

“अहिंसा परमो धर्मः, धर्म हिंसा तथैव च”

THE JUSTICE MAN

WHO HOLDS THE RIGHT TO JUDGE

ABHINAV BHARDWAJ



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Stories Matter

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DEDICATED TO

This book is dedicated to all those who stood beside me, believed in me and gave me the strength to put pen to paper and tell my story.

To my parents—everything I am today is because of your unwavering love, sacrifices, guidance and faith in me. Every value I hold and every achievement I cherish has its roots in the foundation you built for me.

To my wife—you walked beside me not only through the brightest moments, but also through the darkest and most uncertain chapters of my life. When I faltered, you steadied me. When I doubted myself, you believed enough for both of us. You carried burdens I did not always see and made sacrifices I can never fully repay. This journey belongs as much to you as it does to me.

To my sister Sonali, my brother and my daughter Nayra and son Kushagra you are my greatest blessing, my source of strength and constant reminder of what truly matters.

To my course mates, friends, seniors, juniors and pupils—thank you for shaping me, supporting me, and reminding me of who I am when it mattered most. Your encouragement, lessons and companionship have left an indelible mark.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Abhinav Bhardwaj is an alumnus of the National Defence Academy, Pune and was commissioned as a pilot in the Indian Air Force in 2013. A Qualified Flying Instructor with nearly 3,000 hours of flying experience, he has spent over a decade navigating both the skies and the demands of

service with precision and discipline.

Beyond the cockpit, he is a passionate storyteller at heart. An avid reader, singer and performer, he has actively participated in dramatics and creative arts throughout his journey. His love for storytelling led him to write over 25 short stories, known for their engaging narratives and emotional depth—an experience that ultimately inspired him to write his debut novel.

The Justice Man marks his first step into long-form fiction, blending his keen observation of society with a gripping, thought-provoking narrative.

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CHAPTER 1:

SAHARANPUR RAPE CASE – A HEARTBREAKING NIGHT

The sky over Mumbai wore a dull, charcoal-grey hue, clouds swollen with the heavy promise of a monsoon drizzle. Somewhere in the distance, a thunderhead rumbled like a warning—low and half-hearted. The sea breeze, infused with the scent of salt and impending rain, drifted through the maze of high-rises, carrying with it the unmistakable aroma of local street food sizzling on a tawa at the street corner. This was Mumbai—raw, relentless, and alive.

They called it the City of Dreams. A place where every second person believed they were just one audition, one trade or one script away from their big break. Bollywood billboards towered over traffic-choked roads, bearing faces so flawless they looked like gods frozen mid-smile. In the air-conditioned towers of Dalal Street, fortunes were made and lost over a phone call, a flicker of a stock price or a rumour whispered across a trading floor. In a single day, Mumbai could lift a nobody into headlines—or grind a hopeful heart beneath its merciless speed.

Nupur had seen both faces of this city. It gave no promises. It didn't wait for anyone. Behind the glamour and glitter was a city that tested its people like fire tests gold. Each local train carried stories—some of survival, others of surrender. And tonight, as she stepped into her modest one-bedroom apartment in Andheri West, heels clicking against the tiled floor, she felt the fatigue that only a city like Mumbai could give: the kind that clung to your dreams, whispering, “Keep going. Or leave.”

The door clicked shut behind her. She leaned against it for a moment, closed her eyes, and sighed—a long, heavy exhale that belonged more to the soul than the body. She dropped her office bag on the table, kicked off her heels and walked barefoot into the living room. The quiet hum of the city seeped through the closed windows, like background music to a life on pause.

Her bag slid from her shoulder, landing with a soft thud beside the worn-out couch. The apartment smelled faintly of lavender—her favourite incense—and fresh detergent from the laundry still drying on a makeshift rack near the window.

Nupur peeled off her blazer, folded it neatly on a chair, and walked into the small bedroom. The clock read 8:41 PM. She changed into a loose tee and pyjama shorts, tied her curly hair into a messy bun and returned to the living room, flicking on the television out of habit more than interest.

The screen lit up the otherwise dim room. The channel was already set to RDTV. The headline stabbed through her like cold steel:

“SAHARANPUR RAPE CASE: A NATION’S CONSCIENCE ON TRIAL AGAIN.”

She froze mid-step.

The anchor’s voice was heavy, his words weighed down by grief. His eyes, usually sharp and professional, now glistened with unspoken tears. Behind him, grainy footage played: wailing sirens, angry protesters, an elderly man collapsing beside a stretcher.

Nupur’s breath caught.

The camera cut to the victim—Sukriti, a 14-year-old girl. Her face was blurred, but the outline of her frail, bandaged body was enough. She was fighting for her life

in a sterile hospital room where even hope seemed too afraid to enter. The only sounds were the intermittent beeping of life support machines and murmured prayers from desperate parents.

By 2 a.m., the hospital had updated that Sukriti's condition was critical. A shocking 70% of her body was burned—evidence of a crime so horrific, so evil, that the nation could barely hold its gaze.

The reporter's voice trembled. "We've been bringing you updates on this case... and tonight, we have our brave team on the ground in Saharanpur. But before we go live, here's what we know so far..."

Nupur stood rooted. Her vision blurred. Her throat tightened. She didn't notice Siddhant come in.

Siddhant entered the apartment, sweaty from his gym session, earphones still dangling from his neck. His tank top clung to his athletic frame, the scent of deodorant and effort clinging to him. "Hey babe, I'm back," he called casually, walking into the room.

He paused at the door. Nupur didn't respond. She didn't even look at him. She stared ahead—face pale, eyes locked on the screen.

He followed her gaze. The reporter's voice cracked: "The 14-year-old girl, Sukriti, remains in critical condition, with more than half her body burned. Doctors say her

chances of survival are slim. And yet, her spirit fights on.”

Siddhant walked over, sat beside her and placed his hand on her back. Her body trembled. “I can’t...” she murmured. “I just... can’t...”

Siddhant didn’t speak. He simply turned the volume down and pulled her closer. She leaned into him, tears slipping quietly down her cheek. “She was just a child, Sid...”

“I know,” he said softly, kissing the side of her head. They sat like that, tangled in silence, broken only by the low hum of the news channel.

A memory uncoiled itself from the back of Nupur’s mind—one she had tried to forget. She was in college, walking home with her batchmate after evening classes. The sun had already dipped below the horizon, leaving behind an orange-pink sky and shadows that grew longer with each step.

They were laughing about a guy trying to flirt by discussing the previous day’s notes when a bike revved behind them. Two boys. She remembered the laughter disappearing from her friend’s face, the way her hand gripped tighter. The bike slowed; the boys whistled. One leaned over and said something she didn’t fully understand at the time, but the tone—it had made her skin crawl.

They walked faster. The boys circled them once before zooming off. Nothing happened. Not that day. But the fear remained, burned into memory. She had never told her parents. What would they have done? Blamed her for staying out too late? For walking without a male escort?

Siddhant noticed the silence in Nupur's eyes. "Where are you?" he asked softly.

Nupur took a breath. "Nowhere," she whispered. "I had a moment like that. Nothing happened. But... I remember how scared I was."

"I wish I could have been there for you," he said, his voice firm with emotion. "I wish I could've scared them off."

She gave him a small smile. "You're here now."

The city outside was buzzing as always—cars honking, people shouting near the chai stall. Life in Mumbai didn't pause for grief. But inside the apartment, time felt like it had slowed to a crawl.

The lavender incense was still burning, curling smoke like fragile threads of memory. Nupur walked to the window and looked out at the glowing skyline. She wondered how many women tonight were afraid, how many girls were learning to be quiet.

"I'm tired, Siddhant," she said suddenly. "Tired of hashtags, of people being outraged for a week and

forgetting the next. Sukriti will be trending now. Then what? Another girl? Another city? Another case?"

"You think it'll change?" she asked, looking over her shoulder.

He didn't answer immediately. "Not unless we change it. Not unless more people like you stop being quiet."

"I don't want to be quiet anymore," she said. "I want to do something. Write about it. Speak. Protest. Anything."

"Then do it. I'll be with you."

They lay in bed, the sound of the ceiling fan mingling with the honking outside. Siddhant turned off the light and wrapped his arms around her. Her head rested on his chest, where his heart beat steady and strong.

She said, "If I have a daughter someday, I'll raise her to fight back. And if a son, I'll teach him to respect women and never be silent."

And though outside the world seemed unchanged, inside that little home, a fire had been lit.

Nupur stared blankly at the ceiling, her thoughts a hurricane of rage and helplessness. The news kept echoing in her mind—Sukriti, just 14, burned, assaulted, discarded like she was nothing. Her fists clenched under the blanket. Siddhant lay beside her, silent, letting her feel without interruption.

She whispered, her voice raw, “Why does this keep happening, Sid?”

Siddhant turned to her, brushing a curl from her forehead. “Because we’re still a country where silence is safer than justice. But it doesn’t have to stay that way.”

Nupur’s eyes brimmed again, but there was a flicker in them now—not just sorrow, but something close to fury. She sat up suddenly, wiping her cheeks. “I want to go to Saharanpur. I want to meet her parents. I want to see that place.”

Siddhant looked at her with awe. “Then we will. Whatever you need, we’ll do it together.”

The TV remained off. The night deepened. But in that silence, a purpose was born.

Nupur was an army kid. Her childhood was marked by shifting cities, salutes at gates, crisp uniforms and the smell of freshly polished boots. Her father, Colonel (Retd.) Arvind Sood, ran their home in perfect army setup—disciplined, structured and emotionally distant. There were moments of warmth, but mostly, her memories of him were steeped in silent expectations and unspoken judgments.

She had always wanted to make a difference—not with a gun but with a pen. Journalism called out to her like a silent revolution. She graduated from one of India’s most prestigious media colleges, earning accolades for

her bold storytelling and human-interest features. But the choice had driven a wedge between her and her father. Colonel Sood had hoped she would join the civil services or pursue something more 'dignified.'

