrying.”

Sameeksha gave a small nod, but her eyes lingered on Rajiv for a moment. “Just don’t forget that trust is earned slowly. Not everyone is what they seem at first glance.”

Rajiv laughed it off, waving his hand. “You’re overthinking, Sami. Yuvi is loyal to us. I can feel it.”

But Sameeksha did not say anything further. There was a quiet unease resting in her heart.

Gayatri Mills was now blooming. It became the new headliner of the newspapers and a trending topic on social media.

“Sir, Yuvi has worked miracles. Everyone wants to buy from Gayatri Mills now. We’re trending with #GayatriMills!” said Suresh, the accounts manager, brimming with pride.

The phone on Rajiv's desk buzzed just as he was finishing a meeting with the accounts team. He picked up, and a familiar voice from AKIRA, the Textile Association, greeted him warmly.

"Congratulations, Mr Grewal! Gayatri Mills has been selected for the Outstanding Achievement Award this year. Your innovations in fabric quality and market growth have set a benchmark."

For a moment, Rajiv was silent, his heart thumping with pride. "Thank you... Thank you so much. It's an honour."

As he put the receiver down, Yuvi walked in with a file. One look at Rajiv's face, and he raised an eyebrow. "Good news, sir?"

Rajiv couldn't contain his smile. "Not just good, the best! We've been awarded the Outstanding Achievement of the Year award!"

Yuvi broke into his trademark grin. "That's incredible, sir ji! We must celebrate this. It's an award not just for the company, but for the trust you've carried all these years. Gayatri Mills is finally where it deserves to be."

Within minutes, the news spread across the office. The staff poured into the corridor, applauding and congratulating each other.

Someone shouted, "Long live Gayatri Mills!" and laughter filled the air.

Rajiv ordered a special lunch for all the employees, and in the evening, he drove home with sweets and flowers, his chest swelling with pride. For years, he had dreamt of this moment, and now—thanks to hard work and perhaps a little luck—the dream had arrived.

Gayatri Devi's eyes glistened as Rajiv touched her feet. "Maa, it's finally here. Our mill is being honoured."

Sameeksha's face glowed, and little Sarika clapped her hands in delight.

The day of the award ceremony finally came, and Rajiv, in his crisp black *bandhgala* and *dboti*, along with Yuvi, arrived at the venue directly from the mill. Rajiv felt it was truly Yuvi's hard work that had led Gayatri Mills to finally achieve this milestone. His family joined him, with Sameeksha in a flowing emerald saree that turned heads, Gayatri Devi in her dignified silk, and Sarika with wide eyes that soaked in the grandeur of the hall.

The ballroom of The Ashoka was bathed in a golden light, chandeliers glittering above the rows of suited men and elegantly dressed women. The evening was alive with music, laughter, and the hum of Delhi's industrial elite gathered to celebrate the Annual Textile Awards.

When the announcer's voice echoed through the hall, Rajiv's breath caught in his throat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Outstanding Achievement Award of the Year goes to... Gayatri Mills, Delhi-NCR!"

Applause thundered in the room. Sameeksha's hands instinctively clasped Rajiv's, Sarika jumped in excitement, and Gayatri Devi's proud eyes shimmered with tears.

Rajiv walked up to the stage, accepting the heavy crystal trophy. The cameras flashed as he bowed slightly, his voice steady at the podium.

"This honour is not mine alone. It belongs to the vision of my late father, the guidance of my mother, the support of my

wife, and the hard work of every member of Gayatri Mills. Together, we have woven not just fabric, but trust.”

The audience applauded again, and in the corner, Yuvi clapped the loudest, his smile wide, and his gaze lingering longer than necessary on the trophy in Rajiv’s hands.

To mark the occasion, the Grewals gathered for dinner at The Imperial’s rooftop restaurant. A cool breeze carried the faint sound of live sitar music as the family settled around a large table.

Yuvi joined them, invited warmly by Rajiv. He came bearing a bouquet of chocolates for Sarika and a bottle of vintage wine for Sameeksha.

The waiter poured wine into crystal glasses, while Sarika eagerly unwrapped the bouquet of chocolates that Yuvi had gifted her.

“Uncle Yuvi, how did you know I love these?” Sarika asked, grinning.

Yuvi winked. “A little bird told me. And when a princess deserves a treat, the kingdom must oblige.”

Sarika giggled, hugging the box to her chest.

“Well, Yuvi, I must say... you’ve become quite the magician at Gayatri Mills. Rajiv can’t stop singing your praises,” Sameeksha said, raising her glass.

“The truth is, ma’am, that a leader’s vision decides how far the ship sails. I’ve only adjusted the sails—Rajiv sir set the course long ago,” Yuvi replied smoothly, turning to Rajiv.

Rajiv beamed, clearly touched by his words.

Gayatri Devi nodded thoughtfully. "Flattery doesn't win me, young man. But results do. And I must admit, the mill is flourishing."

"Your blessings are the real foundation, ma'am. Without strong roots, no tree can bear fruit," Yuvi said respectfully.

Gayatri Devi softened, a rare smile crossing her face.

Rajiv raised his glass high. "To Gayatri Mills, and to the people who've made it shine."

"And to the future... even brighter than the present," Yuvi added, eyes glinting as his glass clinked against Rajiv's.

As laughter and chatter filled the night air, Yuvi leaned back, letting the moment sink in. One by one, he had won them all—the child with chocolates, the wife with charm, the mother with respect, and the boss with loyalty.

Only Sameeksha, who watched him from across the table, felt a fleeting shiver that she couldn't quite explain.

She smiled politely while Gayatri Devi engaged Yuvi in a conversation about fabrics and markets, and Sarika giggled at his witty remarks. Rajiv, glowing with pride, leaned back, convinced he had made the right choice in trusting this man.

But beneath the clinking of glasses and the laughter, something unspoken lingered. Yuvi's charm was too practised, his compliments too precise. He was weaving himself into the family's circle... thread by thread.

And no one noticed the danger hidden in his smile.

On the way home, Sameeksha said thoughtfully, "It didn't feel like we were meeting Yuvi for the first time. He's such a cheerful person. You have been talking so much about him that it felt like I've known him since the day he joined."

“Yes, Mom,” Sarika chimed in, clutching her bouquet of chocolates. “He’ll be the best uncle ever!”

“We are lucky to have him in our office, Rajiv,” added Gayatri Devi.

In the days that followed, Yuvi’s influence over the mill grew. After receiving the trophy, Rajiv promoted him to Head of Operations and publicly felicitated him for his role in the company’s progress. Yuvi now had control over major decisions—a stronghold that few could have predicted.

Chapter 2:

Intrusion

The doorbell rang twice, sharp and unexpected, slicing through the quiet morning.

“Sudha, see who’s at the door at this hour,” Sameeksha called, still tying the sash of her robe.

“Sameeksha ma’am, are you home?” came a hesitant but familiar voice.

Stepping forward, Sameeksha peeked from behind Sudha. Since Rajiv was away on business, visits at such odd hours were rare.

“Yes, I’m here,” she said. The door creaked open, and Yuvi stood there, holding a small box, his eyes flicking nervously around the room.

“Ma’am... it’s me, Yuvi. Sorry to disturb you. I know that Rajiv sir is not home, but... it’s my birthday today. I have no one to celebrate it with. Rajiv sir means everything to me now, so I brought some *kachoris* and *jalebis* for you all,” he said in a hesitant, trembling voice, sounding almost apologetic.

Sameeksha stepped aside, forcing a polite smile on her face. “Please come in, Yuvi. A very happy birthday to you.”

Her gaze followed him as he entered the house, the box still in his hands, eyes scanning the living room—the carved teak furniture, the family portraits, the brass idol by the staircase. His subtle curiosity was normal, but the precision of his glance made Sameeksha’s chest tighten, an instinctive unease curling within her.

“Maa, please come out. Yuvi has come to visit us,” she called.

Gayatri Devi entered the living room, her sharp eyes immediately catching both Yuvi’s scanning glance and Sameeksha’s stiff posture.

Her eyes locked with Sameeksha for a brief moment, an unspoken exchange.

Breaking the silence, Gayatri Devi said warmly to Yuvi, “*Arre beta*, you should have told us about your birthday. Such occasions are meant to be spent with family. Come, have a seat.”

The slight tension remained, an invisible thread weaving through the room. Feeling uneasy, Sameeksha retreated into the kitchen and dialled Rajiv’s number. His phone was unreachable.

She went back into the living room. Yuvi unfolded the boxes of *kachoris* and *jalebi* on the table with a boyish grin.

“Maa, please have some first. I brought these especially for you,” he said, sliding the plate towards Gayatri Devi, who accepted it with a smile.

“*Arre*, you shouldn’t have troubled yourself, *beta*,” she said warmly.

As they began eating, Yuvi leaned forward, his tone casual but probing.

“Maa, how old were you when you got married? I also heard that you managed the mill after Uncle passed away. How did you handle everything by yourself?”

Gayatri Devi chuckled softly, not sensing the edge in his curiosity. “I was just nineteen, *beta*. And yes, those days were tough. But with patience and hard work, everything becomes possible.”

Yuvi nodded, his eyes glinting. “Remarkable. Truly remarkable. Not everyone can handle so much... power.”

Sameeksha shifted uncomfortably in her chair, trying to lighten the mood. “Maa has always been strong. That’s why we all lean on her.”

But Yuvi wasn’t finished. Suddenly turning to Sameeksha, he said, “And what about you, *bhabhi*... You work in a bank, right? How much authority do you have there? I mean, can you sanction loans on your own, or is everything dependent on your boss?”

Sameeksha froze for a second before replying, “It’s a team process, Yuvi. Every decision goes through a proper chain of approval.” Her voice was polite, but the uncomfortable feeling in her gut increased.

“And Rajiv sir,” Yuvi continued, smiling as though in admiration, “he trusts you with everything at home, doesn’t he? His clothes, meals, even decisions about Sarika? Must be comforting to have so much... control.”

Gayatri Devi laughed lightly. “That’s how families are, *beta*. We share responsibilities.”

But Sameeksha's grip tightened on the cup in her hands. Yuvi's questions weren't simply small talk—they cut too close, circling around power, control, and authority. She glanced at Maa, who remained oblivious, completely charmed by him.

She set her cup down with a soft clink and turned the spotlight around.

"Yuvi, you've asked so much about us, but you've never told us about yourself. You had said you're an orphan... but where were you raised? Did you ever live with any relatives?"

Yuvi blinked, caught off guard. He forced a smile on his face. "Oh... here and there. Hostels mostly. Nothing worth remembering."

Sameeksha didn't let go. "And what about before you joined the mill? Where did you work? You must have colleagues or friends from that time?"

He shifted in his chair, suddenly restless. "Small jobs... odd things. I don't like to talk about the past, *bhabhi*. What matters is that Rajiv sir trusts me now."

Gayatri Devi interjected gently. "Arre, why insist on such questions, Sami? The boy said he has no one."

But Sameeksha's eyes stayed fixed on Yuvi. "Still, everyone has a story. It's strange, isn't it? To appear in someone's life with no strings at all?"

For the first time since he came, Yuvi's smile faltered. He wiped his hands on a napkin and then pushed back his chair as he got up. "I... I should go. Work at the mill isn't going to wait. Thank you for the breakfast, Maa."

He stood abruptly, bowing slightly towards Gayatri Devi with his hands folded, but avoiding Sameeksha's gaze. Within

moments, he was out the door, the faint jingle of the gate latch echoing behind him.

The silence he left behind was heavy.

Sameeksha exhaled slowly, her unease sharpening into certainty. *He doesn't want to be known. Why?*

Gayatri Devi's voice broke through the silence. "*Beta*, sometimes pain makes people secretive. Don't be harsh on him."

But Sameeksha only tightened her lips, staring at the untouched *jalebi* on his plate. The questions he had dodged lingered louder than the ones he had asked.

When Rajiv finally returned Sameeksha's call, he dismissed their concerns.

"No, no—you're taking it wrong. He's a simple man. He had told me that he had lost his wife in an accident. He has a son of Sarika's age who lives in a hostel so that Yuvi can focus on his work life. I often tell him that he's like family to me. Maybe that's why he came over. So don't worry. I will see you both soon. Tell mummy to take care." He hung up before an argument could erupt between the two.

Weeks turned into months. Yuvi became almost like family to the Grewals, often dropping in during breakfast or evening tea. His charm slowly worked on Gayatri Devi, and Rajiv's trust in him deepened. Sameeksha's doubts never fully left her. But Rajiv remained stubborn regarding all matters and decisions related to the mill. His say was final in all issues. He would take advice from Maa and Sami—but the final decision would be his. Oftentimes, he would ignore the pros and the cons of a decision and simply go with what he felt like.

Gayatri Devi's seventy-fifth birthday arrived. It was a grand occasion for the family.

Sameeksha had spread her notes and sketches of the décor across the dining table. Sarika was perched on a chair beside her, bouncing with excitement, while Rajiv sipped his morning tea as he watched them.

"Rajiv, the party for Maa's seventy-fifth birthday is soon. I want every detail to be perfect—from the decorations to the seating, the food, and even the music," Sameeksha declared firmly.

Rajiv smiled indulgently. "Sami, you're the boss. But Yuvi has offered to help with the logistics. He can handle some of the arrangements if you like."

"No," Sameeksha said sharply, shaking her head. "This is for Maa. I want it to be planned by us. No shortcuts."

Sarika clapped her hands. "Mom, we can do golden and black decorations! And I'll make a video montage with all the family photos!"

"Yes, and the seating must follow the exact plan I've made. There must be no confusion this time," Sameeksha said, pointing at her carefully drawn layout. "The menu will include Maa's favourites: *jeera* rice, mixed-vegetables, and don't forget the desserts. I'll supervise the caterer personally."

Rajiv raised his eyebrows, impressed. "Wow, you've really thought of everything. I'll just make sure Maa and Sarika are ready on time and keep Maa happy. You run the show."

Sarika beamed. "And I'll help you with the decorations, Mom! The cake should be huge, with sparkling candles. Yuvi uncle can... uh, I mean... maybe he can help with some of the small tasks?"

Sameeksha nodded. “He can help out wherever necessary, but the major decisions will be mine. I don’t want anyone else controlling the preparations. Every detail matters.”

Rajiv reached over and held her hand. “I love your focus, Sami. Maa will feel every bit of your love in this party.”

Sameeksha glanced at him, and then at Sarika, a small knot of unease creeping in. “I just hope that... *everyone* respects the plan. Especially Yuvi.”

Rajiv’s eyes twinkled. “Don’t worry, Sami. We’ll stick to your plan. Maa will have the perfect birthday, all thanks to you.”

Sarika jumped up. “Yes! I’ll handle the decorations and the video. You handle the food and seating, Mom. Dad, you just make sure Maa’s happy!”

Sameeksha smiled, satisfied that everything seemed to be under her control. But in the back of her mind, she felt a subtle anxiety she couldn’t shake. Yuvi’s appearance in their lives had shaken the usual balance in the family.

Rajiv had grown so accustomed to Yuvi’s presence that his name had become the answer to every problem.

If the electrician was late, Rajiv said, “Don’t worry, Yuvi will fix it.”