Their phone calls now were formal, obligatory and brief. Still, she respected him. He had given his life to the nation. But she wished he could see that she too, was fighting her battles—just in a different uniform.

Her mother, Meera Sood, a retired principal of a well-reputed school, was softer, gentler. Meera lived now with Colonel Sood in their bungalow nestled in the quiet greens of Dehradun. She often sent Nupur handwritten letters and newspaper clippings of articles she liked, always underlining passages with a red pen—habits she could never let go from her school days.

Nupur missed her mother's quiet encouragement, but she knew she was on her own path now. One filled with truth-telling, camera lights and stories that sometimes shattered her heart.

On the other hand, Siddhant was 29 now—tall, athletic, with a jawline so sharp it could rival a sculptor's chisel. Originally from Kerala, he had studied engineering at the renowned Government Engineering College in Cochin. A brilliant student, he had secured a placement right out of college and moved to Mumbai full of hope, ready to conquer the corporate world.

But the city had other plans. During a casual office photoshoot, his colleagues had jokingly commented that he looked better suited for a magazine cover than a cubicle. One remark led to another, and soon he found himself exploring modelling gigs on weekends. His confident walk, his dark, expressive eyes, and his perfectly groomed moustache-beard combo caught attention quickly.

In the beginning, the opportunities poured in—calendar shoots, men’s fashion editorials, even a couple of ad campaigns for premium shaving kits and suits. He quit his engineering job within a year, chasing the dream of being a top model.

But the glamour faded faster than he expected. For the past 2-3 years, the modelling world had become more competitive. Newer faces, Instagram fame and changing trends meant work wasn’t steady anymore. He hadn’t had a real breakthrough in a while and though he smiled through most of it, the pressure gnawed at him silently.

Still, Siddhant remained committed. Full-time into modelling, he juggled auditions, rejections, fitness routines, and side hustles—waiting for that one campaign, one ramp walk, one face-of-the-brand moment to change it all.

Siddhant turns off the TV. The room darkens. Just the sound of the fan, and the heartbeat of the city outside.

He pulls her close, whispering, “It’s okay, baby. Don’t worry. Things will fall into place.”

And even though they both know that may not be true, in that small apartment, their love becomes a protest. A quiet, powerful one.



CHAPTER 2:

ANANTNAG – VALOUR IN THE VALLEY

The aircraft's tires screeched faintly as they met the runway of Sheikh ul-Alam Airport in Srinagar. Nupur's body tilted slightly as the plane slowed down, her forehead resting against the window. Outside, the Kashmir valley stretched in muted tones of snow and silence, framed by jagged peaks that pierced the sky like ancient sentinels. She always found something deeply haunting in this region – like nature was constantly at war with its own beauty.

As the air hostess announced the landing protocols, Nupur's phone vibrated. She glanced at the screen.

Siddhant: Hey baby, landed?

A soft smile played on her lips. The warmth of that message felt like a patch of sunlight amid the cold wind outside. She quickly typed:

Nupur: Yes, sweetheart. The vehicle is on its way to pick us up. We'll reach the campsite in about 1 and a half hours.

Siddhant: Okay, keep me informed. Love you.

She didn't respond right away. There was always something unsettling about replying with "Love you too" just before driving into a conflict zone. Instead, she locked the phone and adjusted her woollen scarf.

Outside, a dark olive-green Army Gypsy with its headlights on was already waiting. A soldier stood by it, scanning the arrivals. Nupur stepped forward, pulling her jacket tight. As she approached, the soldier greeted her politely.

"Ma'am, I'm Havildar Mohan. I'll take you to the Anantnag base."

Nupur nodded, climbed into the vehicle and the journey began.

The road from Srinagar to Anantnag wove through breathtaking landscapes — pine-covered slopes, glacial

rivers and houses with sloping tin roofs painted in faded reds and blues. But beneath the postcard beauty lay tension. A village they passed bore fresh scars — blackened walls, a collapsed shed, an eerie quiet that didn't match the morning sun.

As the Gypsy wound its way through winding roads flanked by forests of deodar and patches of lingering snow, the silence inside the vehicle was punctuated only by the rhythmic hum of the engine. Nupur adjusted her scarf and glanced out at the mist-veiled valley, her thoughts swirling with anticipation and quiet apprehension.

Suddenly, Havildar Mohan broke the silence. His voice was steady, with a faint trace of pride.

“Ma'am, it was here — just a few kilometres from here — that we had the last encounter.”

Nupur turned to him; her journalistic curiosity piqued. “The recent one?”

He nodded. “Yes, the one where we lost seven of our own.”

He kept his eyes on the road, but there was a storm behind his calm expression. “They were good men... brave men. Most of them young. They didn't hesitate even for a moment. Held their ground till the end. One of them — Rifleman Armaan — was just 21. First posting. Shot twice but kept firing till he ran out of rounds.”

Nupur sat up straighter, stunned by the raw immediacy of the story. “I read about it. But no news article could have captured it like that...”

Mohan offered a faint smile. “They weren’t just soldiers. They were brothers. That morning... we had chai together. Two hours later, they were gone.”

There was a pause. The kind of silence that comes not from lack of words, but the weight of too many.

“And you were there?” she asked gently.

He nodded again, slower this time. “I was part of the second response team. By the time we reached, the area was littered with empty casings... smoke in the air... bodies in the mud. But you know what, ma’am? Not a single civilian was harmed. Not one. That’s what our boys ensured – that the village was safe.”

He inhaled sharply, clearly reining in emotion. “That’s the kind of regiment you’re going to meet.”

Nupur’s heart thudded with a mix of admiration and sorrow. She had come here to tell a story, but it was quickly becoming more than that. It was a responsibility now – to honour memories, to do justice to the voices of those who had stayed behind.

When they finally reached the camp, it was just past noon. Tents lined the perimeter of the field, some in camo green, others in heavy snow-proof material. Soldiers moved about with practiced efficiency –

cleaning weapons, maintaining equipment and rehearsing drills.

A junior officer greeted her. “Ma’am, the CO is expecting you at 1500 hours. Till then, feel free to explore the camp. But photography only in approved areas.”

Nupur nodded. She had done enough ground reports to know the rules. She pulled out her camera and began her usual ritual – capturing the quiet intensity on soldiers’ faces, the camaraderie in their gestures and the grit in their discipline. Her lens lingered on a young sepoy tying his boots. He looked barely 20.

As she roamed, she spoke with a few off-duty soldiers. Some came from far-off villages of Himachal and J&K. Many were married. Most hadn’t seen their families in months. One of them – Lance Naik Imtiyaz – told her how every Sunday, he video-called his daughter, just to watch her sing nursery rhymes.

At 1500 sharp, she was escorted to the Commanding Officer’s Office. A modest structure with a crisp national flag flying outside. Colonel M.S. Raja stood on the porch, tall and composed, with salt-and-pepper hair and an unmistakable air of authority.

Colonel M.S. Raja wore his combat uniform with precision – the olive-green fabric pressed and tucked immaculately into his high-altitude black boots, their

leather gleaming despite the rugged terrain. His nameplate and regiment insignia sat perfectly aligned, while his green beret, with the regimental badge polished to a mirror shine, was tucked neatly under his left epaulette — a quiet testament to both his experience and pride in service.

He stepped forward with the calm assurance of a man who had faced both bullets and bureaucracy, his gait steady and purposeful.

“Welcome to Anantnag, Ms. Nupur,” he said, offering a handshake that was firm but not forceful. “Let’s step inside.”

As she entered the office, the atmosphere shifted from the sharp cold air outside to a room quietly humming with discipline and focus. The walls were adorned with framed citations; photographs of past regiments and a large map of South Kashmir marked with tiny coloured flags. A table lamp glowed softly on the far end of a solid teak desk, casting long, warm shadows across a stack of neatly organized files, their edges frayed from handling but aligned with military exactness.

The curtains were drawn just enough to let in a muted sliver of sunlight, giving the room a war-time seriousness without making it sombre. A faint smell of sandalwood and freshly brewed tea lingered in the air.

Behind the desk, Colonel Raja took his seat in a leather-backed chair that had clearly seen decades of conversations — some ordinary, some classified and many deeply personal. His sidearm, secured in a holster hanging behind the chair, remained untouched — but ever-present.

Nupur felt the gravity of the space — a place where critical decisions were made, where lives were counted in silence and where the burden of command hung invisible but heavy.

The colonel leaned forward slightly. “I’ve heard you’re here to document our recent ordeal. You’ve come at a time when spirits are high but hearts are healing.”

Nupur nodded respectfully, her voice calm. “Yes, sir. I came to listen... and tell the story as truthfully as it deserves.”

The Colonel studied her for a moment — not with suspicion, but with the watchfulness of a man accustomed to measuring words before trusting them.

Hope the journey wasn’t too hard.”

“Not at all, Colonel. Thank you for having me.”

“Then we’ll begin with the men,” he said finally. “Not the headlines. The men.”

Room had a wooden board listing the names of previous commanding officers.

Nupur's eyes paused on one name — Colonel A. Shekhawat.

Her breath caught.

“That’s the man my father always spoke of,” she said quietly.

Colonel Raja looked up. “You knew Colonel Shekhawat?”

“My father did. They trained together. He often said Shekhawat sir was the bravest man he ever met.”

Raja's eyes lit up. “A legend, that man. Served here during the peak insurgency days. Led three major ops and never lost a man. Wrote the standard protocols we still follow. Happy to know; you knew him, Miss Nupur.”

There was a moment of silence. Nupur smiled, feeling a strange kind of pride, she hadn't felt before. Here she was — a journalist, walking the same paths her father's friend once walked as a warrior.

Over the next few mins, Raja shared stories — the recent martyrdom of seven soldiers during a counter-infiltration operation, the evolving tactics of the militants, the use of advanced drone surveillance now helping prevent ambushes. There was a knock on the office door.

The Adjutant stepped in with crisp formality “Jai Hind Sir, Permission to bring in Major Vivek, sir?”

Colonel Raja looked up, his eyes softening instantly. He nodded once. “Send him in.”

The door opened wider and Major GS Vivek stepped into the room.

He was tall, broad-shouldered, and walked with the quiet poise of someone who didn’t wear his grief on his sleeve – but carried it like a badge of honour beneath his skin. His combat uniform bore the insignia of 5 Para (Special Forces) – the elite. The sharp gleam of a Sena Medal and Bar on his chest didn’t speak of pride, but of pain endured and missions survived. His marron beret, Sleek torso, polished boot – every inch a soldier and every step echoing a storm.

Nupur turned as he entered and for a moment, her breath caught in her throat. The resemblance was uncanny – it was as if Captain Vishaal, whose framed photo she had seen, had walked back into life. The same jawline. The same piercing eyes. But Major Vivek’s gaze had a weight Vishaal’s never had – the weight of having stayed behind to bury a piece of his own soul.

Colonel Raja stood up from behind the desk. His expression, usually restrained and commanding, now carried a tinge of heartfelt sorrow.

“Major Vivek... I can’t begin to express—”

But Vivek braced up, gently but firmly, with a faint smile that somehow disarmed the grief in the room.

“Sir, I’ve not come here for condolences. I have lost only one brother. This unit – 3 JAK RIF – has lost seven. Seven sons. Seven protectors. Seven heroes.”

He paused and looked directly into the Colonel’s eyes.

“My brother used to say – ‘The unit is our first family. Our last too.’ So, I’ve come here, not to mourn... but to be with his real family. I’m not here for closure. I’m here for continuity. For the men he bled with. For the cause he died for.”

The room fell into a stillness so heavy; Nupur felt like the air had thickened. Her throat tightened. She had witnessed grief before – loud, wailing, broken grief. But this... this silent, dignified courage in uniform... it shattered her.

Her hands turned clammy. Her eyes stung, but no tears came. Just a strange numbness spreading from her chest to her fingertips.

She looked at Major Vivek again – and for a flickering moment, she could swear it was Captain Vishaal standing there instead... chin high, chest forward, eyes full of pride... as if watching his elder brother carry his legacy not in words, but in action.

A ghost of a smile passed through her, but it trembled into sorrow. This was not a story anymore. This was a wound dressed in olive green.

Colonel Raja's voice finally broke the silence, this time softer. "Your brother was among the finest. And so are you, Major. Your presence here has uplifted this entire unit's morale."

Vivek nodded once, then turned to leave — his posture ramrod straight, but every step radiating a silent vow. A vow to protect not just the land, but the very spirit of the olive green.

Nupur remained seated, unable to speak. She stared at the spot where Vivek had stood.

And for the first time since she had become a journalist, she didn't feel like an observer. She felt like a witness. A humbled, breathless witness to the rawest, most sacred form of love — sacrifice.

Nupur blinked back tears. She wasn't just hearing stories anymore — she was walking among living epics.

That night, Nupur sat on the wooden cot in her tent, her laptop open, the soft buzz of the camp generator filling the silence. She stared at the blank screen, unsure of where to begin. How could she capture this? This raw intensity, the unbreakable spirit, the weight of sacrifice?

Her phone buzzed again.

Siddhant: Hey love, all, okay? You haven't replied since morning.

She typed slowly.

Nupur: Everything's okay. Just... overwhelmed. The stories here... they're not stories. They're lifetimes woven in blood, brotherhood and bravery.

He replied instantly.

Siddhant: I wish I could be there. Proud of you. Don't forget to eat.

She smiled. She had forgotten to eat.

Just then, she heard a commotion outside – laughter, clapping and a flute playing somewhere near the mess tent. Curious, she stepped out.

A group of soldiers had gathered. Someone was narrating a folk story – with mimicry and exaggerated gestures. One of them offered her tea. She sat among them, feeling no different. Just another person trying to make sense of a world full of purpose and pain. It was evident they were instructed to do so.

The next morning, Nupur requested permission to accompany a routine patrol. The CO agreed, assigning a small unit and a protected vehicle. As they drove through the forest trails, her camera captured more than visuals – it captured the breathing rhythm of duty.

A soldier named Karamveer Singh pointed to a hilltop. "Ma'am, that's where Captain Vishaal fell. He saved all of us. Dragged an injured jawan down that slope. Got shot twice in the process. Refused to be airlifted. Fought till the op was complete."

Silence fell again.

Nupur turned away for a second, hiding the tears welling in her eyes.

When she returned to camp later that afternoon, she walked straight to her tent. She began typing.

“In a place where time stops for no one and danger lurks behind every shadowed tree; a new day still begins with a soldier lacing his boots and saluting the sky...”



CHAPTER 3:

LONG NIGHT AT ANANTNAG

The sun had dipped low behind the hills, painting the sky in streaks of burnt orange and purple but Nupur hardly noticed. Her boots crunched softly against the gravel path as she walked alone through the camp perimeter, the sounds of distant drills and muffled radio chatter hanging in the twilight.

For the past half hour, she had walked without a word. Her heart was heavy — not with sorrow, but with something far more complex: reverence, helplessness, pride, grief, and an aching sense of understanding she had never known before.

She had just witnessed a man — Major GS Vivek — whose brother, Captain Vishaal, had been killed in a militant ambush merely weeks ago. Yet, there he was, composed, dignified, returning to serve with the very regiment that had lost his brother. Not for closure, but for continuity. That moment — that declaration — had shaken her to the core.

She had seen soldiers in the past. She had interviewed officers, filmed war memorials, covered ceremonial parades. But what she had witnessed today was different. This was family, forged not by blood, but by uniform, honour, and shared fire. She was no longer just a journalist with a camera. She had become a quiet witness to the sacredness of sacrifice.

As she wandered back toward her quarters, the mountains of Anantnag stood quietly around her like silent sentinels. The wind whispered through the pines. Even nature here seemed to mourn its soldiers.

When she finally reached her room, she collapsed on the bed, still in her jacket and stared at the ceiling. The face of Captain Vishaal — young, determined, alive in photographs — merged with the stoic, grief-hardened face of Major Vivek in her memory. It stunned her how much they looked alike.

A chill ran through her. They were from Kerala — just like Siddhant.

She sat up slowly and pulled out her phone. As she scrolled through her gallery, she selected a few images she had taken earlier in the day – soldiers training, the camp’s sunrise, the plaque with the names of the martyrs – and sent them to Siddhant with a short message:

“Today was a storm. You won’t believe the depth of stories I heard. So much pain. So much pride. My heart feels full and broken at the same time.”

She waited. No reply yet. Maybe he was working.

So, she sent the same pictures to her mother.

Not two minutes had passed when her phone buzzed. It was her mom calling.

“Nupur... just saw the photos. Are you okay?”

There was a softness in her voice, a mother’s instinct sensing her daughter’s emotions even through pixels.

Nupur’s voice cracked. “Mom... I don’t know what to say. These soldiers... their families... I feel like I’ve been sleepwalking through life till now.”

There was a pause. Her mom sighed gently. “I know what you mean. Your father often used to say that the real stories of courage aren’t told in newspapers. They’re written in silence. In bunkers. In broken letters home.”

Nupur swallowed hard. “I miss him, Mom.”

Her mother said nothing for a moment. Then gently added, "You haven't called him in three months, Nupu."

The words hit her harder than she expected.

"I know," Nupur whispered. "I wanted to... but I didn't know what to say."

"You don't need perfect words. Just say something. Even silence is better than distance."

Nupur wiped her tears. Her mother continued, her voice growing warmer.

"Do you remember when he was posted in Uri? You were not even four. You used to cry yourself sick when he had to join after his annual leave. But when he came back, you'd sit in his lap all day, asking him about his jungle stories. At night you would just cling to him with your tiny, trembling hands, as if letting go would make him vanish. Your silent fear etched in every glance, every breath that you took beside him. When you slept your grip would lighten then, he would just keep staring at you, deep inside knowing what all is he missing being a part of olive-green uniform."

Nupur laughed through the tears. "He used to give me apricots and tell me they were from the mountains. I believed they were magical."

"They were, darling. Because they came from him."

That evening, Nupur poured herself into her work. She wrote until her fingers ached and her eyes burned, weaving every word with the emotion she had soaked in all day. She wasn't just filing a report. She was preserving memory, honour, spirit.

When she was done, she stared at the blinking cursor for a while. Then without thinking too hard, she opened her phone again and sent a message to her mother.

"Mom, tell Dad... I love him. And I'm sorry for the silence. Thank you for never giving up on me."

She hit send. Her hands trembled. But for the first time in years, it felt like a barrier was breaking inside her — not with a bang, but with a soft, healing tear.

The reply didn't take long to come.

From her father.

"I read your report. I'm proud of the girl you've become. Call me when you're ready. I'm always there for you."

Nupur didn't reply. She couldn't. Not yet. But her hands clutched the phone to her chest and she wept — silently, fiercely, freely.

Later that night, unable to sleep, she scrolled through her old messages and opened a chat with Aman — her school friend, now serving in the Army. A batchmate from school. The same Aman who had been part of every major moment in her teenage years.

She typed a long message.

“Aman... I don’t even know how to explain today. I met the elder brother of a martyr – Major GS Vivek. He visited the unit that lost his younger brother. And not for emotional closure – but to support the unit. He’s from Kerala. He’s made of steel, Aman. I’m shaken. I don’t know how you all do what you do. Your job... your world... I’m proud of you. And I want you to know that.”

Aman replied almost instantly.

“Vivek sir? GS Vivek? 5 Para?”

“Yes!! You know him?!”

His reply made her sit up.