When the florist delayed the delivery, he said, “Yuvi knows a better one. Let him arrange the flowers.”

Even when Sarika suggested making handmade invitation cards for the party, Rajiv smiled and replied, “That’s sweet, but Yuvi has a friend who’s a designer. He’ll handle it faster.”

At first, Sameeksha thought this was harmless—Rajiv was only trying to lessen her workload. But soon, it felt like Yuvi’s shadow was looming over every detail of the party.

One evening, as she was checking the guest list, she heard Rajiv speaking over the phone in the next room.

“Yes, Yuvi, I’ll leave it to you. You decide the seating. Sami is busy anyway.”

Sameeksha froze. Busy? She had spent hours on that very chart. Walking into the room, she confronted him.

“Rajiv, why are you asking Yuvi for the seating arrangement? I have been planning it.”

Rajiv looked up casually. “But Yuvi is efficient, Sami. Why do you want to strain yourself? He’s practically family now. Maa also has a lot of trust in him.”

That single sentence cut Sameeksha deeper than Rajiv realised. She swallowed her irritation, but her eyes betrayed her frustration.

Family? How could someone who had appeared just months ago suddenly be the pillar of all their decisions?

Later that night, she went into Gayatri Devi’s room, hoping for reassurance from her.

“Maa, don’t you think Rajiv is relying too much on Yuvi? It’s only been a few months that he’s been working at the mill. We hardly know anything about his past. And yet... he’s everywhere.”

Reclining on her bed with her prayer beads, Gayatri Devi smiled faintly. “Sami, you worry too much. Yuvi is a good man. He has no one else, and he respects this family. Rajiv feels responsible for him, and truthfully, Yuvi has proved himself to be capable. Why not trust him a little?”

But Sameeksha's unease only deepened. She smiled faintly at Maa, but her mind whispered what her lips could not. *Yuvi has a story. And until I know what it is, I cannot trust him.*

Chapter 3:

Demise

The colour scheme of the party was golden and black—Gayatri Devi's favourite colours. Drapes shimmered, fairy lights twinkled, and the aroma of carefully chosen delicacies filled the air. The family had picked out a dazzling diamond ring as the gift, a symbol of their love and respect for Gayatri Devi. Relatives had arrived from near and far. The house was buzzing with laughter, greetings, and the occasional clatter of plates being set. Sarika ran about excitedly, ensuring that every detail was perfect, from the flower arrangements to the placement of candles.

Yet amidst the celebration, Sameeksha couldn't help but notice Yuvi. This time, he moved through the gathering like a guest rather than a family member, which he had come to become—his expression neutral, his eyes scanning the room with a quiet intensity. He lingered in corners, speaking sparingly and nodding politely to those who greeted him, but never initiating conversation. There was a stiffness in his movements, a deliberate distance that set him apart, though few noticed it.

Every now and then, Rajiv called out, “Yuvi, come forward,” or “Yuvi, can you lend a hand here?” But Yuvi’s responses were minimal. During the cake-cutting, when Rajiv beckoned him to stand beside the family, Yuvi shifted awkwardly, stepping just a bit closer, his eyes carefully avoiding the crowd.

A bit later, Yuvi stepped forward towards the family, holding a velvet box containing a delicate bouquet of orchids and an elegant bottle of Clive Christian No. 1—the world’s most exclusive perfume, known for its rich floral-amber notes. “This is for you, Maa,” he said, lowering himself gracefully to one knee before Gayatri Devi, his gaze reverent. “It’s my request—you must try it. This is a rare fragrance, and it belongs with someone as remarkable as you.”

He lifted the bottle and sprayed a fine mist onto her saree, an almost ceremonial gesture that drew curious glances.

The scent was intoxicating—warm, luxurious, and commanding attention without being overwhelming.

Rajiv’s brow furrowed. He appreciated Yuvi’s thoughtfulness but could not ignore the overly dramatic gesture. “Hmm... that was a bit elaborate,” he murmured to Sameeksha, unease flickering in his eyes.

Sarika clapped in delight. “Wow! That’s so fancy, Uncle Yuvi! You’re like a prince from a storybook!”

Gayatri Devi smiled politely, touched but startled by the intensity of Yuvi’s gesture. Then almost immediately, she began sneezing violently. “Oh dear!” she exclaimed, covering her nose. Excusing herself, she hurried upstairs, Sameeksha close behind her.

Rajiv exchanged a concerned glance with her before she followed Gayatri Devi. “That’s... unexpected,” he murmured,

still watching Yuvi. Sarika tugged at his sleeve. “Papa, he’s trying so hard to impress Maa. Isn’t it sweet?”

“Maa, perhaps the fragrance didn’t suit you,” Sameeksha said gently to Gayatri Devi. She took the woman upstairs to her room and helped her change into a fresh saree. “Maa, you should rest for a few minutes. I’ll stay here with you.” Sameeksha handed over an anti-allergic medicine to her.

Gayatri Devi took the medicine and sat on her chair, trying to relax for a moment.

“Sami, you should go back downstairs. The guests are waiting for dinner to be served. I’ll be fine. You’ve already given me a medicine. I will rest for a bit and then join you,” Gayatri Devi convinced Sameeksha and sent her back downstairs.

Sameeksha headed downstairs and paused near the stairs, her eyes lingering on Yuvi, who stood nearby, calm and composed. Something in his serenity set her nerves on edge.

Moments later, Sameeksha’s scream pierced through the music and chatter. “Maa!”

Gayatri Devi didn’t want to miss any moment of the party and wanted to be a part of her birthday dinner. While she was coming down, she lost her balance on the polished marble stairs. It all happened in a blur—her feet slipped on a step, her body twisting awkwardly and her saree fluttering like a dark cloud. Each impact against the marble sent a jolt of terror through the hall. Her head struck repeatedly, the sound echoing sharply across the room.

Rajiv froze for a heartbeat and then lunged forward, his voice breaking. “Maa!”

Sarika covered her mouth, her eyes wide with horror. “Papa... Maa!” she cried.

The guests gasped and scattered—some rushing to help, others paralysed. Plates and glasses clattered to the floor, forgotten. Servants scrambled to help, but it all happened too quickly.

Sameeksha had dashed forward, her arms outstretched, but the distance had been cruel. Gayatri Devi rolled to the bottom of the staircase, lying there motionless.

Rajiv fell to his knees beside her, shaking her gently, his hands trembling. “Maa, wake up! Please!”

Yuvi, who was standing nearby, quickly pulled out his phone. His voice was steady and urgent as he called the ambulance. His eyes, however, scanned the room like a hawk, calculating even in chaos.

The cheerful air of the room turned into panic. Sirens soon wailed. Guests whispered and wept. What had begun as a joyous celebration was shattered in an instant.

For the next twenty-four hours, Rajiv sat motionless in the hospital corridor, his face buried in his hands. Sameeksha wept silently beside him. Sandeep, a manager at the mill and Keshav, a transporter, brought some tea for the couple, trying to console them.

“Sir, ma’am, please get up,” Sandeep urged them softly. “It’s been more than a day. The doctors want to speak to you.”

Rajiv collapsed onto the floor, shaking. Sameeksha clutched his hand, both of them feeling broken by their helplessness.

The doctors delivered grim news: Gayatri Devi had suffered severe head injuries, and her vitals were unstable. Yuvi took charge of the hospital formalities, his efficiency drawing quiet praise.

Days blurred into weeks. Rajiv refused to leave her side, sleeping on benches in the hospital and refusing to eat. Sameeksha divided herself between home, office, and hospital. Rajiv asked Yuvi to oversee the mill. Yuvi stepped in seamlessly, earning admiration from others—but not Sameeksha’s trust.

One evening in the hospital canteen, Sameeksha spoke quietly to Rajiv. “Work at the mill is piling up. A lot of things need your approval. Yuvi is trying to manage, but it’s been a fortnight. Maa wouldn’t want to see you like this. You must think of the mill too.”

Rajiv’s face was pale, his eyes hollow. “Yes... Yuvi has proven himself to be trustworthy. I think I’ll ask him to prepare Power of Attorney papers—let him make decisions for me.”

Sameeksha’s breath caught in her throat. “Rajiv, is that wise? To trust Yuvi with everything? This feels hasty.”

“He’s more dedicated than anyone. I told you before as well that he keeps his son in a hostel so that family wouldn’t distract him. Sameeksha, I trust him more than myself right now.”

Her lips tightened. She said nothing, but unease gnawed at her. She knew how stubborn Rajiv was.

The very next morning, Gayatri Devi’s condition worsened. Amidst the panic, Rajiv whispered hoarsely, “Yuvi, get the papers ready today. I can’t make decisions in a state like this. I trust you completely.”

Rajiv sat at the hospital suite’s dining table with documents spread before him. His hands trembled as he held the pen. Medical machines beeped faintly beyond the walls, echoing the fragility of his mother’s life.

Yuvi stood opposite him, calm and persuasive. “Sir ji, I have brought the Power of Attorney papers. It would be great if you could sign them. With these documents, I can handle urgent decisions for Gayatri Mills. This is only for your good... and for hers.”

Sameeksha hovered nearby, hiding her turmoil behind a polite smile. *We barely know him... How can Rajiv trust him so blindly?*

Rajiv’s voice cracked. “Sami... I have to do this. I can’t leave Maa’s side. If something happens to her while I’m gone...” His throat tightened.

He raised the pen. Sameeksha felt dread coil in her stomach. *Stop. Don’t let this happen. What if we’re giving him everything?* Her fingers brushed his hand as she passed him some water, her touch a silent plea.

A sudden gust fluttered the curtains, carrying the faint scent of jasmine—Gayatri Devi’s favourite. Rajiv paused, as though hearing a warning.

Yuvi’s voice cut smoothly through his hesitation. “Sir ji... let me carry this burden for you.”

Slowly, Rajiv signed the documents. The scratching of the pen felt like a verdict. Yuvi’s lips curved, almost imperceptibly.

Sameeksha forced herself to remain composed even though her chest tightened with fear. I must wait. I must watch.

Quietly, she squeezed Rajiv’s hand, turning her gaze towards the window, searching for strength.

Yuvi gathered the papers with practised calm. Rajiv exhaled, drained but resolute. Sameeksha managed a faint smile, though dread rooted deep inside her.

The next morning, Gayatri Devi passed away.

The house was silent, drenched in grief. Rajiv broke down completely. Time dragged them through the rites and rituals, but nothing felt real.

The Grewal home stood hollow. Where laughter once echoed, silence pressed in every corner. Rajiv sat in his study, his shoulders slumped, staring at the ring left on the mahogany desk from his mother's morning tea cup. Every corner whispered her absence—her shawl on the sofa, the faint trace of jasmine in the air.

Sameeksha moved mechanically through the kitchen, setting the breakfast table. Her gaze lingered on the empty chair. "I can't even hear her humming," she whispered, her voice cracking.

Sarika wandered from room to room, clutching her grandmother's diary. She paused at the staircase, touching the railing. "Maa... why did you leave me?" she whispered through her tears.

At dinner, the three sat together but barely spoke. Rajiv pushed food around his plate, Sameeksha stared at her folded hands, and Sarika poked at her vegetables. The silence was thick and unbearable.

Later, Rajiv stood on the balcony, whispering to the night. "Maa... I don't know how to go on without you."

Sameeksha joined him, her hand resting on his shoulder. "We'll have to... but it feels impossible. Every little thing reminds me of her."

Sarika's small voice drifted from the doorway. "I keep waiting for her to come back. To smile at me like before."

For a long while, they stood together, their grief reflected in the hollow stillness of the house.

A week later, Rajiv finally decided to return to the mill. “Sameeksha, it’s been too long. Yuvi hasn’t called even once. Not even Keshav or Sandeep. Something feels wrong.”

She packed his breakfast, hopeful. “Maybe they’re busy at the office. It’ll be good for you to go.”

But within an hour, Rajiv returned home. His face was pale; his shirt was soaked with sweat.

“You were right, Sameeksha...” His voice cracked as he stumbled into her arms. “Yuvi has betrayed me.”

Chapter 4:

Restart

Yuvi's photographs were lying everywhere. Glossy magazines showed him stepping out of luxury cars, raising toasts in five-star hotels or holidaying in Europe with a glass of champagne in hand. Newspapers praised his “daring vision” for renaming Gayatri Mills as YC Textiles. The society pages loved him—his designer suits, his lavish birthday parties, the way he had turned himself into a brand.

Each time Rajiv saw these pages, his heart twisted. In their modest Indore home, he kept an old wooden trunk beneath his bed. Inside, carefully folded and stacked, were cuttings of every newspaper article and magazine feature about Yuvi.

Sameeksha never asked him why he had saved them—she knew. It was Rajiv's way of punishing himself, keeping an account of his failure.

Late at night, when his wife and daughter were asleep, he would take out the stack, read each piece of paper line by line, and whisper, “Sami had warned me. Why didn't I listen? Maa's mill... our legacy... I gave it all away by signing those papers.

She was constantly telling me not to trust him, but I still didn't listen."

The guilt weighed heavily on him. He saw Yuvi's smiling face on the glossy papers and felt the hollow ache of betrayal all over again. The mill that his mother had nurtured with pride had slipped through his fingers—not because of fate, but because he had trusted someone blindly.

Sameeksha often found him sitting alone in the balcony, the city lights of Indore spread out like scattered stars. His shoulders slumped, his eyes far away. "Rajiv," she would say softly, "You can't live in the past forever." But he only nodded, never answering her. Deep inside, he believed that Gayatri Devi's spirit must be angry with him. He had failed her, failed Sarika, failed himself.

"Papa, enough of these papers!" Sarika's cheerful voice broke through Rajiv's silence one Sunday morning. She snatched the magazine from his hands and tossed it onto the sofa. "We are going shopping today. I need some formal clothes to take with me to Pune, and you both are coming with me. No excuses."

Sameeksha smiled knowingly. "Shopping? Again? Your wardrobe is already overflowing."

"Maa," Sarika whined, looping her arms around her mother, "this is different. First job, first posting—it's special. You two must help me pick outfits."

By late afternoon, the three of them were strolling through Treasure Island Mall in Indore. Sarika flitted from one store to another—Zara, H&M, Lifestyle—trying on blazers, skirts, and crisp shirts. Sameeksha gave practical advice about fabrics and fits, while Rajiv stood back, watching his daughter with

misty eyes. She was growing up too fast, slipping away into her own life.

After hours of shopping bags piling up, Sarika clapped her hands. “Dinner time! It’s my treat. We’re celebrating after all.”

They went to Chhappan Dukan, Indore’s famous food and shopping street, glowing with lights and buzzing with people. Sarika made them taste everything—hot *poha-jalebi*, spicy *Indori sev*, and frothy *shikanji*. Finally, they sat down at O2 Café de la Ville, a trendy spot that Sarika loved.

“This city spoils us,” Sameeksha laughed, sipping her cold coffee. “No wonder you have so much fun every time you go out.”

Sarika leaned her chin on her hand, looking at both of them. “Maa, Papa—promise me one thing. When I’m in Pune, you won’t just sit at home sulking. Go out and explore. Indore has so much to offer. Life has to move forward, okay?”