“Nupur, he was my senior at NDA. He is from Sainik School, Kazhakootam. We were in the same squadron – Mike Squadron. The man was a legend. Hockey captain. Sharp shooter. Straight spine. We all called him ‘Rock’. He was our CSM. He was a role model. We admired him a lot.”

“Captain Vishaal was his younger brother, right?”

“Yes. We couldn’t believe it when we heard. I had met Vishaal once too. Same spark. Same discipline. They both resembled each other.”

She paused. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Then she wrote:

“Seeing him today... something inside me changed. I feel like I’ve been living my life selfishly. He lost his brother, but he’s standing tall. I don’t know how people carry such pain with so much dignity.”

Aman replied:

“Because for people like him, the pain is a part of the service. You don’t carry it alone – you carry it with your regiment. That’s what makes us strong. That’s why we fight. For the ones beside us.”

Her fingers trembled.

“I’m sorry I never understood what this uniform means. You’ve always been my friend, but I never truly grasped the weight you carry every day.”

“You don’t need to apologise, Nupur. Today, you understood. That’s enough. That’s everything.”

As the night deepened, a still silence settled over the Anantnag camp.

Nupur stood by the window, watching the stars blink faintly over the shadowy silhouettes of the snow-capped mountains. Somewhere down the slope, she could hear faint singing – a few jawans humming a folk tune around a fire.

She didn’t know what tomorrow would bring. But tonight – this long, sleepless night in Anantnag – she had changed.

She messaged Siddhant.

“You won’t believe this, but I met someone today who reminded me so much of you... and of all the reasons I fell in love with you.”

Then she opened a blank page in her journal and wrote:

“They call it the Valley of Death, But I saw life here today.

Stronger than fear; Deeper than blood.

More sacred than sacrifice.

This is where heroes walk and at times it’s only the silence that salutes them.

Where boots leave behind not just footprints, but promises.

Where echoes of last breaths become lullabies of courage.

*Where medals are pinned not on chests,
but on memories that ache in mother’s arms.*

The wind here doesn’t howl- it mourns.

The soil doesn’t just stain- it remembers.

Each stone here holds the weight of the name that will never be forgotten.

They say war breaks men.

But I saw men here, broken- and still standing.

Because some souls rise even after their bodies fall.

And in the quiet between gunfire and goodbye,

ABHINAV BHARDWAJ

You hear the heartbeat of a nation whisper;

“We live, because they chose not to.”

The mountains stood still.

And somewhere inside Nupur, the silence finally spoke



CHAPTER 4:

HARIDWAR: ECHOES OF JUSTICE

Four days had passed since the Anantnag broadcast aired. It had created ripples—across newsrooms, defence circles and hearts that had forgotten what true sacrifice looked like.

Nupur's phone hadn't stopped buzzing since the morning. Her mother had proudly shared the link of her coverage in every family and neighbourhood WhatsApp group. Messages poured in—from childhood friends she hadn't spoken to in years, many of them fellow Army brats who had grown up with her in Cantonment quarters, drill grounds and mess halls.

“Nups! Just saw your Anantnag story. Goosebumps. You’ve made all of us Army kids proud.”

“Hey reporter girl, you brought back memories of our dads in uniform. Cried a little. Hugged Mom after.”

“Can’t believe the girl who bunked drill is now telling stories of soldiers like that. Proud of you, Legend!”

Even her uncles and cousins—some serving, some retired—sent voice notes, their voices choked with pride. One of her father’s old colleagues messaged her directly:

“Your father served in that sector years ago. He never talked about it. But today, you spoke for him.”

With every message, Nupur felt the wall between her world and her father’s crumbling, brick by brick. It wasn’t just a story she had told — it was a bridge she had unknowingly built, across silence, duty and decades of sacrifice.

Nupur had returned to Mumbai with a storm in her soul and fire in her eyes. The city felt alien after the starkness of the valley. But journalism didn’t wait. Neither did truth.

That morning, she sat hunched over her desk at the Mumbai office, still partially in Kashmir in her mind, when a news flash caught her attention on the ticker.

“BREAKING: Three prime suspects in the Saharanpur rape case met with a fatal accident near Haridwar. Two dead, one critical.”

Her breath caught.

She clicked the link and stared at the wreckage — a crumpled black SUV, shattered glass, blood on asphalt. It felt almost too cinematic. Too sudden. Too convenient.

She immediately picked up her phone and dialled Siddhant.

“Hey Sid...” she said, her voice sharp with urgency. “Did you see the news today? Those three guys... Sukriti’s rapists... they were in a car heading to Rishikesh. Crashed near Haridwar. Two dead on the spot, one barely clinging to life.”

There was a pause. Then Siddhant said, “That’s... unexpected. Do you think it was just an accident?”

“I don’t know,” Nupur whispered. “But my gut says no. Something’s off.”

Just then, her phone buzzed again. She glanced at the screen.

“Ugh. I think Saxena’s calling. I’ll call you later, okay? Love you. Also, tell Di not to make dinner tonight. I’m bringing your favourite Chinese.”

“Got it. Love you, too. Come home soon.”

That evening, as she stepped inside their cozy apartment in Andheri, she was met with the scent of fresh orchids and the sound of soft music playing in the background.

Siddhant stood by the kitchen island, smiling. "Hey baby, welcome home." He held out a bouquet of lavender orchids. "Celebration flowers. For Kashmir's rising star."

Nupur smiled, surprised. "You really didn't need to..."

"But I wanted to," he interrupted, pulling her into a warm embrace. "You deserve it."

She laughed, burying her face in his shoulder, her tiredness dissolving. "You should've seen Saxena today. Mithun Sir was full-on praising me. Called it one of the most humane pieces we've aired in months. Saxena suddenly turned into my godfather, claiming he discovered me."

Siddhant chuckled. "Typical. So... how does it feel to be the newsroom's darling?"

"Exhausting," she said, kicking off her heels and dropping onto the couch. "Also, deeply satisfying."

He walked over and handed her a glass of white wine. "To your fire," he toasted. She smiled and clinked glasses.

"And how was your shoot, Mr. Supermodel?"

“Fun, but exhausting,” he said, sitting beside her. “There was this Mallu girl who tried to flirt with me.”

Nupur raised an eyebrow. “Mallu girl, huh?”

“Yup. Said I had ‘Kerala hero eyes.’ But I told her, ‘Sorry, boss. I’m taken by the most beautiful woman in the world.’”

“Oh really?” Nupur laughed. “Didn’t you say that about Shreya too?”

Siddhant winced. “Ouch. Low blow.”

“Come on, spill it. Didn’t you say she blocked you?”

“I thought she did. But she posted her engagement pic recently. Maybe unblocked me to show it off. Shruthi confirmed—guy’s some entrepreneur based in Bahrain.”

“By the way, Shruthi also had a thing for you,” Nupur teased.

He groaned, rolling his eyes. “Please, don’t remind me. That girl gives me the creeps. She came to Mumbai a few weeks ago and texted me out of the blue. I didn’t even open the message—left it unseen.”

Nupur raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t even reply?”

“Nope,” he said flatly. “Shruthi’s sweet in her own way, but way too creepy. Always trying to get close, even when I never gave her a reason to. I never felt anything for her—not then, not now.”

Nupur chuckled. "So she wasn't, the one that got away?"

Siddhant leaned in with a smirk. "Baby, I never had to lose anyone to know you're the only one I ever wanted."

Nupur, in, her voice soft and playful. "Maybe she also wanted the most handsome guy in the world?"

He turned to her, catching her chin between his fingers. "Too late for her. He's already taken."

Their eyes locked. The mood shifted — from light-hearted teasing to something deeper, more magnetic.

He leaned in and kissed her — not rushed, not in hurry — but slow and full of longing. She responded, wrapping her arms around his neck, her fingers running through his hair. The wine, the warmth, the exhaustion of the day all melted away as they sank into each other.

The room, dimly lit, echoed only with the soft sounds of their breathing and the rustle of clothes falling to the floor.

Later, wrapped in a blanket on the living room floor, a half-eaten box of noodles beside them, Siddhant looked at her, tracing circles on her shoulder.

"Do you really think it wasn't an accident?" he asked, quietly.

Nupur nodded slowly. "Two out of three suspects, dead. Right when the case was reopening due to public pressure. It feels... orchestrated."

Siddhant frowned. "But who'd want them dead? To silence them? Or for revenge?"

Nupur stared at the ceiling. "That's what I want to find out. Maybe someone didn't want a trial. Maybe justice came... in another form."

"You sound like you're walking into something dangerous."

"I'm not," she said. "I'm just... curious."

Later that night, as Siddhant dozed off, his face lit softly by the warm glow of the bedside lamp, Nupur lay wide awake beside him.

The praise, the romance, the orchids... they all filled her heart. But the image of that SUV crash wouldn't leave her mind. Her instincts, honed over years of reporting, were whispering again. No – screaming.

Something was wrong.

She opened her phone, looked up the accident photos again. Zoomed in. The windshield had bullet-like cracks. The side of the car looked... too clean. Almost as if the damage had been done post-mortem.

She took a screenshot and forwarded it to a forensic journalist she trusted.

"Need your eyes on this. Something's off."

Then, she stared at the last message her father had sent from the other night:

“I’m proud of the woman you’ve become.”

She smiled faintly, a single tear slipping down her cheek. Her father’s silence had once been the loudest wound in her life. But tonight, it felt like that silence was finally breaking into understanding.

She typed slowly, then sent:

Dad... I love you. Always have. I was just too stubborn to say it. But I know now. I really know.

She placed her phone on the side table and curled into Siddhant’s chest. He stirred, half-asleep, and wrapped his arm around her instinctively.

In that quiet embrace, surrounded by shadows and unfinished questions, Nupur finally allowed herself to close her eyes.

Tomorrow would come – with truths, with lies, with maybe even danger.

But tonight, in the arms of love, she found her courage again.

Nupur jolted awake, heart thudding, drenched in a cold sweat. Her breaths came in sharp, shallow bursts. She glanced at the clock – 2:14 AM. The room was dim, lit only by the distant glow of streetlights filtering through the rain-soaked curtains. Beside her, Sidhant slept soundly, his soft snoring a reminder of the safety of now – but Nupur felt anything but safe.

The dream lingered in shards: her childhood glimpse of Haridwar, the Shiv Mandir's towering spire, the clang of temple bells, a mangled car spinning off a cliff, Sukriti's mother wailing, her saree soaked in blood and rain. A sense of dread hung over her like thick fog.

She closed her eyes again, trying to slow her breathing, but her chest remained tight. Five minutes later, she gave up and reached for her phone. A WhatsApp message blinked on her lock screen.

Mom: "See, Lord Shiva punished the culprits. Finally, the mother got justice."

It was followed by a link — an old video interview of Sukriti's mother.

Nupur's thumb hovered over the play button.

The screen lit up. Sukriti's mother, draped in a faded green saree, looked directly at the reporter:

"Main jaanti hoon... jaise sabko insaaf mila, meri beti ko bhi milega. Shiva sab dekh raha hai."

("I know... just as others received justice, so will my daughter. Shiva is watching.")

A chill ran down Nupur's spine. Her eyes welled up.

She remembered Sidhant's words — an atheist, but eerily right that day:

"Maybe your Shiva sent someone to do justice."

She glanced at him, still asleep. Quietly, she got out of bed, tiptoed to the bathroom, splashed cold water on her face and returned to her desk. The rain tapped lightly on the glass. The city slept. But Nupur didn't.

She began poring through old footage, reports, files from the Saharanpur rape case. The faces of the accused haunted her—now two of them were dead, the third clinging to life. Something didn't feel right. Too convenient. Too clean. Too exact.

Hours passed unnoticed.

At 3:40 AM, she stumbled across a case from Gwalior — eerily similar: three suspects in a gang rape, all dead within two weeks in a truck collision. Another case from Hisar, 2019 — two prime accused found charred in a burnt-down warehouse.

By 4:30 AM, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor, laptop open, yellow sticky notes scattered like fallen leaves. She began to compile a spreadsheet. Case. Year. Victims. Suspects. Cause of death. Status.

By 5:15 AM, the number hit 312.

Her head spun.

"What are you doing?" a groggy voice murmured behind her.

Nupur turned. Sidhant squinted at her from bed.

"It's 5:30. Go back to sleep," she whispered.

“That’s why I’m asking what you’re doing...” he mumbled, half-asleep and rolled over.

She smiled, touched by his concern even in his sleep.

The sky outside had turned pale grey. Rain fell in a steady rhythm.

Instead of trying to sleep, she went into the kitchen and made coffee — her fingers trembling slightly as she poured. The aroma filled the house like a quiet reassurance. She walked over, bent gently and whispered, “Sid... coffee.”

He opened one eye. “Keep it there... and come back here,” he said, pulling her into the blanket beside him.

She curled into his arms. His warmth, his scent, calmed her racing thoughts.

“Why were you awake all night?” he murmured, brushing her hair back.

“I’ll tell you when we wake up properly,” she said, closing her eyes briefly.

They dozed for another 45 minutes, a fragile peace.

It was 7:15 am Nupur stood barefoot on the cool kitchen tiles, swirling sugar into the second cup of coffee.

“Okay,” Sidhant said, rubbing his eyes, “now spill it. You’ve been possessed all night.”

She sat beside him and opened her laptop. “Read this.”

He scrolled through the spreadsheet.

“Three hundred and twelve rape cases. In over 80% of them, the prime accused died in what were reported as accidents.”

His brows furrowed. “Are you sure about this?”

“I triple-checked. It’s too patterned. It’s like someone... or something... is making sure they never reach trial.”

Sidhant looked at her. “You just got praised across the country for Anantnag. Don’t jump into something that could blow up in your face.”

“I’m not jumping,” she said quietly. “I’m being pulled. Something’s happening, Sid. Something nobody’s talking about.”

He reached for her hand. “And what if it’s not just coincidence? What if it’s... vigilantism? A group? What if it’s not Shiva but someone who thinks they are?”

Nupur didn’t blink. “Then I need to find them.”

Outside, the city roared back to life, unaware of the storm she was about to uncover.

But Nupur’s eyes were wide open now.

Shiva was watching.



CHAPTER 5:

CREDIBILITY

The newsroom was unusually quiet for a Tuesday afternoon. Not silent, but quiet in a way that suggested something simmering beneath the surface. Screens flickered. Phones buzzed softly. And the heavy Mumbai humidity pressed against the windows like an unspoken warning.

Nupur sat in Saxena's office; her jaw clenched. The third prime suspect in the Saharanpur rape case had just died. Brain haemorrhage. Another so-called "accident."

"He was supposed to be in jail. On trial. Not in a coffin," she said, her voice low but firm.

Saxena leaned back in his chair, adjusting his glasses. He exhaled heavily and crossed his arms. “Nupur, I know where you’re going with this. But are we really prepared to put our credibility on the line for... divine retribution?”

She looked him straight in the eye. “I don’t believe it’s divine. I believe it’s deliberate. There’s a difference.”

Saxena arched an eyebrow. “You think there’s someone—some vigilante—executing justice across the country, eliminating rapists in ‘accidents? Like some modern-day Robin Hood.”

“I don’t think it,” she replied, pulling out her laptop. “I know it.”

She opened a folder titled “Justice Trail.” Dozens of case files populated the screen. News clippings. Police reports. Social media posts. Obituaries. It looked obsessive. It was.

“For the past four nights, I’ve barely slept. My team has tracked down 312 cases in the last ten years where prime suspects in rape cases have died under suspicious circumstances before or during trial. Out of those, 78 happened in the last 18 months.”

Saxena narrowed his eyes. “And you think this is the work of one person?”

Nupur hesitated. “Maybe one. Maybe a network. But there’s a pattern. It’s too clean to be coincidence.”

He rubbed his temples. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, Nupur. It’s that I need a face. A name. You don’t have one.”

“I will,” she said. “Soon.”

An hour later, in the buzzing cafeteria of Rashtra Voice Network (RVN Channel) Nupur stood in the corner with her closest team—Tanvi (research head), Manoj (video editor), and Abhinav (field journalist).

“They don’t buy it,” she told them, her voice hushed. “But I need to prove this isn’t just a wild theory.”

Tanvi sipped her coffee. “Even the smallest pattern can be earth-shattering if the story is told right. Let’s start threading the narrative.”

Manoj added, “We need a hook. Some voice of God. An angle that isn’t tabloid but terrifyingly real.”

Abhinav looked up from his phone. “What if the vigilante wants to be found? Maybe not his name, but his message? Some digital footprint? Dark web?”

Nupur’s mind began racing. “Let’s comb back through the last year’s videos. CCTV footage, public rants, even viral shorts. Anything where someone—anonymous or masked—talks about justice outside the system.”

They agreed. After all, this wasn’t just reporting anymore. It was decoding a myth in real time.

Later that evening, on a film set 45 minutes from Film City, Sidhant wiped the sweat off his brow and waited for the next scene. The studio lights bore down on him. His co-actor, Nandhini, had gone into the vanity van to change into a traditional outfit.

He checked his phone and texted Nupur.

Sidhant: Hey baby, just completed a few takes, have a few more to go. Waiting for it.

Nupur: Why waiting?

Sidhant: Mallu girl costume change. Same one I told you about. Nandhini.

Nupur: Oh okay. Saxena says story isn't ready. No one will believe a messiah is real. Asked me to drop it. Working on UP elections story now. I'm confused. It all seems so... fictional.

Sidhant: Baby, you're the best. Even Saxena knows that. The right time will come. Maybe the Justice Man will give you another chance.

Nupur: You know what... that's why I love you.

Sidhant: Love you too. But what just happened?

Nupur: I got the human face for my messiah—it's The Justice Man!

That night, Nupur gathered her team once more. "We're not stopping. Whether it gets published or not. We tell

the story, even if we self-publish. This isn't about TRPs anymore."

They worked until 2 a.m. Digital threads of death records, CCTV footage of accident sites, Reddit and Quora discussions, even voice notes from grieving families. Most said the same thing.

"Usse Bhagwan ne sazaa di."

"Ram ka nyaay aya."

"Kisi ne toh usko uska hisaab diya."

"Aankhon pe patti bandhi thi kanoon ki, par Bhagwan ki nahi."

("God punished him.")

"Ram's justice has arrived"

"Someone finally gave him what he deserved"

"The law was blindfolded, but not the god")

Tanvi connected the dots. "Look at this tweet. A woman from Ranchi wrote, 'Shiva ke trishul ka kaam kisi insaan ne kiya hai.' (*"What should have been done by Shiva's Trident, a human did on his behalf"*) This was before the news of the suspect's death was even public."

"Let's find her," Nupur said.

They called the woman—a widow, whose daughter was raped two years ago. Her voice cracked as she whispered over the phone, "He wasn't just killed. He was purified."

At 3:44 a.m., just as Nupur was preparing to wrap up, her phone rang.

Unknown Number.

She hesitated. Answered.

A modulated voice said, "You're looking in the right place. But the justice you seek didn't start last year. It began in 2005. The first man who crossed the line was thrown in front of a train."

The line went dead.

Nupur's heart pounded. Her hands trembled. She didn't sleep that night.

At 7:30 a.m., Siddhant opened the front door in his shorts, rubbing his eyes.

Nupur sat at the dining table, fresh coffee steaming, her eyes bloodshot but determined.

"You're exhausted and looking like a mad scientist," he joked.

"I got the call. A voice. He—or someone who knows—confirmed it started in 2005."

"Holy shit. So, it's real?" he whispered.