Rajiv managed a small smile, but inside, her words cut deep. Move forward—that was something he hadn’t yet learned to do. Still, seeing Sarika’s sparkling eyes, he nodded. “Alright, *beta*. We’ll try.”

Eight years ago, when the dust of betrayal had just settled, Sameeksha had been the one to act. While Rajiv sat hollow-eyed in the silence of their Delhi home, she had gathered every ounce of courage left in her.

“I’ll handle this, Rajiv. We cannot let Sarika’s childhood drown in these ruins,” she had said firmly.

She had applied for a transfer through her company and soon secured a position in Indore, a city known for its cleanliness and calm pace. To make a fresh start, she applied for a modest home loan and bought a small two-bedroom house

on the outskirts of the city. It wasn't like their grand haveli in Delhi, but it carried a warmth of its own—the warmth of survival and determination.

In those first few years, Rajiv stayed at home, managing Sarika's school runs, meals, and household chores. The man who had once controlled boardrooms now spent his mornings braiding his daughter's hair, helping with her homework, and ensuring the gas cylinder didn't run out. It wasn't easy—his pride took a blow—but in Sarika's laughter, he found a fragile kind of healing.

Sameeksha shouldered the financial burden, working long hours as a senior executive. She never complained, though exhaustion often clouded her eyes. Two years later, when life seemed a little steadier, Rajiv stepped back into the world of work, joining a mid-sized firm in Indore as a senior accountant. The salary was humble compared to the days of Gayatri Mills, but it restored his dignity.

Slowly, brick by brick, they built a new life. The modest house became a home. Indore's green streets, polite neighbours, and the endless aroma of *poha-jalebi* at every corner became a part of their rhythm.

"Papa, which ice cream do you want?" Sarika shouted from a few feet away. "Blueberry," replied Rajiv, awakening from reminiscing their past.

Their house in Indore had never been so messy or so alive. Suitcases lay open in every room, clothes spilling over sofas, shopping bags stacked against the walls.

"Beta, how many pairs of jeans do you need? Pune is not another planet," Rajiv muttered, trying to fold her clothes

while Sarika pulled out yet another new dress from her wardrobe.

“Papa, you don’t understand!” she exclaimed, tossing it into the suitcase. “What if I need different outfits for the office and the weekends? And what about reels?”

Sameeksha shook her head, half-amused, half-exasperated. “Sarika, at this rate, you’ll need a truck, not a suitcase. Let’s be more practical.”

But practicality had long flown out of the window. From ordering last-minute essentials on Amazon to labelling containers of homemade *laddoos* and *mathri*, the trio went a little crazy. Rajiv insisted on packing a separate bag just for snacks. Sarika kept sneaking in more makeup kits, electronics, and her favourite novels, only for her mother to pull them out again.

However, between the laughter and the chaos lingered a heavy silence.

Late at night, when Sarika had returned to her room, Rajiv sat with Sameeksha in the living room. “What will we do without her?” His voice trembled, betraying the strength he tried to show in front of their daughter.

Sameeksha placed her hand on his. “We’ll manage, Rajiv. Like we always have. She’s stepping into her own life now. We have to let her go.”

They had already been to Pune the previous week—finding a flat, checking the food service, setting up Sarika’s room with curtains, bedsheets, and even a small potted plant that she had insisted on. Yet, their worries persisted.

Would she adjust well in the new city? Would she eat properly? Would she call often?

The next two days were a blur of packing lists, courier parcels, and emotional goodbyes hidden behind playful arguments.

The truth was that all three of them were terrified of the distance that was about to come between them.

The morning of Sarika's departure arrived faster than anyone wanted. The house was unusually quiet, as though even the walls knew she was leaving.

Rajiv insisted on loading the luggage himself into the cab. "These drivers don't know how to handle bags," he muttered, wiping his forehead though it wasn't even hot.

Sarika hugged her mother tightly at the door. "Maa, don't cry... you'll make me cry too."

"I'm not crying," Sameeksha said firmly, but her moist eyes betrayed her words. She quickly adjusted Sarika's dupatta, smoothened her hair, and whispered, "Remember to eat on time. Don't skip breakfast for the sake of reels, okay?"

"Maa!" Sarika laughed, but she clung to her mother a little longer before slipping away.

At the airport, the trio stuck together, clumsily handling luggage, documents, and their overflowing emotions. Trying to lighten the mood, Rajiv handed Sarika her boarding pass like it was a prized trophy. "Keep it safe, or they'll send you back home."

"Maybe that's the plan," Sarika winked.

But the moment the security check was announced, all three of them froze. Time, which had flown too fast in the past few days, now seemed cruelly precise.

Rajiv pulled Sarika into a tight hug, his voice cracking. "*Beta*, don't ever think you're alone. Call us—morning, night, anytime. Just hearing your voice will keep us alive."

Sameeksha held her daughter's face in her hands, memorising every line, every curve. "This is your time, Sarika. Make it count. But never forget—home is here, always waiting for you."

Sarika's green eyes shimmered as she tried to be strong. "I know, Maa. I know, Papa." She hugged them both together, whispering, "I'll make you proud."

When she finally turned to leave, dragging her suitcase towards the security line, both Rajiv and Sameeksha stood frozen, watching her shrinking figure.

Rajiv's hand found Sameeksha's. They didn't speak. They didn't need to.

For the first time in years, the two of them felt the weight of silence in a house that was about to become unbearably empty.

Driving back home, Rajiv and Sameeksha made a small stop at Sarika's favourite ice cream outlet. They each had a tiny scoop, the sweetness lightening the heaviness in their hearts for just a moment.

Back home, the house was a mess—suitcases half-packed, clothes scattered across rooms, and shopping bags piled up high. Slowly and methodically, they cleaned, stacking things in order, wiping counters, and bringing some semblance of normalcy back. Their office work, which had piled up over the last few days, awaited them as well.

As they tried to settle into their usual routine, the doorbell rang. Rajiv opened it to find a Zomato delivery boy holding neatly packed food containers.

"Delivery for Rajiv sir," he said politely.

Sameeksha smiled softly, taking the package inside and looking at the piece of paper with the message “*Love, ur baccha*” on it. “Sarika... she thought of everything,” she murmured, placing the containers on the dining table.

Rajiv nodded silently, touched by their daughter’s thoughtfulness. They unpacked the food—*dal*, *jeera rice*, chapatis, and a few smaller dishes—everything her mother and father loved. Sarika had ordered wisely, knowing that grief often left them with empty stomachs. The aroma of warm, comforting food filled the kitchen, a gentle reminder of her presence even from miles away.

Sitting together in the quiet dining room, they ate slowly, savouring the meal and the small connection to their daughter. Each bite was a silent acknowledgement of her care, a reassurance that even as she ventured into a new city and a new life, her love and thoughtfulness would bridge the distance between them.

Chapter 5:

Ray of New Hope

The wheels of the plane had barely touched the tarmac when Sarika's excitement surged out of her. Stepping out of the Pune airport, she pulled out her camera and began recording. "Hey everyone! Welcome to Pune! A new home, a new city, and a whole new journey begins now!" Her followers would see every detail—from the bustling streets and colourful rickshaws to the leafy avenues lining the roads.

The cab ride to her flat became an impromptu travel vlog. She narrated the city's vibe, commented on the architecture, pointed out quaint cafés she wanted to feature in her videos, and even promised to try local street food for her reels. Her energy was infectious, the camera capturing the sparkle in her eyes as sunlight glinted off Pune's buildings.

When she reached, she was greeted by her new roommates—Erica, Jyoti, and Gauri. Erica, a quiet fashion student, instantly admired Sarika's enthusiasm. Gauri, a fellow YouTuber, was eager to exchange ideas about content creation. Jyoti, who was already working in the company

Sarika was joining, promised to guide her through office life and the city's pulse.

Later, Sarika closed the door to her room and unpacked her bags. She carefully arranged her belongings—books, clothes, makeup, and her beloved camera. Then, she gently took out the photo frames she had carried all the way from Indore: one of her grandmother, Gayatri Devi, smiling in her timeless saree, and another of her parents, taken just a few months ago during a family dinner. She lingered on them for a moment, her eyes moist.

“Wish you were here, GD...” she whispered softly, touching the glass frame. The room suddenly felt warmer, more like hers.

As the night fell, the roommates decided to step out for a quick dinner, but Sarika had other plans. She called home. On the other side of the video call, Rajiv and Sameeksha's faces lit up instantly.

“*Beta*, did you settle in well?” Sameeksha asked, concern laced in her voice.

“Yes Maa, all set! See, I've already decorated my room with our pictures,” Sarika tilted the phone to show her the wall.

Rajiv chuckled. “You couldn't stay away from us even for one night, could you?”

“Never, Papa,” she smiled.

That evening, though miles apart, the trio had dinner together—Sarika with her roommates on one side, her parents at the dining table in Indore on the other. Between laughter, teasing, and a little silence when the emotions overwhelmed them, the bond between them felt unbreakable. For Sarika, it was the perfect first night in Pune: a new

beginning, but one still anchored to the love she had carried from home.

The next morning, Sarika stood before the mirror, adjusting the collar of her crisp white shirt. Her nerves buzzed beneath the surface, but her green eyes sparkled with determination. “First day,” she whispered to her reflection. “New city, new chapter.”

The office building of CreativeHive Media stood sleek and modern, all glass and steel, catching the bright Pune sun.

Inside, the reception was alive with chatter, young professionals rushing with laptops and coffee cups. Sarika took a deep breath and stepped in, clutching her joining file.

Her reporting manager, Mr Arvind Mehta, greeted her in the conference room. He was in his mid-forties, sharp in demeanour but approachable, with a knack for spotting creativity.

“Welcome aboard, Sarika. We’ve heard about your design portfolio and your online presence—it’ll be an asset here. At CreativeHive, we value ideas that break the mould. Don’t hesitate to speak your mind.” His words settled some of her nervousness.

At her workstation, she was introduced to her team—a mix of content writers, video editors, graphic designers, and campaign strategists. The buzz of creativity filled the air, but the faces still felt unfamiliar—polite smiles exchanged but no real connections. Except one.

“Hey, new roomie!” Jyoti grinned, sliding into the chair beside her. Dressed in a bright *kurta*, her energy lit up the room. “At least you have one ally in this jungle.”

Sarika chuckled with relief. “Thank God! I thought I’d be lost on day one.”

“Lost? Please. You’ll be trending in no time,” Jyoti teased, pointing at her screen where Sarika’s YouTube channel flashed at one million subscribers. “Our office already stalked you last night. You’re practically famous.”

Sarika blushed but waved the compliment off. “That’s different. This is work.”

For now, Jyoti became her anchor, showing her where the coffee machine was, introducing her to their colleagues—Abhishek, Keerti, Faizal—and guiding her through the first team briefing. By lunchtime, Sarika realised that though the office was buzzing with talent, trust and comfort would take time. Until then, Jyoti was her only real bond.

Within a week, Sarika had settled into her new rhythm. The office, which had at first felt like a maze of strangers, soon became familiar territory. She got along well with her colleagues, her natural charm and creativity making her easy to approach. Even at the flat, the ice melted quickly. Late-night Maggi sessions with Erica, long chai talks with Gauri, and Jyoti’s constant banter turned the four girls into an unexpected little family.

Every evening, no matter how packed her day was, Sarika never missed her ritual of calling home at dinner time. The trio would share their meals “together,” connected through video calls. Rajiv often joked about the taste of her “flat food,” while Sameeksha insisted on checking if she had eaten enough. For Sarika, those calls stitched the distance back into comfort, reminding her that though she was in Pune, her heart remained anchored in Indore.

On the weekends, she explored the city with her roommates—Koregaon Park’s cafés, FC Road’s buzzing chaos, and the quiet of Saras Baug. Each vlog she shot for her channel carried both her excitement for discovery and her thoughtful observations. Her followers loved this new phase of “the girl who balanced beauty, brains, and family bonds.”

During the second month of her being in Pune, Sarika’s boss called her into his cabin.

“Sarika, I’ve been hearing good things about your ideas. We have a small brand campaign coming up. It will involve social media, reels, and creative content. I want you to take the lead,” he said with a confident smile.

It was her first responsibility—not too big, but big enough to prove herself. Sarika’s heart raced with excitement as she walked back to her desk. Jyoti gave her a high-five. “See? Told you, Pune suits you!”

That night, during her routine dinner call, she shared the news with her parents.

“Maa, Papa—they’ve trusted me with a project already!”

Rajiv’s chest swelled with pride. “Just like GD... sharp, fearless, and a natural leader.”

Sameeksha’s eyes softened. “That’s great, but stay grounded and work hard, Sarika. Work will respect you if you respect it.”

Her journey in Pune had only just begun, but she already felt the city opening its arms to her. Between office, her YouTube channel, and her flat family, Sarika was finding her own rhythm—a rhythm where dreams, hard work, and love all blended into one melody.

The day of the campaign presentation arrived, and the entire office buzzed with nervous energy. Teams huddled over last-minute notes, screens flickered with bright slides, and the conference room carried the faint smell of freshly brewed coffee. For Sarika, it was her first big assignment since joining the company, and though she had rehearsed her presentation a dozen times, her heart still raced.

Just before the meeting began, her manager gestured towards the other side of the room. “Sarika, meet Viraj. He’s leading the other team today.”

She turned—and for a moment, words failed her. Viraj was tall, and looked effortlessly stylish in his crisp navy blazer, with an easy smile that seemed to charm half the room. His confidence radiated so naturally that it was no wonder several girls at the back kept stealing glances at him.

“Hi, Sarika,” he said, offering his hand. “I’ve heard you’ve got quite an eye for creativity. I look forward to seeing your campaign.”

Sarika smiled politely, shaking his hand. “And I’ve heard you’re the office favourite. Let’s see whose idea the jury actually prefers.”

A playful spark flickered between them—professional rivalry with an undertone of curiosity. Both knew the stakes: only one campaign would be chosen, and winning meant recognition across the company.

When Sarika’s turn came, she walked to the front of the room with calm confidence. The projector lit up her slides, and with every word she spoke, her voice carried clarity and conviction. Her idea wasn’t just creative; it was fresh, relatable, and

innovative—the kind that would instantly catch the attention of the senior managers.

By the time she concluded her presentation, the room broke into appreciative murmurs. The final verdict didn't take long—Sarika's campaign was chosen as the one to go ahead with.

A wave of relief and pride washed over her. She had done it—her very first big win. The office erupted into light applause, and amidst it, Viraj walked up to her with an easy smile.

“Congratulations, Sarika,” he said warmly, extending his hand again. “That was brilliant. A true green-eyed beauty with brains.”

She laughed, shaking his hand. “Thank you, Viraj. And don't worry, I'm sure we'll be competing again soon.”

All her teammates—Abhishek, Keerti and Jyoti—were happy for her. The tension of rivalry melted into mutual respect.

Months later, Sarika's campaign topped the charts, bringing the brand record engagement. To celebrate, the campaign head took the entire team out for a grand dinner.

The group—Viraj, Jyoti, Abhishek, Faizal, Keerti, and Sarika—filled a lively rooftop restaurant. The city glittered below as laughter and music floated in the air.

“Team CreativeHive, to our success!” Mr Mehta raised a toast, and glasses clinked.

The atmosphere turned joyous. Abhishek cracked jokes about late-night editing marathons, Faizal mimicked Mr Mehta's stern expressions during meetings, and Jyoti teased Sarika

about how Viraj had been “too distracted” by her presentation to focus on his own.

Viraj smirked. “Well, someone had to make my job difficult.”

Sarika raised her eyebrow. “Or maybe you just underestimated me?”

The table erupted in laughter as Viraj lifted his glass in mock surrender. “Guilty as charged.”

Between group photos, funny reels, and candid laughs, Viraj and Sarika ended up taking more pictures together than they realised. She even pulled out her vlogging camera, documenting the celebration. “This is how we celebrate hard work, guys!” she said, panning over the laughing faces of her colleagues. In one corner of the clip, Viraj leaned in with a playful smile, flashing a peace sign. Later, as she reviewed the footage, Sarika couldn’t help but smile longer than usual at that frame.

That weekend, Sarika’s YouTube channel touched a milestone she had only dreamt of—two million subscribers. Instead of celebrating in Pune, she booked a quick trip home.

As she walked into her house, Rajiv and Sameeksha were waiting with balloons and a homemade cake. On it, in clumsy icing, were the words “2 Million Smiles!”

“Beta, your followers may be in millions,” Rajiv said, hugging her tightly, “but remember that to us, you’ll always be our one in a million.”

Tears welled in her eyes as Sameeksha lit the candles. The three of them laughed, took pictures, and even went live on Sarika’s channel to share the moment with her fans. Her followers flooded the chat with love, touched by the sight of the young creator celebrating with her parents instead of at a glamorous party.

That evening, sitting at the same old dining table with home-cooked food, Sarika felt a sense of completeness. Success tasted sweeter when shared with the ones who had been her anchor since day one.

Chapter 6:

Goa Trip

Sameeksha had found a balance between her life, her career, and her YouTube channel. It had been more than a year of juggling work and creativity, and things were going smoothly.

The gang decided to celebrate the new year with something unforgettable—a trip to Goa. None of them had ever been to the beach city before, and their excitement was impossible to hide.

“Maa, we are going to Goa for new year’s! We’re all so excited about it,” Sarika squealed over the phone.

“Wow, that’s great, *beta*. But please take care of yourself. Safety should always be your priority. Enjoy yourselves and keep us updated with pictures,” Sameeksha reminded her before hanging up.

The bond of trust between parents and children matters more than rules. They encouraged Sarika to always speak the truth and trusted her decisions.

On 30th December, the group checked in at Larisa Beach Resort. The place was nothing short of breathtaking—a perfect blend of modern luxury and nature’s calm. Private cabanas overlooked the turquoise waves, fairy lights sparkled in the palm trees, and the pathways were lined with scented orchids. The beach stretched endlessly, serene and clean, while the infinity pool merged with the horizon. For the influencers among them, every corner was a backdrop ready to be captured.

Sarika shared her room with Jyoti, while Abhishek and Keerti chose a private villa as they were the lovebirds of the group. Viraj stayed close to his best friend Faisal as always.

That evening, they gathered in the dining area. A guitarist strummed soft melodies under dim golden lights. Platters of Goan delicacies and steaming bowls of soup were served.

Viraj leaned towards Sarika with a smile. “I hope you liked the resort. I planned this trip for our gang.”

“It’s amazing! You really have great taste,” Sarika admitted warmly.

Viraj’s eyes glowed. “There’s a view near the poolside you’ll love. After dinner, maybe Jyoti and you can join me there to have a look around?”

“Sounds good,” Sarika agreed.

The three walked through pathways lit by lanterns and fairy lights. The sea shimmered silver under the moonlight. Viraj looked every bit the confident charmer in a brown leather jacket while Sarika sparkled in shimmery palazzo pants and a halter-neck top. For a brief moment, their eyes met under the soft glow of the hanging lamps, and Viraj felt something deeper stir inside him.

After dinner, the trio strolled along the lantern-lit path towards the poolside. The sea shimmered like molten silver, reflecting the scattered moonlight. The resort glowed with fairy lights and candles, giving the whole evening a dreamlike warmth.

Sarika pulled out her phone and began a live session for her followers.

“Hey guys! Look at this view... Goa is magical tonight,” she said, twirling once as the camera caught her sparkly palazzo glistening under the lights. She panned her phone across the waves, the infinity pool blending with the horizon, then zoomed in on the fairy lights wrapped around the tall palms.

Comments poured in instantly: “Wow queen, looking gorgeous!” and “That view is insane!”

Viraj stood a few steps away, pretending to check his watch but secretly admiring the way she glowed. Each time she laughed at a funny comment or struck a pose for her audience, he felt his chest tighten.

“Let me take one for you,” Jyoti offered, grabbing Sarika’s phone. She clicked multiple shots—Sarika leaning against a palm tree with the ocean behind her, Sarika sitting on the edge of the pool with her reflection in the water, and Sarika and Jyoti doing a goofy peace sign together. Viraj quietly stepped into one frame at Jyoti’s insistence, standing at the side while Sarika shone at the centre.

Later that night, back in their room, Sarika scrolled through the photos, shortlisting the best ones to post. “These are so aesthetic! I’m definitely putting one of these on my Insta tomorrow,” she giggled, her eyes glowing with excitement.

Jyoti, lying on the bed, teased her, “So... you and Viraj seemed pretty comfortable with each other today. He couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

Sarika paused, her smile fading slightly. “I noticed that... but I don’t know much about him beyond his college days. What’s his story? And he’s always with Faisal.”

Jyoti thought about it for a moment. “He’s from Mumbai. He lost his mom when he was young, I think. He’s very close to Faisal—they’re like brothers. Viraj doesn’t open up much, but people say he’s had a rough past. Maybe that’s why he acts overprotective sometimes.”

Sarika frowned, twirling her hair nervously. “Hmm. He’s... intense. Sometimes I feel it’s just friendship. But other times, it feels like he’s hiding something deeper.”

Jyoti shrugged. “Don’t overthink it tonight. Just get some rest. Tomorrow, we’ll explore more of Goa, shoot some reels, and

Sarika woke up at dawn, the sound of waves still whispering in her ears. Last night’s sea view had been so mesmerising that she couldn’t resist the urge to witness the sunrise. She gently shook Jyoti.

“Wake up, Jyoti. Let’s go watch the sunrise today,” she urged with a sparkle in her eyes.

Jyoti groaned and pulled the blanket tighter around her. “Are you insane, Sarika? It’s so early... no way. I’ll see you at breakfast,” she muttered before drifting back to sleep.

Smiling at her friend’s stubbornness, Sarika got ready on her own—slipping into a light floral dress, brushing her hair loose, and grabbing her phone to capture the golden morning. The

corridors of the resort were quiet, the air heavy with the fragrance of wet sand and fresh orchids.

As she walked in along the rooms, still half-lost in the thought of catching the first rays over the sea, a sudden grip tightened around her arm.

Before she could even gasp, she was yanked inside a dimly lit room. The door slammed shut behind her with a dull thud.

Her breath caught in her throat. The curtains were drawn, the only light coming from flickering candles. The air was thick with the scent of roses—dozens of them were scattered across the floor, pinned to the walls, and even arranged in the shape of a heart on the bedspread.

Sarika's heart began to race. Staring down at her was Viraj.

"It's me, don't worry."

His voice was low, almost trembling, yet filled with a strange determination.

"Sarika, I... I love you from the bottom of my heart."

Before she could react, he pressed a button on the wall. In an instant, the curtains shifted and the dim light revealed the walls—they were plastered with her pictures. Some from office parties, some candid, some she never even remembered having been clicked. Her breath caught in her throat in horror.

"I live for you," he whispered, scattering rose petals across the floor. He released her wrist just long enough to fall to his knees, holding out a bouquet of purple tulips.

"I love you, Sarika. Please... marry me."

Everything had happened so suddenly—so overwhelmingly—that her instincts flared. Without a second thought, she

slapped him hard across the face, her palm stinging. Heart pounding, she darted towards the door.

But Viraj lunged forward, clutching her wrist tightly again. His eyes burned with obsession.

“You can’t leave me, Sarika. You’re mine. Only mine.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she struggled against his grip. “Viraj, what are you doing... let me go, please... please!”

For a moment, he froze, his breath shallow, his expression unreadable. Then slowly, he unlatched the door.

Sarika didn’t waste a second. She ran down the corridor, stumbling into her room. She pushed the door shut behind her, gasping for air.

The noise startled Jyoti, who shot up from her bed. Seeing Sarika’s trembling body and her eyes red with tears, Jyoti rushed to her side.

“What happened, darling? What’s wrong?!” she asked in panic, her voice breaking.

Sarika collapsed into her arms, sobbing uncontrollably, hiccups breaking her words apart. Jyoti grabbed a bottle of water, pressing it into her hand, and held her tightly.

Keerti’s voice shook as she dialled Abhishek. The moment he answered, words tumbled out in panic.

“Abhishek, you won’t believe what just happened. Viraj... he suddenly pulled Sarika into his room. He had decorated it with her pictures and spread flowers everywhere. He proposed to her in the most... terrifying way. She’s completely shaken up, Abhishek. We don’t know what to do.”

There was silence for a moment on the other end, and then Abhishek's voice hardened.

"Stay with Sarika. Don't let her be alone. Faisal and I are coming over right now."

Within minutes, Abhishek and Faisal strode down the resort corridor, their expressions stormy. They found Viraj pacing outside his room, a restless energy in his movements.

Abhishek didn't waste a second. He grabbed Viraj by the shoulder and spun him around.

"What are you up to, man?!" he yelled, his voice echoing in the empty hall. "Is this the way to propose to a girl? With obsession, with force? Do you have any idea how terrified she is right now?"

Viraj's face was pale, his eyes defiant but clouded with guilt.

"I just... I love her. I couldn't hold it in anymore. She has to know, Abhishek. She has to understand."

Faisal stepped forward, his tone sharp but controlled.

"Love? This isn't love, Viraj. Love doesn't chain someone, doesn't trap them in fear. What you did—dragging her into a room, surrounding her with pictures—that's not romance, it's obsession."

Abhishek jabbed a finger at him.

"You've forced yourself onto her. She's panicked to the point of having a breakdown. Anyone would be, Viraj. You need to calm down, think straight, and back off before you destroy everything—including your own respect."

Viraj's fists clenched at his sides, his jaw tight. His voice cracked when he spoke.

“I didn’t mean to scare her... I just wanted her to see how much I feel for her. She’s... everything to me.”

Faisal shook his head.

“Then prove it by giving her space, not by suffocating her. Right now, Sarika doesn’t see love in your actions—she sees fear. If you really care about her, let her breathe.”

Abhishek’s eyes blazed.

“And hear me, Viraj. If you ever try something like this again, none of us will stand by you. This is a warning.”

Viraj lowered his gaze, trembling, torn between desire and shame.

After the heated exchange, Abhishek exhaled sharply and turned away from Viraj.

“I’m going to check on Sarika,” he muttered, his tone still stern. Without waiting for an answer, he strode towards her room.

Faisal stayed behind, looking at Viraj with a mix of disappointment and concern. Slowly, he pushed open Viraj’s door and stepped inside. The dim light revealed the unsettling sight—walls plastered with Sarika’s photographs, petals scattered across the floor, and the bouquet lying abandoned on the bed.

Faisal sighed heavily. “This has gone too far, Viraj,” he whispered under his breath. He began removing the photos one by one, folding them away, erasing every trace of the obsessive shrine.

As he cleaned up, his mind drifted back to their childhood.

Viraj and he had been inseparable once. Boarding school had forged their bond—they ate together, studied together, and played on the same cricket team. Later, they chose the same college, the same course, and even appeared for the same company interviews. Everyone called them shadows of each other.

Yet life had not been kind to either of them. Faisal had lost his uncle—the only family member who had raised him—when he was just seventeen. The old man left behind his assets, giving Faisal a safety net, but the loneliness still weighed heavily on him.

Viraj, on the other hand, had a father, but he might as well have been alone. Neglect, indifference, and years of emotional absence had hollowed him out. His father would drown his pain in alcohol, sliding down a path of self-destruction until finally, he was forced into rehabilitation. For the last three to four years, Viraj has been fighting his demons quietly, trying to stand straight again.

Faisal looked around the room now at the desperation splashed across the walls. His chest tightened. He had always known Viraj carried scars—but tonight, those scars had hardened into obsession.

“Why didn’t you come to me before it came to this, Viraj?” he muttered, balling up the last of the photographs.

Behind him, Viraj leaned against the wall, his face pale and his voice hoarse.

“Because you wouldn’t understand. Nobody does. Sarika... she makes me feel alive. And I can’t lose that.”

Faisal turned, his gaze steady.

“You’ve already lost her, Viraj. At least don’t lose yourself.” Viraj sank onto the edge of the bed, his head buried in his palms. The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating.

Faisal came closer to him, his tone softer now.

“Viraj... I’ve always been there for you. From the boarding school dorms, to college nights, to every interview room—we’ve faced everything side by side. You’ve never been alone.”

Viraj lifted his face slowly, his eyes clouded with pain.

“Then why does it feel like I’ve been alone my whole life?” His voice cracked. “You had your uncle, Faisal. He cared for you, gave you something to hold onto. But I... I had a father who cared more for the bottle than his own son. He was drunk every night, violent some nights and absent the rest. And now he sits in a rehabilitation centre while I...” His voice faltered, trembling. “I don’t even know if I have a family anymore.”

Faisal’s chest tightened. He crouched down in front of him and pulled Viraj into a firm embrace.

“You have me. Always. Don’t ever think otherwise.”

Viraj’s grip was desperate, his words muffled against Faisal’s shoulder.

“Then why can’t I stop this fire inside me? When I see Sarika, it’s like she’s the only piece of light left in all the darkness. I can’t lose that, Faisal. I can’t.”

Faisal drew back slightly, holding Viraj’s face between his hands, forcing him to meet his gaze.

“Listen to me. Sarika is not your cure. She’s not the medicine for your father’s sins. She’s her own person, Viraj, and forcing yourself on her will only destroy her—and you. If you really

care about her, you have to learn patience, respect, and restraint.”

Viraj’s eyes brimmed with tears. For once, there was no fight left in him, only exhaustion.

Faisal hugged him tightly again.

“I’ll never leave you, brother. But promise me this—you will not cross the line with Sarika again. If you push her away, you’ll lose the only chance you have to heal.”

Viraj nodded faintly, though his trembling shoulders betrayed the storm still raging inside him.

Abhishek entered Sarika’s room just past noon. The golden sunlight streamed through the half-drawn curtains, falling across Sarika’s pale face. She sat huddled on the bed, still shaken, while Jyoti kept close beside her. Keerti stood by the window, arms folded, her eyes sharp with concern.

The moment Sarika saw Abhishek, her eyes welled up again. “Why me?” she whispered. “Why can’t he just... let me be?”

Abhishek came closer, speaking gently but firmly.

“Because he’s confused his obsession for love. But you don’t have to carry this fear, Sarika. You’re not alone. I won’t let him invade your boundaries again.”

Keerti turned away from the window and added, “I told Abhishek everything. You don’t have to explain again, Sarika. We’re all here for you.”