"It's real, Sid. And it's bigger than I thought."

He took the coffee. "Then don't screw it up. Tell it with heart. Don't lose your voice in the thrill."

She looked at him, grateful. "That's why I love you."

"I know," he smirked. "I'm irresistible."

By 11 a.m., Nupur stormed into Saxena's office with her team. She set her laptop down and started a presentation.

A timeline. Case-by-case visuals. News headlines. Death certificates. Quotes from family members. The anonymous voice note. And most importantly—patterns.

"The Justice Man isn't fiction. He's a phenomenon. Maybe he's a person. Maybe a spirit of anger. But his presence is felt by every victim who wasn't heard."

Saxena didn't interrupt. Not once.

When the last slide appeared—300 faces, greyed out except for one outlined in red—he looked at her, for a long, silent moment.

"You understand what this means, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"If we go ahead, we become the voice of either a miracle or a lie."

Nupur nodded. "And I'm ready to risk everything."

Saxena stood up, extended his hand. "Let's start by calling Mithun Sir. You're going to pitch it to him directly."

That evening, the newsroom began preparing two stories: one about UP election—and one about a nameless man who had been erasing rapists from the face of the earth. The nation was ready for politics. But Nupur was about to introduce them to justice.



CHAPTER 6:

ADIEU MURPHY

Nupur sat hunched over her laptop in her apartment. The glow of the screen illuminating her determined face. The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report was open, its statistics painting a grim picture of the state of crimes against women in India. She was searching for a pattern, a link that would lead her to the elusive figure she had dubbed “The Justice Man.”

For the past week, Nupur had been tirelessly interviewing families of rape victims and those of the accused who had met untimely deaths. The stories were

harrowing, each one echoing the same sentiment: justice had been elusive, and when it did arrive, it was often too late. Yet, in many cases, the accused had died under mysterious circumstances, leading to whispers of a vigilante delivering justice where the system had failed.

One case that stood out was that of a 10-year-old girl in Morena. According to reports, a 50-year-old neighbour had abducted the girl while she was playing near her home. He took her to a graveyard, raped her and then strangled her, hiding her body in nearby bushes. The police arrested the accused, but the community was left shaken. Finally, the accused was found dead when whole city was celebrating Ramanavami.

Another chilling incident involved a 16-year-old girl whose body was found in an agricultural field in Sehore. The police suspected gang rape and murder, with the girl's neck slit by a sharp-edged weapon. The community's outrage led to attacks on the police, highlighting the deep mistrust between the public and law enforcement. Again, the justice was done where these suspect accused met road accident.

Nupur knew she had to delve deeper. She decided to visit Haridwar, a place that held both personal and professional significance. The city, with its sacred ghats and ancient temples, was also the site of several incidents she was investigating. She visited the locations of the crimes, spoke to locals, and tried to piece together the

narratives. The stories were eerily similar: victims from marginalized communities, accused individuals who died under suspicious circumstances, and a community left grappling with grief and unanswered questions.

After her fieldwork, Nupur made her way to Dehradun to visit her parents. The relationship with her father, Col Sood, had been strained but the visit brought a sense of reconciliation. Col Sood, expressed pride in Nupur's work, a rare display of emotion that brought tears to both their eyes. Her mother, always the mediator, was overjoyed to see the father-daughter bond rekindled.

That night, as Nupur lay in her childhood room, she reflected on the journey that had brought her here. The stories of the victims haunted her but they also fuelled her determination. She messaged Sidhant, expressing gratitude for his unwavering support and for encouraging her to reconnect with her roots.

The next morning, sunlight filtered softly through the floral curtains of Nupur's childhood room. Her mother walked in carrying a tray with poha, buttered toast and a steaming mug of masala chai. The aroma was comforting, almost sacred in its familiarity.

Good morning, her mother with a smile, brushing a strand of hair from Nupur's forehead.

Nupur sat up; her eyes still heavy from sleep but her heart lighter than it had been in days. As she took the

first bite, her mother opened an old photo album she'd brought along. They sat together on the bed, having their breakfast, flipping through the pages, reliving fragments of a long-lost time.

"Remember this?" her mother chuckled, pointing at a faded photograph.

In it, a six-year-old Nupur stood dressed as Rani Lakshmi Bai—sword, fake braid, and all—but her eyes were red with tears.

"You were furious that day," her mother laughed. "You kept saying you wanted to be Bhagat Singh, not Rani Lakshmi Bai."

Nupur laughed too, wiping the corner of her eye. "I wanted the Moustache."

They both giggled like old friends. Her mother's eyes then softened as she turned the page to a photo of Nupur's room—just as it had looked before she left for college.

"Your father kept your room exactly like this," she said quietly. "Not a single thing moved. Even when I wanted to shift a few books, he told me not to. Said it should be just the way you left it."

"You know..." her voice softened to a whisper, almost afraid to disturb the silence. "I always wanted two children."

Nupur turned toward her mother, surprised. She had never heard this before.

“But it was your father...” her mother continued, her gaze lost in some faraway time, “he would just smile at me and say, ‘I can’t have a second one, because I’ll do injustice to the second child.’”

Nupur blinked.

Her mother’s voice trembled slightly now. “He said, ‘The love I feel for Nupur... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to share that with anyone else.’ And that’s why... you never had a sibling.”

The words hit Nupur like a wave—quiet, soft, but so overwhelmingly full. She had always wondered, in passing, why she had grown up alone. Now she knew—it wasn’t absence. It was love. A love so deep, it felt too sacred to divide.

Her mother reached out, touched her hair as if she were still the little girl who once sat cross-legged on this very bed. “You remember your tenth birthday?”

Nupur nodded slowly. “The one with the broken cake and the rain?”

“You cried the whole night,” her mother smiled faintly. “Not because of the cake. But because you wanted a pet. You said you were lonely, that your friends had siblings, and you had no one.”

"I remember that," Nupur said, her voice shaking. "I remember crying into your lap."

"That night," her mother said, voice cracking now, "Your father didn't sleep. I saw him sitting outside in the balcony for hours, silently smoking. The next morning, he came home with Murphy in a basket—wrapped in your old baby blanket."

Nupur covered her mouth, tears spilling freely now.

"I have never... never seen him love anyone the way he loved that dog. It was like... he finally found a way to give you what he couldn't with words. A companion. A friend. A sibling in fur."

Her mother paused, trying to hold herself together. "But things changed after that. You were growing. Becoming your own person. There were arguments. Distance. You and your father... you both started building walls. And I watched it happen, helplessly."

Nupur was crying now—quiet, soul-deep sobs she hadn't let out in years.

Her mother looked at her, her voice now barely more than a whisper. "And yet... somehow, Murphy knew. He knew your father's heart. He never left his side."

She reached for Nupur's hand, holding it tightly. "The day Murphy passed; your father was alone with him. He had stopped eating. Barely moved for days. And that morning, when I walked into the room... Murphy was

lying in your father's arms. His eyes had closed... and your father... he just sat there, still, holding him like a baby. Like he was holding onto you."

Nupur was sobbing now, her shoulders shaking, her hand gripping her mother's as if she could somehow hold onto all of it—Murphy, her father, her childhood, the lost years, the unspoken love.

"He never cried," her mother added, wiping her own tears. "Not at your farewell. Not during any goodbye. But that day... he broke."

And in that moment, sitting amidst fading photographs and warm tea, Nupur finally saw her father—not as the stoic Colonel Sood, not as the strict parent—but as a man who loved so fiercely, so silently, that even a dog became the vessel for all he couldn't say.

Nupur paused. Her heart clenched with a mix of guilt and love. "He never says it, Mom. But I know he feels everything."

Her mother nodded, her smile faint but knowing. "He's been a little lost since Murphy passed," she added after a moment, her voice dipping gently into sorrow.

Nupur's face fell. "Murphy..." she whispered. "That's the first thing I missed when I walked in. The house felt too quiet without him."

"He lived a full life, sweetheart. Sixteen years. He waited for you when you went to college... even when you barely

came home,” her mother said, rubbing her back. “You know, Aman visited us last month. He was on leave. He spoke about Murphy too—remembering how both your father and his father were posted in Agra that time? Murphy was just a pup. Aman used to meet him and play with him during Murphy evening walks.”

Nupur’s eyes welled up again. She hadn’t expected to be hit with so many memories at once. Murphy was more than a pet; he had witnessed their life—transfers, promotions, farewells, fights, birthdays. His absence was a quiet void in every corner of the house.

Her mother added softly, “There’s a new pup in the neighbourhood—Murphy’s offspring. Your father and I visit him often. It helps. He has Murphy’s eyes. Same stubbornness too.”

A silence settled between them, thick with love and remembrance.

Her mother, as if reading her mind, shifted the conversation gently.

“By the way,” she began casually, “How has Aman been doing? I always had a feeling he liked you.”

Nupur nearly choked on her tea. “Come on, Mom! He’s just a good friend.”

Her mother raised an eyebrow. “Well, Brigadier Gupta used to tease your dad all the time—said he’d love to see you and Aman together.”

Nupur laughed, shaking her head. "I remember. And yes, Aman did invite me to both his NDA and IMA Ball Nights."

Her mother's eyes twinkled. "I remember you mentioning about it earlier"

"During his NDA ball, I thought he was just kidding, pulling my leg like always. But I was genuinely shocked to know he went stag." She paused, her smile softening. "During his IMA Ball Night, I wanted to go, Mom. I really did. But it clashed with my internship dates. I couldn't leave Delhi then."

Her mother gave a small sigh. "Life has a way of rewriting plans, doesn't it?"

Nupur nodded, then added with a grin, "But guess what? He's dating the same girl who came as his partner to the IMA ball. Her name's Himani. She's Kumaoni too. I think her father, Mr. Chandel, was from the ranks. She's now a cabin crew with Qatar Airways."