Sarika’s fingers clutched Jyoti’s hand tightly. “The way he pulled me inside, the way he shut the door... I felt trapped, Jyoti. I thought I wouldn’t get out.” Her voice broke, tears spilling from her eyes again.

Abhishek sat on the edge of the bed and covered her trembling hand with his, steady and warm.

“Listen to me—he won’t come near you. I’ve already talked to him. Faisal is with him right now, making sure of it. You’re safe.”

Jyoti leaned in with her usual spark of humour. “Safe? Of course, she’s safe! And if he dares to do something again, I’ll be the first one to throw my slipper at him.”

A faint smile flickered through Sarika’s tears, breaking the tension for a moment.

Keerti moved closer, brushing Sarika’s hair back gently. “You should rest for a while. Don’t let Viraj’s madness ruin this entire trip for you. We’ll stick together.”

Abhishek stayed a little longer, his presence grounding in the heavy silence. His eyes lingered on Sarika—not with the intensity of Viraj’s obsession, but with the quiet steadiness of someone who truly wanted to protect her.

Keerti picked up the hotel room phone and ordered a light lunch with fresh juice and hot coffee for Sarika. “We’ll eat here today, no need to step out,” she said firmly, glancing at Sarika who looked exhausted.

A tray arrived soon after, filled with pasta, sandwiches, and chilled lemonade glasses. Jyoti tried her best to keep the mood light. “See, this is better than that crowded buffet downstairs. Room service always feels like royalty.” She pushed a plate gently towards Sarika.

Sarika managed a small bite, but the weight of the morning still clung to her. She leaned against her pillow, her eyelids heavy. Keerti exchanged a glance with Jyoti, and they both understood.

“Enough for now,” Keerti said softly, taking the plate away. “You need rest more than food.”

Jyoti tucked the blanket around her and whispered, “Don’t think about anything. Just sleep. We’ll be right here.”

The curtains were drawn halfway, letting only a muted glow into the room. The hum of the air-conditioner filled the silence. Sarika’s breathing grew slower and steadier as she finally drifted into sleep.

Keerti settled on the couch with her phone in hand, watchful. Jyoti stretched beside her, lowering her voice.

“She’s really shaken, Keerti. I’ve never seen her like this.”

Keerti nodded, her eyes firm. “That’s why we should stay close to her. She needs peace right now, and no one bothering her.”

The two girls sat quietly, guarding their friend’s rest like silent sentinels, while outside, the tropical noon sun blazed over Goa.

The clock struck twelve, and the entire beach erupted in cheers. Fireworks burst across the velvet sky, their reflections dancing on the restless sea. Music swelled louder, strangers hugged and laughed, and the air smelled of salt, smoke, and celebration.

By evening, Sarika looked much calmer. The nap and the girls’ care had worked like medicine. Though traces of unease still lingered, she didn’t want to dampen the celebratory spirit.

“Let’s go out tonight,” she said with a faint but determined smile. “It’s New Year’s Eve... I don’t want to spoil it for any of you.”

The girls cheered instantly. Soon, the room turned into a whirl of glitter and laughter as they dressed for the night. Sarika, Jyoti, and Keerti all chose shimmering silver outfits—sparkling under the lights as though they were part of the celebration itself.

When they gathered in the lobby, Abhishek and Faisal were already waiting for them, equally sharp in their formal jackets. Viraj, however, didn't join them. His absence was noted, but no one spoke of it aloud. He had chosen to stay back in his room, which was perhaps for the best.

The five of them stepped out into the electric Goan night. The streets were alive with music, lanterns, and laughter.

The beaches glowed with bonfires, fireworks cracked over the water, and the air pulsed with celebration. For a while, the morning's shadows felt distant.

Abhishek raised his glass in a toast when they settled at a seaside lounge. "To new beginnings," he said, his eyes lingering just a little longer on Sarika.

Sarika clinked her glass lightly, her lips curving into a small smile. She let the music and the crowd lighten her heart. Jyoti danced, Keerti took endless photos, and Faisal cracked jokes.

Together, they let the night wash over them.

Still, deep inside, their energy wasn't at its fullest. The morning's incident had broken something unspoken, leaving a quiet thread of heaviness beneath the glitter of fireworks.

But as the clock struck twelve, with fireworks painting the sky and waves crashing below, Sarika made herself a promise—whatever storms came, she wouldn't let them steal her joy.

Amidst the chaos, Sarika stepped a little aside, phone in hand. She called up her parents. “Happy New Year!” she shouted over the noise, her face glowing as she heard their familiar voices. Her mother’s blessing and her father’s warm laugh steadied her heart. For a moment, it felt like home had reached across the miles to hug her.

“Take care, *beta*. Have fun—but wisely,” her father said, making her chuckle.

She then flipped her phone camera and captured a short video—fireworks in the background, her friends waving and blowing kisses, and Sarika smiling into the lens. She posted it with a caption: *New year, new memories. Goa vibes with my favourites. #BeachNights #NewBeginnings*. Within minutes, likes and comments began pouring in from her followers.

Back at their table, a delicious spread arrived—crispy calamari, cheesy nachos, rich chocolate mousse, and bright cocktails with tiny umbrellas. Sarika sipped a colourful mocktail first, but soon gave in to a pink cocktail that matched her sparkling silver dress.

“This is heaven,” she murmured, savouring the blend of sweet and tangy flavours.

Jyoti, already high on the atmosphere, pulled Sarika onto the dance floor. Keerti clicked endless selfies, Faisal tried balancing three glasses at once in his hands, and Abhishek—always watchful—finally let himself laugh freely, joining the rhythm.

For that one night, Sarika forgot about fear. She was just another girl in glitter, dancing under the stars, chasing the happiness of a brand-new year.

Chapter 7:

Boundaries and Bridges

Some walls are built to protect the heart, yet even those walls can hold a doorway for understanding.

After partying the night away, they all woke up very late on the first of January—it was almost noon. By then, Viraj had already left for Pune, leaving behind a letter for Sarika.

In the letter, he wrote how truly apologetic he was for his actions. He admitted that what he had shown was not love, but obsession.

Faisal sat down with Sarika in the balcony later that afternoon. The sea breeze ruffled their hair as he spoke softly, trying to ease her unease.

“Don’t let this get to you, Sarika. Viraj... he’s not a bad person at heart, but he’s deeply troubled. I’ve known him for a long time. His father’s addiction, his loneliness... they have shaped him in ways he didn’t have control over.”

Sarika hugged her knees and looked out at the waves. “But Faisal, what he did really scared me. I couldn’t breathe that morning. How can I ever forget it?”

Faisal leaned forward gently. “You don’t have to forget it. Just... don’t let this incident define you. You handled it with strength, and you weren’t alone. We’re all here for you.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you, Faisal. You’ve always been the one who holds everyone together.”

He smiled faintly. “That’s what family does. Even if it isn’t by blood.”

With Viraj gone from the city, Sarika finally felt a sense of relief. She began exploring every nook and corner of the resort, her spirit becoming lighter with every step. In the evening, the group even went out to another beach, where they laughed, played in the waves, and watched the sun sink into the horizon.

Later that night, as they gathered in the lounge, Abhishek and Keerti sat beside Sarika. Abhishek noticed the quiet look in her eyes.

“You know,” he said softly, “not everyone you meet will treat you the way Viraj did. Don’t lose faith in people.”

Keerti added, “Yes, Sarika. You’re stronger than you think. And sometimes, the people who stand by you in silence matter more than the ones who shout their love out loud.”

Sarika looked at both of them, her heart swelling with gratitude. “I don’t know what I would’ve done without you all. Abhishek, you... I feel like you’re a brother to me now.”

Abhishek smiled warmly. “And I’ll take that role happily. I’ll always have your back.”

For the first time since the incident, Sarika's heart felt lighter. She hadn't spoken to her parents about it yet—she didn't want to worry them—but she had found a family in her friends, one that stood by her no matter what.

The next morning, they boarded their flights back home. As the plane soared above the clouds, Sarika looked out of the window, reflecting on everything that had happened.

“Jyoti,” she whispered, turning to her friend, “please don't tell Erica and Gauri about this. Let it be... bygones.”

Jyoti nodded, squeezing her hand gently. “Don't worry, Sarika. This stays between us.”

Back in Pune, Faisal decided to cheer Viraj up and took him out for a drive. He didn't berate him further and instead tried to give him hope and remind him that he wasn't alone.

Meanwhile, Sarika's mind was restless. The next day, they all had to return to work. The idea of facing Viraj made her nervous. Her heart wrestled between fear and trying to act normal.

On the third of January, everyone was back at the office. The holiday glow had faded, replaced by the familiar hum of keyboards, phones, and chatter.

Sarika felt her heart pounding the moment she stepped inside. The walls of the office, usually her comfort zone, now felt heavy—like they carried the memory of everything that had happened in Goa. She glanced around quickly, almost dreading the possibility of running into Viraj.

“Relax, Sarika,” she whispered to herself, clutching her bag tightly. “Just focus on work.”

She slid into her chair, opened her laptop, and buried herself in pending emails and projects. Every ping of a notification made her flinch. Every time footsteps echoed down the corridor, her stomach twisted with unease.

But Viraj did not appear. He stayed in his cabin most of the day, as if deliberately avoiding her as much as she was avoiding him. Their eyes never met; their paths never crossed. It was as though an invisible wall had risen between them.

The entire day passed with both Sarika and Viraj staying in their corners—each knowing the other was just a few steps away, but neither daring to close the distance.

As the clock struck the end of the day, Sarika shut down her laptop with a deep exhale. She had managed one whole day without facing Viraj. The moment she stepped out of the office doors, she felt a weight lift off her chest.

A long sigh of relief escaped her lips.

Jyoti walked beside her. “See? You did it. First day is always the hardest.”

Sarika gave her a tired smile. “Yes... at least today is over.”

That night, curled up at home, she felt her heartbeat return to its normal rhythm for the first time since coming back from Goa.

The next morning, Sarika logged into her office mail and froze.

A new email from Mr Mehta blinked in her inbox—she and Viraj had been selected to work on the upcoming campaign.

Her heart sank. It was supposed to be good news, but instead, it felt like a storm brewing again.

Within an hour, another email popped up. This time from Viraj. He had applied for three months of medical leave, citing health issues.

Sarika stared at the screen, her fingers trembling. She knew. Deep down, she knew it wasn't just "health." This was his escape. His way of running from what had unfolded between them.

That evening, she sat down with Faisal. "Faisal, tell me honestly. What's going on with Viraj? Why is he acting like this?"

Faisal sighed. "Sarika, Viraj isn't a bad person. He's... broken. His father's alcoholism, his mother's death, and the loneliness he grew up with—it all left scars. He's been fighting his own battles for years. Sometimes he loses control. Sometimes he doesn't know where to put his emotions."

For the first time, Sarika looked beyond her own fear and anger, and glimpsed the pain buried within Viraj.

Later that night, she called up her mother. The moment Sameeksha's voice came on the line, Sarika felt tears sting her eyes.

"Ma... I don't know what to do. Everything's a mess."

Sameeksha listened patiently, letting Sarika pour her heart out. When Sarika finally stopped, her mother spoke gently,

"If you want, you can come home. This is a serious matter. We can discuss it face to face, Sarika," advised Sameeksha.

"No, Mom. I want to resolve it with your guidance and don't want to turn my back on it. I spoke to Faisal, who is Viraj's best friend. He and many others in the office have always praised Viraj for his behaviour and manners. There hasn't

been a single complaint against him so far. So I really don't understand why he was like this with me."

"*Beta*, sometimes people act strangely out of their pain, not their intention. I'm not asking you to forgive him blindly—but try to understand him. If your heart feels heavy, meet him once.

Don't go alone—take Faisal with you. But look him in the eyes and listen to his truth. Only then will you find peace. Yes, you can handle this very well. If you want, I can come down on the weekend."

Sarika wiped her tears, nodding softly though her mother couldn't see it. Somewhere deep inside, she knew her mom was right. "No, that's alright, Mom. I'll handle this on my own."

The following morning, Faisal arranged a private meeting with Viraj at a café. Sarika woke up earlier than usual, dressed simply but neatly, and reached the place on time.

Viraj was already there, nervously tapping his fingers on the table. Faisal sat a little distance away, keeping watch but letting them talk alone.

Sarika broke the silence. Her voice was calm but firm.

"Viraj, why are you stepping back from the campaign? Work and personal life are two very different things—you can't mix them."

Viraj lowered his head. "I don't want you to be uncomfortable, Sarika. I'm... really sorry for my behaviour." His voice cracked, and tears rolled down his cheeks. He looked up, pain raw in his eyes. "But it's true—I love you, Sarika. I love you more than I can even explain."

For a moment, the air hung heavily between them. Sarika reached across the table and held his trembling hand.

“I know about your past,” she said softly. “And I want you to be a part of the campaign. I don’t have feelings for you, Viraj, but as my senior, I respect you and your work. I want us to move forward as colleagues... and maybe, as friends.”

Viraj closed his eyes, a mix of relief and heartbreak washing over him. Faisal, watching from a distance, felt a quiet satisfaction. Maybe this was the beginning of healing for both of them.

The next three months went by steadily. Viraj and Sarika worked side by side, this time with a quiet understanding and clear boundaries. The tension of Goa had faded, replaced with mutual respect.

Both poured their energy into the new project, giving it their best. And when the results came in, their hard work was rewarded. Their campaign won the Best Campaign Award.

It wasn’t just a professional victory—it was proof that drawing boundaries can still build bridges.

Chapter 8:

When the Heart Awakens

The award changed more than just their professional lives. For Viraj, it was a turning point. The applause, the recognition, and most of all, the trust Sarika had shown by standing beside him—it stitched together pieces of his self-worth that he thought were lost forever.

For the first time in years, Viraj felt light. The shadows of his past no longer weighed him down. He wasn't just a man haunted by mistakes—he was someone people could believe in, someone people felt safe around.

That evening, he met Faisal for dinner. Over drinks and laughter, the two old friends celebrated—not just the award, but also Viraj's return to himself.

“Feels good, doesn't it?” Faisal clinked his glass against Viraj's.

Viraj smiled, the kind of smile Faisal hadn't seen in ages. “It feels like... I'm finally breathing again.”

Meanwhile, Sarika decided she needed a break before the next whirlwind of projects. She packed her bags quietly and took a train home, eager to surprise her family.

The moment she stepped inside, the house lit up with joy. Sameeksha gasped and hugged her tightly, while her father's eyes gleamed with pride. Within minutes, Sarika turned into a chatterbox, pouring out every detail—the Goa trip, the campaign, the award, and even silly office anecdotes.

Her parents listened with wide smiles, their daughter's happiness filling the walls of the home like sunshine.

Viraj and Sarika kept in touch. They exchanged short messages and the occasional call—no longer awkward, no longer heavy. What had once been a scar between them had transformed into something gentler: a special bond built on trust, respect, and silent understanding.

Later that night, as they were returning from dinner, Faisal and Viraj's car was hit at a crossroads. The crash was brutal. Faisal suffered a fractured arm and bruises, but Viraj... Viraj had taken the worst of it. His head had struck hard, and by the time the ambulance arrived, he was unconscious.