"Ohh!" her mother said with genuine surprise. "That's impressive. International job, no less."

"You won't believe it, Mom. Aman told me she earns more than he does," Nupur chuckled. "He sounded half proud, half shocked."

Her mother smiled but didn't comment, sensing there was more.

“Gupta uncle still feels Aman’s a bit immature. He thinks Aman doesn’t have enough social depth yet, that he jumps into things without thinking them through. That’s why he keeps telling him not to rush, to take time before deciding anything serious with Himani.”

“Hmm,” her mother hummed thoughtfully. “Well, he always was a little too idealistic for his own good.”

“True,” Nupur agreed. “Meanwhile, Aman’s younger brother—Aditya, you remember him? Chintu?”

“Oh yes, the quiet one who always followed Aman around.”

“Yeah, he has a girlfriend in the Army now. They both visit Gupta uncle and aunt in Panchkula whenever they’re on leave. Aunt’s cool about Aditya’s girlfriend, but still a bit sceptical about Himani. She says Himani’s very polished and ‘too fast-paced for Army life.’”

Her mother nodded knowingly. “That generation still looks for familiarity. And sometimes, they confuse calm with compatibility.”

Nupur stayed silent for a moment, reflecting on everything—the people who had grown with her, around her, and without her. Lives moving on, relationships evolving, memories softening with time. It was strange how much stayed the same and how much changed.

Her mother reached out and touched her hand. "I'm glad you're talking about all this. Your voice sounds lighter. Like you're starting to breathe again.."

"I think I am," Nupur said, her eyes lingering on an old picture frame by the window—her and Murphy, muddy and wild from a garden chase. "One memory at a time."

"And tell me, how's Sidhant? We've only seen him in pictures. What's his family like?"

Nupur smiled, slightly caught off guard. "They're from Kerala. His father's is a businessman. His mom runs a small boutique now. Very grounded people. Sidhant's closest to his grandmother. Talks about her all the time."

Her mother nodded with soft interest, then looked at Nupur closely. "Do you see this going somewhere? Not asking to pressure you. Just... trying to understand."

Nupur looked down at her tea and said quietly, "I don't know, Ma. He's kind. He listens. He supports me. Even Aman met him once, he praises him lot. But I've changed... this case, this journey—it's reshaping me in ways even I don't fully understand yet."

Her mother didn't press further. She just placed a hand over Nupur's. "You're allowed to grow. Just don't close the door on love while you're chasing justice."

They sat in silence again, sipping tea, the morning stretching out like a soft shawl over two women bound by time, love and memories—of a room left untouched,

of a loyal dog, of a daughter who had returned changed. Her mother also mentioned about Mrs Shweta, “she was also asking about you”. She called me after your Anantnag coverage, Shekhawat uncle commanded that unit. Mrs Shweta Shekhawat she is now running an NGO promoting cleanliness and hygiene in slum of Delhi and nearby outskirts.

Reinvigorated, Nupur returned to her research. She compiled data, cross-referenced cases and began to see a pattern. The deaths of the accused were not random; they followed a trajectory that suggested a deliberate hand. The figure of “The Justice Man” was no longer a myth but a possible reality. As the monsoon rains poured outside, Nupur knew that her search had truly begun. She was on the trail of a story that could shake the very foundations of the justice system and she was ready to follow it wherever it led.



CHAPTER 7:

THE JAIPUR TRAGEDY

The soft hum of the ceiling fan did little to alleviate the oppressive heat in Nupur's room. Stacks of case files, news clippings and her laptop surrounded her, each piece a puzzle in the grim mosaic she was assembling. Her investigation into the mysterious "Justice Man" had led her down a harrowing path, unearthing stories of pain, loss, and a justice system that often failed its most vulnerable.

One case, in particular, had gripped her heart—the tragic story of a young girl from Jaipur in 2008.

Ananya Chauhan was a bright 14-year-old student at a reputed school in Jaipur. Her father, Mr. Abhimanyu Chauhan was a respected chemistry teacher at the same institution, known for his dedication and gentle demeanour. Her mother, Meena, managed their household with warmth and care.

On a seemingly ordinary September morning, Ananya left for school, her backpack slung over her shoulder and a smile on her face. She had a science project due and was eager to present it. Mr. Chauhan as always, dropped her at the school gate before heading to his classroom.

The day unfolded like any other until the final bell rang. Ananya never returned home. Panic set in as evening approached, and frantic calls to her friends and teachers yielded no information. Mr. Chauhan's heart sank when he realized that no one had seen her since the last period.

A missing person's report was filed that evening, and a desperate search began. Abhimanyu spent the night pacing through the streets of Jaipur, flashlight in hand, calling out his daughter's name. Meena sat by the door, hands trembling around Ananya's favourite shawl, praying for a knock—any sign of her return.

But by dawn, the nightmare had taken its final shape.

Ananya's charred body was discovered near an abandoned yard adjacent to the railway tracks. Her school uniform was torn, her arms bore signs of restraint,

and the brutality of the act—too heinous to fully comprehend—had left even the police speechless. Medical examination confirmed the worst: she had been raped and then burnt alive.

The investigation, hurried and chaotic, revealed that three men were last seen in the vicinity. The youngest, an 18-year-old boy, was allegedly infatuated with Ananya. According to witness reports and whispered rumours among classmates, he had expressed his feelings to her multiple times. When Ananya firmly rejected him—calling him immature and telling him to “grow up”—he felt humiliated, especially in front of his older friends, aged 27 and 31.

What began as wounded pride quickly morphed into a twisted idea of revenge.

The trio lured Ananya after school hours, offering her a lift home under the pretence that her father had sent them. She knew the younger boy from school corridors, and her guard lowered just long enough for their plan to unfold. She was taken to an isolated yard near the tracks, assaulted in turn by the three men, her pleas muffled by cruel laughter.

As she lay broken and weeping, one of them—panicking over her threats to go to the police—suggested they “finish it.” In a horrifying act of cowardice and cruelty, they poured kerosene on her clothes and set her on fire. She died screaming.

By the time her body was found the next morning, her face was unrecognizable.

The forensic evidence was weak. The crime scene, already tampered with, yielded little. Though local witnesses pointed fingers and rumours circled like vultures, there was no CCTV footage, no solid proof to place the three accused directly at the site. Their lawyers claimed consensual interaction and accused the police of framing them due to “public pressure.”

Despite Ananya’s post-mortem report, despite witness accounts, despite the overwhelming grief of her family and the fury of Jaipur’s citizens—justice was denied.

The court, citing lack of “conclusive evidence,” released all three men on bail. Eventually, they walked free.

The Chauhan family—once simple, quiet, and content—was gutted.

Meena stopped eating. She sat in silence, staring at the front gate, waiting for a child who would never walk through it again. She blamed herself—for letting Ananya go alone that day, for not noticing anything was wrong, for not being able to protect her.

And one day, she was simply... gone. Abhimanyu returned home from the school laboratory to find her hanging from the ceiling fan in the living room.

As Nupur delved deeper into Ananya’s case, she was struck by an eerie silence that surrounded it. There were

no news reports, no television interviews, no photographs—nothing. It was as if the incident had been deliberately wiped from public memory. Every search ended in dead links. Archived news segments had been scrubbed and even social media had no trace. When she asked around—locals, journalists, old contacts—she was met with hesitation, nervous glances and most disturbingly, silence. No one wanted to speak about Ananya.

But Nupur was relentless. Driven by a haunting need for truth, she began leaning on her private sources—an old police informant, a retired crime beat reporter and a local activist who remembered a “case that vanished.” Thread by thread, she followed a faint trail until she finally found a lead—Abhimanyu Chauhan, Ananya’s father.

It took weeks to locate him and even longer to convince him to meet. At first, he refused. “There’s nothing left to say,” he told her flatly. But something in her voice—earnest, unafraid—must have stirred a memory, because one morning, he agreed.

What Nupur didn’t know then was that this meeting would shake her to the core—and change the course of her investigation forever.

She reached out to the Chauhan’s, requesting an interview. Abhimanyu agreed, his voice steady but laced with sorrow. They finally met at a Cafe. The café was

quiet, save for the rhythmic clinking of ceramic cups and the occasional low hum of conversations. Nupur sat across the table from Abhimanyu Chauhan, her recorder set aside—not out of unimportance, but out of reverence. Some stories, she knew, needed to be listened to not as a journalist, but as a human being.

Abhimanyu sat with a straight back, his hands folded on the table, his eyes distant yet hauntingly focused. Years of grief had hollowed his face, carving lines too deep for his age. His voice, when he finally began to speak, was barely above a whisper—but every word felt like a falling stone.

“Ananya was our only child,” he began, his gaze fixed on a crack in the wooden table. “When she was four, she once told me she wanted to go to the moon and bring back stars for her mother.” A flicker of a smile passed across his lips, broken almost instantly by the grief that followed. “She used to tape silver paper on her tiny dupattas and wear a strainer on her head, pretending to be an astronaut.”

Nupur smiled faintly, her eyes already beginning to sting.

“But later,” he continued, “around when she turned twelve, she saw a documentary about a girl who died from cancer. After that, all she ever talked about was becoming a doctor. An oncologist, she’d say—because she wanted no other child to suffer like that. And she was the brightest student and everyone’s favourite.”

Abhimanyu reached slowly into his pocket and pulled out a worn-out leather wallet. Its seams were frayed, the surface cracked. He opened it with reverence, like it contained something sacred. Inside was a half-burnt photograph.

Nupur leaned in and her breath caught in her throat.

It was a picture of a much younger Abhimanyu, his wife Meena and a small girl sitting between them in a school uniform, her smile wide, her eyes lit with wonder. The top corner was blackened, curling with fire damage. The bottom half of Meena's face was singed away, but Ananya's smile—oh, that smile—remained intact, almost defiant against the cruelty that followed.