Within minutes, the news spread. Jyoti, Abhishek, and Keerti rushed to the hospital. Faisal, groggy but stable, tried to explain in broken words what had happened. But everyone's attention remained on Viraj.

The doctors moved him straight into the ICU. His condition was declared critical. The next twenty-four hours would decide everything.

The hospital waiting area was suffocating. None of them had the courage to make the call, but Faisal finally picked up his phone, his hands trembling. He clicked on Sarika's contact.

On the other side, Sarika was still at home, talking to her father about her campaign, her eyes glowing with pride. When the phone buzzed, she picked it up casually—only to hear Faisal’s broken voice.

“Sa... Sarika,” he stammered. “It’s Viraj. He was in an accident. Severe head injuries. He’s in a coma... he’s been calling your name.”

Her world seemed to collapse in an instant. The phone almost slipped from her hand. Her father, sensing something was wrong, placed a steadying hand on her shoulder.

“Papa... Viraj is in the hospital,” she whispered, her throat choking. “It’s very serious.”

Her father’s face hardened, but his voice was calm. “Don’t panic, *beta*. We’ll go together. Sameeksha should come too. She will know how to handle everything.”

Within the hour, Sameeksha and Sarika packed hurriedly. The flight to Pune felt endless—every tick of the clock stabbing Sarika with dread. Sameeksha, however, sat composed, comforting her daughter and holding her hand firmly.

“You need to be strong,” she told Sarika, her voice steady yet warm. “Viraj needs courage around him, not fear. And Faisal, Abhishek, Jyoti—they all need someone who can think clearly. That’s our role now.”

Sarika looked at her mother, admiring the confidence in her eyes. She knew Sameeksha had always been that way—strong and knowledgeable, never letting emotions cloud her wisdom. In that moment, Sarika drew strength from her.

When they finally reached the hospital, Faisal rushed to them. His face was pale, but relief flickered in his eyes. "Sarika... Thank God you came."

Sameeksha stepped forward first, her presence immediately commanding calm in the chaotic atmosphere. "Take me to the doctor," she said firmly. "I need to understand his condition properly."

Sarika, meanwhile, froze at the glass window of the ICU. Viraj lay still, machines breathing for him, his chest rising and falling faintly. A lump rose in her throat as she whispered, almost like a prayer.

"I'm here, Viraj. You're not alone anymore."

Her palms pressed against the cold glass. The steady beeping of the machines was the only proof that Viraj was still alive. Tubes and wires ran across his body, his face pale, his head bandaged.

Her knees weakened, and she slowly sank onto the bench in the corridor. Tears that she had been holding back poured uncontrollably. Jyoti hurried to her side, wrapping her arms around her.

"Don't cry like this, Sarika. He's strong. He'll fight through this," Jyoti whispered, though her own voice trembled.

Sarika shook her head, burying her face in her hands. *Before Goa... I had started admiring him*, she thought. His charm, his passion for work, the way he carried himself—it had all begun to pull her heart towards him. Jyoti had even noticed it once, teasing her lightly. But after that one dreadful incident, she had forced herself to step back, to deny what she felt.

And yet, seeing him like this—helpless, broken—something inside her shattered.

“I can’t lose him, Jyoti,” she whispered between sobs. “I don’t even know when it happened, but... with time, I’ve begun to love him. And I was too scared to say it. Too hesitant. What if he never hears it from me?”

Jyoti wiped Sarika’s tears, her own eyes moist. “Then don’t hold back anymore. Destiny has brought you here. Maybe this is your moment to give him the strength he needs. Even if he can’t hear you now, your words... your presence... it might reach him.”

Sarika’s heart ached as she looked again over at Viraj’s still body. She pressed her hand over her chest, as though holding her own breaking heart together. *Viraj... wake up. Please. I need you to know.*

All of them stood together in the quiet hospital corridor, hands folded, silently praying for Viraj’s well-being. The tension in the air was unbearable—every second felt like an hour.

Sameeksha finally walked in after meeting with the doctor. Her calm voice steadied everyone for a moment.

“They want you to go sit with Viraj,” she said, placing a hand on Sarika’s shoulder. “Talk to him. In his semi-conscious state, he only remembers you. Maybe hearing your voice will help him fight back.”

Sarika’s throat tightened. Her heart pounded as she stood up. With hesitant steps, she spoke to the nurse, who handed her a hospital gown. Dressed in sterile layers, she moved into the ICU.

The sight of him broke her completely. Viraj lay still, his face pale, machines breathing life into him and monitors beeping steadily. Tears blurred her vision as she walked closer.

She sat beside him, gently taking his hand into hers. His skin felt cold and lifeless. Leaning closer, she whispered, her voice trembling, “Please wake up, Viraj. I need to talk to you... to tell you so many things. Without you, nothing is possible. No campaign... no trip... no laughter. Nothing.”

Her tears fell on his hand as she tightened her grip. She kept talking to him, sharing memories, pleading and begging for him to wake up, whispering little things only he would understand.

But till the evening, his condition remained the same. The doctors, though hopeful, told the family gently, “It’s best you return home now and come back tomorrow. He needs time... and strength.”

Exhausted and heavy-hearted, Sarika walked out of the ICU. Every step away from him felt like betrayal.

Sameeksha put her arm around her, silently guiding her towards the exit.

As Sarika and Sameeksha reached the flat, Sarika could no longer hold back. She collapsed into her mother’s arms, sobbing uncontrollably.

“I love him, Mom. I did not realise when it happened. But now I know—I won’t be able to live without him...” Her words broke into hiccups as she buried her face into Sameeksha’s shoulder.

Sameeksha held her tight, stroking her hair gently. “Shh... my child. Don’t think too much right now. Rest, regain your strength. We’ll handle everything.”

Sarika cried until exhaustion finally pulled her into sleep. Sameeksha carefully tucked her into bed, making sure she was calm before stepping aside.

She picked up the phone and called Rajiv. In a composed yet heavy voice, she narrated the entire incident—Viraj’s accident, his critical condition, Sarika’s breakdown, and her confession of love.

Rajiv listened silently before speaking, worry lacing his tone. “Sami, we must think carefully. We are concerned with not only Sarika but also with Viraj. Before anything moves further, you need to know everything about him—his past, his family history, his struggles. We must be absolutely sure of who he is.”

“I know,” Sameeksha replied softly, glancing at Sarika sleeping peacefully, her tear-stained face still showing traces of pain. After the call ended, Sameeksha stood by the window, lost in thought. The city lights flickered outside, but her mind was elsewhere.

Life always has a new plan for us, she reflected, her heart heavy yet resolute. Maybe this is part of Sarika’s destiny. But before embracing it, she must uncover every truth.

Chapter 9:

The Unwelcome Return

It had been five days since the accident. Sameeksha had left for Indore after reassuring everyone that things would soon take a better turn. Her calm words still lingered in their minds—reminders that as adults, they had to stay strong and handle the situation with courage.

The group had found a rhythm to cope with the long days at the hospital. Duties were divided—mornings for Keerti and Abhishek, afternoons for Faisal, and evenings for Sarika. This arrangement not only ensured Viraj was never left alone but also helped each of them balance their office and home responsibilities.

That afternoon, Faisal arrived after brunch, carrying his laptop and work files. He sat beside Viraj, talking to him as if nothing had changed. He updated him about office projects, discussed Mr Mehta's campaigns, and even cracked a few jokes, hoping that some spark would reach through the silence.

And then it happened. "Faisal..."

The word was faint but clear.

Faisal froze, his heart pounding in disbelief. He turned sharply towards the bed, eyes wide. For a second, he wondered if exhaustion was playing tricks on him. But no—the voice had been real.

He rushed to Viraj's side, gripping his hand tightly. "Viraj? You spoke... say it again!"

Viraj blinked slowly, confusion clouding his gaze. "Faisal... where am I? What's all this?" His voice trembled. His breathing quickened as he tried to move, and panic flickered across his face.

"Easy, easy!" Faisal whispered, holding him down gently. "You're safe. You've been in an accident... but you're okay now. Just don't strain yourself."

Viraj's restlessness grew, his eyes darting around the unfamiliar room. Faisal, his hands trembling, pressed the emergency button. Within moments, doctors and nurses rushed in, their practised efficiency taking over.

Faisal stepped back, watching helplessly as they checked monitors, adjusted drips, and spoke in hurried tones. The longest thirty minutes of his life passed before the head doctor finally approached him in the corridor.

"Your friend is recovering," the doctor said with a small, reassuring smile. "He has started responding, but his memory recall is in fragments. Not everything will come back at once. You'll need to show him videos, photographs—familiar things. Gradually, all this will help his brain reconnect the dots."

Faisal let out a shaky breath, relief flooding him. "So he'll be fine?"

“With patience, yes. He’s a fighter. But remember—he needs the right emotional anchors around him.”

Faisal nodded vigorously, his eyes moist. Then the doctor’s words sank deeper when he added gently, “And call Sarika as soon as possible. In such cases, familiar bonds can work wonders. If he remembers her name... She may be the key.”

Faisal stepped into the waiting area, his hands still trembling from the adrenaline of the last hour. Without wasting a moment, he pulled out his phone and called Sarika.

She answered on the second ring, her voice tense. “Faisal? What happened? Is everything okay?”

Faisal’s lips curved into the first real smile in days. “Sarika... he spoke. Viraj spoke! The doctors say he’s recovering. His memory is patchy, but he called my name. He’s asking for you.”

For a second, there was only silence on the line—then Sarika let out a choked sob of relief. “I’m coming. Right now.”

Within minutes, Sarika rushed into the hospital, her eyes glistening with tears, breath uneven from both running and crying. She barely acknowledged anyone as she hurried to Viraj’s room.

Pushing open the door, she found him lying there, pale but awake, his eyes searching, restless. And the moment they landed on her, his lips moved.

“Sa... rika.”

She could no longer hold back. Sarika ran to his bedside, bent over, and threw her arms around him. Tears streamed down her face as she hugged him tightly, her heart hammering against his chest.

“Viraj! Oh my God... you scared me so much,” she sobbed, pressing her forehead to his. “Don’t you ever do this to me again.”

Viraj tried to lift his weak arm, his fingers brushing her hair. His voice was faint and broken, but filled with yearning. “I... I thought I lost you.”

Sarika pulled back just enough to cup his face in her hands. Her tears sparkled under the white hospital light as she whispered, her voice shaking yet strong, “I love you, Viraj. I don’t care when it happened, or how it happened... but it did. I love you. And you need to get well soon—for me, for us.”

Before she could stop herself, she leaned down and kissed him, softly but passionately, pouring into that moment all the fear, love, and longing she had held inside.

Viraj closed his eyes, surrendering to the warmth of her touch, as if her words and love were a stronger medicine than any drip or injection.

Faisal, standing quietly near the door, turned away with a smile. For the first time, hope truly filled the room.

By the evening, the entire gang had gathered in Viraj’s room, the atmosphere lighter than it had been in days. The beeping of the monitors no longer sounded threatening—it was steady and hopeful, almost like background music to their chatter.

Abhishek pulled out his phone first, showing Viraj videos from their office outings and campaign launches. Keerti added her stash of goofy behind-the-scenes clips. Laughter filled the room as Faisal teased him, “Look at you here, giving that long lecture as if you were the CEO already.”

Viraj tried to smile, his eyes flickering between the screens and their faces, fragments of memory sparking but not fully connecting. Each photo, each clip seemed to light a small candle amidst the fog of his mind.

Through it all, Sarika sat quietly by his side. Her hand never left his. Every now and then, she ran her fingers through his hair, gentle and soothing, as though willing him to absorb not just the memories but the love surrounding him. When his head grew heavy, she carefully guided him to rest against her lap.

Viraj closed his eyes, exhaling a soft sigh as though in that simple gesture, he had found safety. Sarika bent slightly, whispering words only he could hear—fragments of reassurance and promises that he wasn't alone anymore.

The others, seeing them together, exchanged silent smiles. For the first time, the heaviness that had loomed over them began to lift.

Just then, the door creaked open and the doctor walked in, his presence instantly shifting the mood back to hospital protocol. He gave a brief, approving nod at Viraj's progress but then looked at them all firmly.

"It's time," he said gently. "He needs to rest now. You can continue tomorrow."

Reluctantly, one by one, they rose to leave. Abhishek patted Viraj's foot lightly, Keerti and Jyoti waved at him, and Faisal squeezed his shoulder. Sarika stayed till the very last moment, brushing her hand through his hair one final time before slipping her fingers from his.

Viraj's eyes followed her, a silent plea lingering in them. She smiled through the tears threatening to fall. "I'll be right here tomorrow. Sleep well."

And as the door closed, the room dimmed, holding onto the echoes of love, laughter, and the promise of healing.

Outside, while Keerti and the boys took a cab, Jyoti and Sarika rode the two-wheeler back home. Erica opened the door, concern written all over her face.

"How was everything?" she asked.

The trio listened intently as Jyoti and Sarika narrated the day's events. But the teasing soon began—Erica and Gauri teasingly nudged Sarika, laughing at the way she blushed whenever Viraj's name slipped into the conversation.

Sarika tried to hide her face, her heart still lost in the memory of his touch.

Later, after everyone had settled in for the night, Sarika called her parents. Her voice was soft and emotional as she updated them about Viraj's progress. They listened with equal parts worry and relief, asking her to take care of herself too.

The night passed slowly, but hope had finally returned.

Early the next morning, Sarika dressed in a pink polka-dot dress and headed straight to the hospital. To her surprise, Faisal was already there—caught in a heated argument with an elderly man.

The man's voice was firm, commanding, and filled with suppressed anger.

Seeing Sarika approach, Faisal quickly intervened. He guided the man towards Viraj's room and hurried to her side,

whispering urgently, “Sarika... that man is Viraj’s father. Yuvi Chauhan. He just returned from rehabilitation.”

The name hung in the air like a storm cloud, marking the beginning of another chapter in their lives.

Chapter 10:

Haunted Bloodlines

Sarika felt cheated again. This time, it wasn't just love slipping from her grasp, but also the trust of her parents.

The weight of it all pressed on her chest until she could barely breathe.

She sat frozen in the nursing area, her mind blank, her heart pounding with a pain too raw to name.

And then, in a sudden rush, she stood up. Without thinking, without waiting, she ran out of the hospital and straight back home.

The flat was silent when she entered. Everyone had already left for work. The stillness wrapped around her, making her loneliness sharper and heavier.

Dragging herself into her room, she dropped onto the bed, her eyes falling on the picture frame resting on the table. It was her GD's photograph, smiling warmly at her the way she always did.

The sight broke her down. Tears spilled as guilt and remorse crashed over her in waves.

“I failed you GD... I failed everyone,” she whispered, clutching the frame to her chest, seeking strength from the memory of someone who no longer existed in this world.

Yuvi entered the hospital room quietly, his steps heavy yet determined. His eyes softened when they fell on Viraj, lying weakly but awake. With trembling fingers, he reached forward and held his son’s hand.

But the moment Viraj felt that touch, he stiffened. His body turned away, and his voice cracked with anger.

“Why are you here? Why are you back in my life?” he yelled, his pain sharper than his weakness.

Yuvi’s face fell, his lips parting to speak, but no words came.

Faisal, who had been standing near the bedside, immediately stepped forward. His voice was respectful yet firm.

“Uncle... we’ve moved a long way now. Please... leave us alone.”

Yuvi stood up, his voice breaking as he tried to bridge the years of distance between him and his son.

“I will always be here... I want to be with you. *Beta*, please forgive me...”

Viraj’s eyes burned with anger, his chest rising and falling heavily. He turned his face away, forcing each word through gritted teeth.

“No, Yuvi sir... you are nothing to me.”

The room went silent, the weight of rejection hanging heavy in the air. Yuvi's shoulders slumped, his eyes moist, yet Viraj's pain left no space for sympathy.

Faisal placed a steady hand on Viraj's shoulder, standing as a silent wall between the past and the present.

Viraj's face turned red with rage, his chest heaving. The monitor beside him began to beep faster—his blood pressure was rising sharply, his breath growing shallow and uneven.

"Viraj! Calm down, please," Faisal pleaded, panic flashing in his eyes.

The nurses rushed in, followed by the doctor, as Viraj clutched at the bedsheet, struggling for air.

Faisal immediately grabbed Yuvi by the arm and pulled him away. "Enough, Uncle! You need to leave—now!"

Yuvi stumbled back, his face stricken with helplessness, but Faisal didn't give him a chance to argue. He pushed him outside the room and shut the door firmly behind him.

Inside, the doctors and nurses surrounded Viraj, adjusting the drips and oxygen flow, working quickly to stabilise him. Faisal pressed his forehead against the glass window, his fists clenched.

The past had returned like a storm—and it was tearing Viraj apart.

Around noon, Erica returned to the flat and was shocked to find Sarika lying unconscious on the floor of her room. Panic-stricken, she immediately called an ambulance and informed Gauri and Jyoti. Within minutes, they all reached the hospital. The doctors quickly attended to Sarika—her blood pressure and sugar levels had dropped dangerously low.

After a few injections and medicines, her condition stabilised, and by evening, they were able to take her back home.

Still, something didn't sit right with them. Sarika's energy in the morning and the way she had dressed up so cheerfully didn't match the state she was in now.

"What happened, Sarika?" Jyoti asked gently as they settled her on the bed.

Sarika gave a faint smile, brushing it off. "It's nothing... I just hadn't eaten anything since morning."

The girls looked at her with concern but didn't press further. Instead, they quickly made some simple *dal* and *jeera* rice and made her have it, watching over her like hawks until she finished every bite.

Jyoti held her hand gently. "Sarika, what is it that's bothering you? You've always been so strong... at least tell me what it is."

Sarika suddenly stood up, her face pale and her eyes clouded with pain. She walked to the door and quietly locked it. Turning back, her voice trembled.

"Jyoti... I met Viraj's father today."

Jyoti's eyes widened. "Viraj's father?"

Sarika's throat tightened as she forced the words out. "He... he is the same man who destroyed my family. The reason behind everything we lost." Her voice cracked, and she clutched her chest as if the weight of the truth was crushing her.

“I don’t understand, Jyoti,” Sarika whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks. “Whom do I blame? What do I do? How do I even breathe while knowing this?”

Jyoti’s own heart twisted at the confession. She reached forward and pulled Sarika into a tight hug, letting her cry against her shoulder.

“He is my grandmother’s killer.”

“What?! How did he kill your grandma?” asked Jyoti.

“He deliberately sprayed a scent she was allergic to on her saree, and then later sprayed the same mist on the stairway, so that the moment she came down, she would be attacked with dizziness and coughing. She lost her balance on the stairs and fell down. When my father confronted him about our suspicions, he confessed it all,” Sarika revealed the truth.

That night, after Jyoti had fallen asleep, Sarika still couldn’t rest. Her mind kept circling around the same question, the same fear. Finally, she picked up her phone and called Faisal.

“Are you home, Faisal?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” he replied. “As always, the doctors sent me back at nine.”

Sarika hesitated for a moment before speaking. “I... I have something to ask you.”

Faisal’s tone grew serious. “Go on.”

“What kind of bond did Viraj have with his father?”

There was no pause, no doubt in Faisal’s voice. “Hate,” he said firmly. “There was only hate.”

Sarika closed her eyes, her grip tightening on the phone. The answer gave her a strange comfort, yet the storm inside her refused to calm down.

Sarika's voice trembled as she whispered into the phone, "But why, Faisal? Why does Viraj hate him so much?"

Faisal let out a long sigh on the other side. His words came heavy, burdened with memories he wished didn't exist.

"They had everything, Sarika—money, power, fame. But alcohol... alcohol ruined it all. Yuvi uncle became so addicted that he destroyed not only himself but everyone around him."

His voice lowered, almost breaking.

"One night, he fought with Viraj's mother. In his drunken rage, he pushed her. She fell hard against a glass table... the injury was severe. But Yuvi sir was so intoxicated that he just passed out, unaware of what he had done."

Sarika covered her mouth in horror as Faisal continued, his words painting the tragedy.

"Viraj was just two years old. He saw everything, but he was helpless. He cried the whole night beside his bleeding mother... until the milkman came the next morning. Yuvi lay there the entire night, completely drunk, unaware of his little son and his dead wife. The milkman was the one who called the police and ambulance."

Faisal's voice hardened now, filled with the pain of the past.

"We lost aunty that day, because of negligence, because of blood loss, because of Yuvi's addiction. Yuvi was jailed, then sent to rehabilitation. And from then on... Viraj has lived the life of an orphan."

A silence hung heavily between them before Faisal added, almost in a whisper,

“He hates Yuvi uncle... for killing his mother.”

Sarika sat in the dark, the only light coming from the screen of her phone. Faisal’s steady voice had just finished recounting Viraj’s childhood tragedy, but her heart was pounding louder than his words.

For a long moment, she didn’t speak. Then, with a shaky breath, she whispered,

“Faisal... there’s something I need to tell you. Something I’ve never said out loud.”

There was silence on the other side, then Faisal’s calm reply came. “Go on, Sarika.”

Her throat tightened, but the dam inside her broke.

“Yuvi didn’t just destroy Viraj’s life... he destroyed mine too. He killed my grandmother.”

Faisal froze. “What?”

Sarika’s voice grew heavy with grief and rage.

“My father trusted Yuvi more than anyone. They were business partners—almost like brothers. We had a garment factory in Delhi, a good life, a family bound by love. But Yuvi’s betrayal shattered everything. His addiction, his violence, his selfishness... it all tore us apart.”

She pressed her palm over her mouth, trying to stop the sob but it slipped through.

“After my grandmother’s death, my father couldn’t face the city, the people, or himself. We ran away from Delhi to Indore with nothing but our pain. My mother worked day and night

to keep us alive. My father... he never recovered. Even today, he sits in silence, asking himself why the man he trusted the most stabbed him in the back. He still can't believe that Yuvi killed his mother."

Her voice trembled as she whispered.

"Life was hell, Faisal. Every brick of the house we live in today was built on tears and sacrifice. And now... now Yuvi is standing in front of me again, in Viraj's shadow."

For a moment, there was no sound from Faisal's end. Then his voice came low and steady, almost protective.

"Sarika... you must have carried the weight of this alone for so long."

Her tears fell harder, her confession leaving her exhausted. "I don't know how to face Viraj now, Faisal. I don't even know if I deserve to."

Sarika's voice cracked as she struggled to breathe through her words.

"After knowing this truth, it's very difficult for me, Faisal... to even think of being with Viraj. My mind and heart... they've stopped responding. Every time I see him, I feel as though I'm betraying my grandmother."

Faisal's grip on the phone tightened. For the first time, he didn't know what to say. He could hear the raw anguish in her voice—the sound of someone whose soul was splitting in two.

Her sobs quieted, leaving only a hollow whisper.

"If I stay with Viraj, I'll be betraying my grandmother. If I leave him, I'll be betraying myself. Tell me, Faisal... how do I survive this?"

Chapter 11:

The Weight of Blood

The morning sun spilled through the hospital windows, painting the corridors a soft gold. Keerti and Abhishek arrived with coffee cups in hand, expecting another routine visit to Viraj's room, but when they pushed open the door, the bed was empty. The sheets were folded neatly. The machines were unplugged. There was not a trace of him left behind.

Keerti's hand trembled, nearly spilling her coffee. "Abhi... where is he?"

Panic rose instantly. They rushed to the nurse's desk. The staff checked the records calmly, almost indifferent.

"Mr Viraj discharged himself early this morning. He cleared all his dues, signed the papers, and said he wished to go home."

Abhishek's face hardened. "Home? But... he never reached one."

The words sank like stones in the silence.

Within minutes, Sarika and Faisal arrived, breathless.

“How could you let him leave alone?” Sarika’s voice cracked, her nails digging into the counter. “He’s still weak. He’s not ready!”

Faisal’s jaw tightened. He had never seen Viraj take such a reckless step without telling him. Guilt hung heavy in his chest.

All four of them scattered across the lobby, phones pressed to their ears, calling anyone who might have seen Viraj. Each unanswered ring, each quiet “no,” only deepened the pit in their stomachs.

Sarika tried his number again and again. Switched off. Her pulse pounded in her ears.

Then, the automatic glass doors slid open with a hiss.

Yuvi Chauhan stormed inside, his pale, bloodshot eyes searching the hall until they locked on Faisal. In two strides, he reached him, grabbed his collar, and yanked him close.

“You were supposed to protect him!” Yuvi roared, his voice shaking the sterile walls. “Where is my son?!”

Faisal didn’t fight back, though anger flared in his chest. “Leave me, Uncle. Viraj is not a child anymore. He decides for himself.”

“You don’t understand!” Yuvi’s grip trembled now, rage bleeding into desperation. “I already lost him once. Ten years without his face, his voice—don’t tell me I’ll lose him again.”

Sarika flinched, shrinking into the corner. Fear rooted in her, but pity crept in too—pity she didn’t want to feel.

Abhishek shoved Yuvi's hand away. "Enough! Threatening him won't bring Viraj back."

Keerti gripped Yuvi's arm. "If you want to find your son, help us. Don't fight us."

For a heartbeat, Yuvi looked less like a man who had ruined lives—and more like a father terrified of losing what little he had left.

Sarika's phone buzzed in her hand. Jyoti's name flashed. She answered with a shaky breath.

"Hello?"

"Where are you, Sarika?" Jyoti's voice rushed through. "Viraj is here—at our flat. He's a bit unsettled and keeps asking for you."

Sarika's throat closed. Viraj was so close, yet she had never felt farther away from him.

Faisal noticed her pale face and quickly pulled Yuvi aside. "Uncle, come. We'll check outside. Maybe he's hanging out nearby." Yuvi resisted at first, but then followed him, muttering prayers under his breath.

Keerti hurried to Sarika. "Any word? Do you know where he is?"

Sarika swallowed hard. "Yes... he's at my flat. Jyoti just called. You go there—I'll join later."

"Why not now? You're the one he's asking for," Keerti pressed.

Sarika clutched her bag, eyes averted. "I... I have an urgent submission at work. Please, just go."

Abhishek and Keerti exchanged a look but didn't argue. They rushed out.

Sarika left the hospital and just walked around with slow, heavy steps until she reached a quiet park. She sank onto a bench, her hands trembling as she called up her mother.

"Hello, Sarika?" Sameeksha's warm voice answered. "Mom..." Sarika started crying. Her sobs spilled before her words could. "What happened, *beta*? You're scaring me. Is Viraj okay?"

"Yes, Mom... he's better. But yesterday... his dad came back."

Sameeksha exhaled in relief. "That's wonderful news! Maybe the boy's heart will finally heal."

Sarika's grip tightened on the phone. Her pulse hammered. "Mom... his dad is Yuvi Chauhan."

The name brought upon silence.

Sameeksha froze. Her voice was barely a whisper. "What... did you just say?"

Sarika's tears flowed harder. "Yes, Mom. The same Yuvi who destroyed us."

The park felt unbearably bright, unbearably loud. Sarika curled into herself, clutching her phone.

Back in Indore, Sameeksha dropped into a chair, her phone pressed to her ear like a lifeline. The old shadows she thought she'd outrun had found them again. Her voice cracked when she spoke.

"Sarika... come back home. Please. Things are slipping out of our hands. I can't tell your father about this. Not yet."

Meanwhile, Keerti and Abhishek found Viraj at Sarika's flat and managed to bring him home. Stubborn and restless, he finally ate some food and took his medicines, then drifted into sleep.

When Faisal returned—after having misled Yuvi and sent him away—he told his friends they could head back.

Moments later, Viraj stirred. His voice came weak, broken. “Sarika... where is Sarika?”

Faisal's chest tightened. He sat beside him. “Viraj, listen to me. There's something you need to know. But you have to be strong.”

Viraj looked up, eyes weary. “What is it, *bhai*?”

Faisal hesitated, then spoke.

“The family your father had destroyed... was Sarika's. YC Textiles belonged to her grandfather. He stole it. He was even responsible for her grandmother's death. They lost everything—their wealth, their respect, their home. They had to start over in Indore. All because of Yuvi.”

Viraj froze. His body shook. His breath quickened. “Her family...” he whispered.

“She saw him at the hospital. That's why she pulled away,” Faisal added quietly. “But hear me out—this isn't on you. You are not Yuvi.”

Viraj's face crumpled. He buried his head in his hands.

“Every time I try to live, he ruins it. When will I be free of his shadow?” His voice cracked. “How do I face Sarika knowing her childhood was destroyed by my father?”

Behind the door to his room, Sarika's tears fell silently. She pressed a hand to her mouth, hearing every word. She couldn't resist and had decided to come over to see Viraj, arriving just as Keerti and Abhishek were leaving, who let her in.

For the first time, she saw it clearly—Viraj was not Yuvi. Blood bound them, but their hearts divided them.

And in that raw, broken confession, she heard his love.

Chapter 12:

Bridges of Trust

Sarika returned to Indore, carrying the weight of everything that had happened in Pune. At work, she submitted a medical certificate citing her mother's poor health, requesting permission to work from home for the next two months.

Given her excellent track record and performance, her manager approved it without hesitation.

Sameeksha hugged her tightly that evening, sensing the heaviness her daughter was hiding. "You've handled too much for your age, Sarika," she whispered. Sarika rested her head against her mother's shoulder, letting herself be comforted.

That night, they finally decided to share the truth with Rajiv. When Sarika and Sameeksha revealed that Yuvi was Viraj's father, Rajiv's face darkened with anger. His hands clenched the armrests of his chair.

"So this was his plan? Yuvi sent Viraj to spoil our daughter's life?"

Sarika quickly shook her head, her voice urgent. “No, Papa! That’s not true. Viraj is nothing like him. He’s a self-made man. Faisal told me everything—how he grew up, how much pain he endured. He even confessed to me himself. He’s not carrying his father’s sins.”

Rajiv stared at her, torn between his hatred for Yuvi and the sincerity in his daughter’s words.

Sarika’s eyes brimmed with tears, but her voice remained steady. “I don’t love him, Papa. And I don’t expect anything from him. I just... respect the person he is, despite everything. But I’ve made my decision. I’ll forget about him and move on. I’m applying for a new job in Bangalore.”

Rajiv exhaled, his anger softening. He placed a hand on her head. “That’s all I want, *beti*. To see you safe and happy.”

The next morning, an unexpected knock echoed through the house. To their surprise, Viraj and Faisal were standing at the door.

Rajiv and Sameeksha invited them in, seating them in the living room. Viraj’s face was pale but calm, his eyes carrying both guilt and determination.

“I came to meet you both,” he began softly. “I’m sorry... for everything my father has done. Since I haven’t forgiven him for my own mother’s death, I don’t expect you to forgive him for what he did to Sarika’s grandmother.”

His voice broke, but he continued firmly. “That’s why I’ve decided to leave Pune forever. I’ll be moving to Delhi. I need to repent, to break free from my father’s shadow. Rajiv sir... I promise I’ll never bother Sarika again. I’ll move on and won’t look back.”

He rose to his feet, bent down, and touched Rajiv and Sameeksha's feet for blessings. Without another word, he turned and left with Faisal.

Rajiv and Sameeksha exchanged a long, heavy glance. They clearly saw how both Sarika and Viraj had chosen their families over their own hearts, in different ways.

Two months passed. Sarika received an offer letter from the company she had applied to in Bangalore and prepared to begin her new chapter.

Sameeksha travelled to Pune to pack her daughter's belongings.

Among Sarika's files and clothes, she found a small diary—its cover plain, its pages worn. Tucked inside was a single note in Viraj's handwriting:

“Some bonds are beyond blood. Some regrets, beyond words. If destiny allows, I hope you'll remember me not as Yuvi's son, but as Viraj—the man who respected you more than he could ever tell you.”

Sameeksha didn't mention the note to Sarika. She quietly slipped it into a box, carrying it back with the rest of her things.

A year slipped by, almost unnoticed. Sarika never once mentioned Viraj in her conversations. To everyone else, life seemed normal—she visited Indore now and then, spent time with her parents, even laughed with her friends. But the spark in her green eyes was gone, replaced by a steady determination to succeed.

She buried herself in work, climbing quickly in her career. Her YouTube channel, once her creative escape, had fallen silent. She no longer had the heart for it. The cheerful content

creator was gone. What remained was a workaholic chasing targets, not dreams.

Late at night, when the city slept, Sarika sometimes stared at the ceiling, memories flooding her—the nervous way Viraj had held her hand, his quiet confessions, his tears. She never spoke of them. Instead, she shut her eyes tighter and worked harder the next day.

Far away in Delhi, Viraj was equally restless. With Faisal beside him, he threw himself into working at YC Textiles. He learned every corner of the business, worked shoulder to shoulder with the labourers, revived their trust, and restored the pride that once thrived there. He called it not redemption, but survival.

Rajiv often received calls from him to discuss strategies, wages, or future expansions. At first, Rajiv had been wary, but with every call, his respect and trust in Viraj grew. Viraj was rebuilding not with greed, but with integrity.

One evening, Sameeksha whispered to Rajiv, her voice trembling.

“Don’t you feel an emptiness in our daughter’s smile? She’s there, but her soul is missing. She’s like a robot—working, reaching deadlines. How do I get my daughter back?”

Rajiv had no answer then. A week later, when Viraj requested his guidance in Delhi, Rajiv decided to see for himself.

He boarded an early morning flight. The moment he stepped into YC Textiles, he was greeted warmly by his old staff.

“Rajiv sir,” they said, their eyes shining. “The mill feels alive again. It’s like when you were here.”

Rajiv walked through the factory floors, hearing the hum of machines, watching the labourers smile with dignity. Inside the office, Viraj and Faisal welcomed him humbly, listening intently as he spoke about discipline, fairness, and trust. Not once did Viraj interrupt—he only absorbed the knowledge, eager to learn.

By the evening, Rajiv was back in Indore. Sameeksha noticed the calm in his eyes.

“You look... relieved,” she said softly.

Rajiv exhaled, his voice firm. “Because I’ve seen the truth today, Sami. Viraj is not Yuvi. He’s honest and determined, and he takes no shortcuts. The mill is finally in safe hands again.”

He paused, then added gently, “And I think I’ve found the one person who can break the walls that our daughter has built around her heart.”

Chapter 13:

The Complete Family

One afternoon, while reviewing some documents in his cabin, Viraj suddenly froze. The echo of the footsteps in the hallway felt too familiar—slow, heavy, and deliberate. Before he could even look up, the door burst open.

Standing there was Yuvi Mehta, his father.

Viraj shot up from his chair, his face burning with anger.

“How dare you step in here?” his voice thundered. “You’ve already destroyed everything in my life... What do you want now?”

Yuvi smirked, his eyes cold and defiant. “Destroyed? No, Viraj. I built this empire. This—” he flung his hand across the room, “all this belongs to me. Don’t you dare claim it as yours.”

Fury surged within Viraj. His hand slammed against the desk as he barked, “Security!”

Within seconds, the guards rushed in, but before they could act, Faisal entered, sensing the tension. His eyes fell on Yuvi, and a storm of emotions crossed his face—disgust, pity, and restrained rage.

“What’s happening, Viraj?” Faisal demanded, though he already knew the answer.

Yuvi’s voice rose, sharp and venomous. “You think you can erase me from your life? You think you can live well while I rot in some rehab? This mill is mine! You’re just a boy drunk on sympathy!”

Viraj’s jaw tightened, his chest heaving.

“No,” he spat. “This mill is mine because I earned it. Because I stood where you fell. You don’t get to walk back and claim what you abandoned.”

The room vibrated with the weight of unspoken years—of betrayal, resentment, and broken bloodlines.

Faisal stepped forward, his voice low but firm. “Yuvi uncle, leave before Viraj loses the last shred of control he has.”

Viraj’s fists trembled, but his voice cut like steel.

“This never belonged to you. You had snatched it with betrayal. Have you forgotten? When I was a child, you signed away every bit of your property and wealth in my name. You were nothing but a filthy alcoholic. Always drunk and never in your senses to take care of your small child. The court ordered you to stay at the rehabilitation centre and for me to stay in a boarding school. With the due court orders, everything is mine since I have been an adult. You don’t own a single brick here anymore.” Yuvi’s face twisted in shock, then fury.

Viraj stepped closer, his tone sharper and colder.

“Still, for the fact that you gave me birth, I’ll allow you forty thousand a month. Not a rupee more. This is my pity, not your right.”

Yuvi opened his mouth to argue, but Viraj’s glare silenced him.

“And remember this,” Viraj’s voice thundered now, echoing through the cabin. “If I ever see you again, not security but the police will take you away. For the penalty of my mother’s death. For what you did to Gayatri Grewal. For every scar you left behind.”

Yuvi staggered back, the weight of his son’s words heavier than any chains. For the first time, he looked powerless, defeated. Not as a father, but as a man stripped of everything.

Faisal motioned to the guards. “Show him the way out.”

As Yuvi was escorted out, Viraj sank back into his chair, his hands shaking and his eyes burning. The confrontation had ended, but the storm inside him had only just begun.

Rajiv had gone to the mill that morning, planning only to observe quietly from a distance. He had never intended to interfere. But as he walked past the old administrative wing, he froze.

Inside Viraj’s cabin, Yuvi’s voice thundered—raw, demanding, and full of the arrogance Rajiv remembered all too well. Rajiv leaned against the corridor wall, hidden from sight, listening as the argument unfolded.

He heard Viraj’s fury, his refusal to bend. He heard the accusation he made to his father and how Yuvi had lost his right over everything in the mill. Then he heard the steel in Viraj’s voice as he allowed his father some money to live by.

When he heard Viraj take Gayatri Devi's name, Rajiv's breath caught in his throat.

The conviction in Viraj's voice shook him to his core. He didn't step inside and didn't reveal his presence. Instead, he turned away silently, his heart pounding with something he hadn't felt in years—respect.

By the evening, he was back in Indore, sitting in the quiet living room when Sameeksha returned from office.

She looked startled to see him. "Rajiv? When did you come back? You were supposed to return tomorrow."

Rajiv's face was thoughtful, softened in a way she hadn't seen in a long time. He gestured for her to sit.

"I couldn't wait," he said slowly. "I witnessed something today... and it changed everything I thought about Viraj."

Sameeksha frowned. "What do you mean?"

Rajiv took a deep breath. "I had believed him to be Yuvi's shadow—another trap sent to ruin Sarika. But I was wrong. He's exactly like what Sarika said he was. Honest. Strong. Nothing like his father. I stood outside his cabin and heard every word of a fight he had with Yuvi. The boy rejected him, disowned him in every way possible. He carries the shame of Yuvi's sins, but he refuses to let them define him."

His voice thickened with emotion. "For the first time, I saw not Yuvi's son—but a man who could stand beside Sarika. A man worthy of trust."

Sameeksha sat in silence, her heart twisting. She reached for his hand. "So... now you believe her?"

Rajiv nodded, his eyes misty. "Yes. Maybe Viraj really is the one who can soften our daughter's heart again."

About half a year later, Sarika's company received an important assignment—handling the PR and social media campaign for the grand inaugural of a new textile mill in Delhi. The project was low-profile and didn't even disclose the name of the mill. They were looking for marketing and social media influencers who could help the mill gain a lot of views soon after the inauguration. They wanted Sarika, the star performer of their company, to handle it.

The company gave Sarika all the details of the project and gave her the option of accepting or refusing to work on the project. They were paying well but everything was very secretive. The offer brought on mixed feelings. Sarika called her parents that night.

Over the video call, Sarika said, "Maa, Papa, I have been offered to cover a project in Delhi. I can't decide whether I should take it or not. They have approached the company for particularly my leadership in the project. Everything will be disclosed at the time of the inaugural. Maa, do you suggest that I go for this?" she said, trying to sound cheerful.

Sameeksha listened to her daughter and responded, "Yes, I think you should go. It seems like a challenge and a totally new experience. You have to make the inaugural viral so that it reaches the masses. Covering news and events on a daily basis is something you have always been doing. This adventurous experience would be a new feather in your team's hat."

Rajiv's voice softened on the other side. "Work hard, *beti*. We're proud of you."

Sameeksha added gently, "Yes, you are right, Maa. Like always. I will surely take this project. And both of you, take care of yourselves."

Her mother said, “Delhi holds memories... it would be quite nostalgic for you to visit again.”

Sarika only smiled faintly. “Those days are behind me, Maa.”

When the team landed in Delhi, everything was perfectly arranged—hotel rooms, cabs, assigned guides, and schedules neatly mapped. For most of her colleagues, it was an exciting trip. For Sarika, Delhi carried shadows. She had buried those memories deep, teaching herself never to look back.

The next morning, the cabs arrived to take them to the site. As they drove through the bustling streets, her colleagues discussed campaign ideas, hashtags, and media coverage. Sarika sat quietly by the window, watching the city blur past.

Soon, they reached the sprawling venue. The mill stood tall, newly built yet carrying an aura of legacy. Banners still covered the main signage. The name of the mill was intentionally kept secret until the grand reveal.

Workers hurried about, decorators strung up lights, and PR officials buzzed with instructions. The place was alive with anticipation.

Sarika walked in with her team, briefing them on their tasks—camera angles, live updates, and influencer invitations. But as she looked at the covered board, she couldn’t shake a strange feeling. Something about the atmosphere tugged at her, though she brushed it away.

“Who owns this mill?” one of her teammates asked casually.

The coordinator smiled knowingly. “That will be revealed tomorrow at the inaugural. For now, let’s keep the suspense alive. But they’ll reveal the name of the mill today—only to the marketing staff and other collaborators.”

Sarika nodded, forcing a professional smile, but deep inside, her chest tightened. She didn't know why—but a quiet storm was gathering inside her.

The crowd hushed as the microphone crackled to life.

"I welcome you all to the reopening of this mill," a voice rang out from behind the curtain—calm, steady, yet filled with conviction. "We had once received immense love and respect here. For a while, dark clouds loomed over our lives, but with determination, faith, and the blessings of my elders, we have brought it back to life. Today marks not just the revival of a mill—but of trust, of dreams."

Sarika's breath caught in her throat.

That voice.

It was warm yet edged with steel. Familiar, achingly familiar. Her heart skipped a beat, then raced uncontrollably. She pressed her nails into her palm, trying to ground herself.

"No... it can't be," she whispered under her breath.

Her teammates glanced at her curiously, but she quickly shook her head, masking her turmoil.

The curtains dropped.

The banners unfurled, the electronic boards lit up, and applause rippled through the hall.

And there he was. Viraj.

He stood tall at the podium, poised and dignified. Behind him, in shining bold letters, the name gleamed:

Virika Mills — Reborn

Sarika froze. The world blurred around her. The clapping, the flashing cameras, and her own team's chatter—all of it dissolved into silence.

It was him. After all these years of silence, after the walls she had built brick by brick, after every attempt to erase his memory—he stood there. Not as the boy she remembered, but as a man who had fought his battles and carved his destiny.

She looked around. The area, the mill—even though much had changed over the years, a faint memory of her family's mill tugged at her.

Her chest tightened, her throat burned, but she couldn't move. Couldn't look away.

The next morning, Sarika tried calling her parents before leaving for the venue, but both their phones were unreachable. She brushed it off, assuming they were busy, and focused on the day ahead.

By noon, the grand inaugural ceremony was in full swing. Satin curtains covered massive banners, and electronic boards were ready for the reveal. The security staff, labourers, and event coordinators moved swiftly, ensuring every detail was in place. The guests settled into their seats, while Sarika and her team prepared for live updates and media coverage.

A calm but resolute voice rose from behind the curtains.

“Welcome to our reopening and inauguration! We have received love and respect in the past, and with hard work and blessings, we aim to regain it. Life cast dark clouds over us, but with firm determination and the support of my elders, we have built this new chapter.”

Sarika froze. It was his voice again. Her heart raced as the satin curtains drew back, revealing the man she thought she had shut out forever.

Viraj stood tall at the podium, dressed in a beige suit that seemed to radiate quiet strength. Behind him, the new name gleamed in gold letters:

VIRIKA MILLS

A wave of emotions surged through Sarika—shock, disbelief, and something she hadn't felt in a long time: hope. She wasn't mistaken yesterday. It was really him.

She stood abruptly, almost ready to excuse herself from the venue when someone gently held her hand. She turned—and to her surprise, it was Rajiv.

"Papa?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

Rajiv's eyes glistened. "Sarika... I'm sorry. I was wrong to keep you away from him. You were right—Viraj is a man of principles and trust. For months, he has worked tirelessly to prove himself, to earn respect, not just mine, but the world's. And today, I proudly stand with him."

Sarika's lips parted in disbelief. Before she could speak, Sameeksha appeared beside them, her face glowing with quiet pride.

Rajiv gently squeezed Sarika's hand. "Come, *beti*. Let's join him on the stage."

As they walked forward together, Sarika's heart pounded. She climbed the steps with her parents, and there, under the lights and in front of the world, Viraj turned to look at her. Their eyes met, and for the first time in years, the walls around her heart began to crumble.

Sameeksha took her place beside Viraj, Rajiv stood tall with a proud smile, and Sarika—hesitant but steady—stood at Viraj's side.

There, on that stage, under the banner of Virika Mills, stood a family.

A complete family.