"This was her first day of school," Abhimanyu said, his voice barely holding together. "She didn't want to go. She clung to Meena and cried. I had to carry her inside the classroom. But by afternoon, she didn't want to come back. She had made friends. She loved it."

He paused, looking at the photo as if trying to pull himself back into that moment—just for a breath.

Nupur looked down, her own throat tightening. The story she had come to investigate had now become far more personal than she had ever anticipated.

"The day Ananya died," he said after a pause, "was the day Meena stopped being Meena."

Abhimanyu's voice now grew darker, slower—hardened by years of pain. "When the police told us she was dead, burnt, violated, I felt something leave me. But Meena... she shattered. She stopped speaking. She just sat by the window, clutching Ananya's diary like a lifeline."

For a long moment, silence hung between them.

Nupur finally asked in a whisper, "What happened after?"

Abhimanyu exhaled slowly. "For two days, we had the entire media outside our house. Local politicians came. Candle marches. Slogans of justice for Ananya. But then... everything vanished."

He looked directly at Nupur for the first time.

"They were connected. Politically. One was the nephew of a local MLA. Another was the cousin of a senior bureaucrat. Within 48 hours, the narrative changed. No one talked about them anymore. Instead, they began talking about us."

Nupur clenched her fists beneath the table.

"They said we had insured Ananya heavily. That Meena had taken her life in guilt. That I had killed them both—for the money." Abhimanyu chuckled, hollow and bitter. "Can you believe it? The same people who had hugged me days earlier were now calling me a murderer."

He took a moment to drink from his cup—hands shaking just slightly.

“They arrested me. For conspiracy to murder. They said I poisoned Meena’s mind. They said I knew about her suicide plan and didn’t stop her. They searched the house. And when they left...”

He paused. The pain in his expression was no longer containable. “They burnt everything. Photographs. Clothes. Paintings Ananya had made in school. Her favourite blanket. Every goddamn memory I had of them.”

Nupur wiped a tear from her cheek.

“I begged them to leave just one picture,” Abhimanyu said. “Just one. They laughed.”

He nodded to the wallet. “That photo... it was in my wallet. That’s why it survived.”

Nupur swallowed hard. Her voice quivered when she asked, “How long were you in jail?”

“Four months. Four months of being called a killer, a fraud, a monster. I tried to end my life twice. Both times, I survived. They call that mercy,” he said bitterly. “I call it punishment.”

There was silence again.

“I didn’t come out of prison as a father,” Abhimanyu said. “I came out as a ghost.”

Nupur looked at him, heart heavy. “Why did you agree to talk to me?”

Abhimanyu stared outside the café window. “Because someone needs to tell the truth. And because... you remind me of her. Ananya was sharp. Fearless. She wouldn’t stop asking questions.”

Nupur nodded, tears in her eyes. She reached across the table, gently touching the edge of the photo.

“I won’t let her story disappear,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I promise.”

For the first time that afternoon, Abhimanyu Chauhan’s eyes welled with tears. But not a single drop fell.

His soul, perhaps, had forgotten how.

Their stories galvanized Nupur’s determination. She saw in Ananya’s case a microcosm of a larger, systemic failure—a society that often turned a blind eye to the suffering of its daughters. The “Justice Man,” whether myth or reality, symbolized a yearning for accountability and retribution that the official channels had failed to provide.

Seeking solace and clarity, Nupur decided to visit her parents in Dehradun. The journey was both a retreat and a return to her roots. Her father, Col. Sood, a man of discipline and few words, greeted her with a nod and a rare smile. Her mother enveloped her in a warm embrace, the familiar scent of home bringing a sense of

comfort. These moments of familial warmth contrasted sharply with the darkness of her investigation, yet they reinforced her resolve. She realized that the fight for justice was not just professional—it was deeply personal.

Reinvigorated, Nupur returned to her research, determined to shed light on the stories that had been forgotten or ignored. She knew that the path ahead would be fraught with challenges, but the memory of Ananya and countless others fuelled her commitment.

The “Justice Man” remained an enigma, but Nupur understood that the true pursuit was not of a vigilante figure—it was of a society where justice was not an exception but the norm.



CHAPTER 8:

ECHOES IN SIKAR

Her phone buzzed.

Nupur stirred awake, blinking against the hard streaks of sunlight slicing through the flimsy motel curtains. The cheap cotton sheets tangled around her legs, sticky with sweat, and her head pounded from the disturbed sleep. She reached blindly across the nightstand, hand fumbling until it landed on the phone.

A single message blinked at her from the lock screen.

“Today’s meeting was fruitful, wasn’t it ma’am? Here’s a number—meet him tomorrow. 9843****41. SHO Sandeep Garathi, Sikar. Take a gift with you.”

No name. No signature. Just that eerie familiarity, like the sender lived somewhere behind her shoulder. His messages always carried that same peculiar gravity, like a whisper pressed against the skin of her neck. She never had to guess twice who it was from.

She sat up slowly, every joint in her spine clicking like old hinges. Her body was still recovering from the endless bus rides, the late-night drive, and the stress of everything she had seen and heard the day before.

Fragments from her dreams clung to her skin like dust—her mother’s soft humming while combing her hair, the crinkle of newspaper in her father’s hand, the distant laughter of children in the schoolyard behind their Dehradun house. But Siddhant’s smile lingered the longest—half-lit, barely formed. That smile, so full of reckless joy, was the anchor she kept drifting back to in her sleep. Even now, it hurt to wake up and know it was just a dream.

But then the real world came crashing back.

Abhimanyu’s expression.

The burns along his arms.

The stench of kerosene.

The name—Ananya.

She inhaled sharply. She was no longer in Dehradun, or even Jaipur. She was now in Sikar, another forgotten dot on Rajasthan's vast and blistering map, chasing ghosts in the form of half-spoken stories.

At 7:00 AM, she had stumbled into a faceless motel on the edge of town. The place reeked faintly of Dettol and damp cement. One dim bulb flickered above the bed. A ceiling fan clacked rhythmically overhead, spinning warm air in circles. No frills, no welcome—just anonymity. She hadn't even changed. She'd fallen asleep in her jeans and faded black shirt; her voice recorder still clutched tightly in her palm like a weapon or a prayer.

Now it was nearly 12:45 PM.

She bolted upright, panic flaring.

A new notification blinked on her phone:

"Nehru Park. 13:45."

She cursed softly and threw herself into motion. Checked the recorder—fully charged. Grabbed her canvas satchel and tossed in a notepad, two pens, her scarf, a half-eaten pack of glucose biscuits. She splashed cold water on her face, not bothering with makeup. Her reflection in the cracked mirror looked like someone else—tired, determined, worn down to the bone.

Outside, the heat slammed into her like a wave.

To her surprise, a dusty grey Mahindra Bolero was already waiting in the dirt lot behind the motel. A lanky boy stood beside it, barely sixteen, sunburnt and barefoot, with eyes too old for his face.

“You’re going to Nehru Park, right ma’am?” he asked, opening the rear door with a grin.

She gave a nod, not even bothering to ask who had sent him. She already knew. The same unseen string-puller was always one step ahead.

As the vehicle pulled away, Sikar passed by in tired frames—the cracked sidewalks, weather-stained signboards, lazy tea stalls with old men slapping cards onto the tables, and a mosque in the distance, its loudspeaker echoing the afternoon prayer. Billboards peeled from corners of buildings, their slogans faded, sun-beaten and forgotten. A herd of goats blocked the road for a moment, forcing the boy to honk until they scattered.

But Nupur wasn’t really seeing any of it. Her mind was a storm of questions and scattered details:

The half-burnt photo.

The child’s uniform.

The girl in the frame.

The silence of the mother.

And Abhimanyu's empty eyes, watching everything and giving nothing.

They reached Nehru Park at 1:51 PM.

It was the kind of public park that had seen better decades. The grass was dry and patchy, the swings creaked on rusted chains, and the fountain in the centre lay still and algae-choked. A few schoolboys in dusty uniforms chased each other near the far corner. An old man slept on a bench; a newspaper draped across his chest.

But one detail stood out instantly—a white police Gypsy, parked thirty meters away near the shade of a neem tree. And then, a man walking toward her.

He was broad, solid, dressed in a well-ironed white shirt with sleeves rolled up. His skin was a few shades darker than sun-kissed, and his moustache was thick but cleanly trimmed. He carried two paper plates in his hands and wore the kind of calm that usually came after surviving a storm.

"Hello ma'am," he said, as if they were long-lost friends. "Sub-Inspector Sandeep Garathi. Hope you haven't eaten yet. Got you something local—Raj Kachori. This one's mine."

He offered one of the plates with a nod, and to Nupur's surprise, her stomach growled. The smell of fried dough

and tangy chutney hit her nose like a memory of better days.

She took the plate, slightly dazed. He smiled casually, as if this were a Sunday picnic instead of a meeting that might dig up buried corpses.

They walked to a stone bench beneath the neem tree. Its shade was their only reprieve from the sun's fury. They sat side by side, eating in silence for the first few minutes.

Only the crunch of food, the distant chirping of sparrows, and the occasional screech from a broken swing chain punctuated the quiet.

"So... what's Uttarakhand famous for?" he asked suddenly, wiping his mouth.

She looked at him, caught off guard. He was trying small talk. She didn't respond, not because of arrogance, but because her mouth was full and her head was elsewhere.

"Alright," he laughed, clearly unbothered by the silence. "You can feed me momos when I visit Dehradun. I've heard they're the best."

Then, without warning, the air between them shifted. The friendly tone evaporated. Sandeep finished his last bite, dusted his hands, and leaned slightly forward.

The eyes that met hers now were sharper. Wary. Professional.

"Ask your questions, ma'am," he said flatly.

Nupur reached into her bag and pulled out the recorder but didn't switch it on. She placed it on the bench between them as a quiet sign of respect. Then came the notebook, its pages filled with underlined dates and scribbled names.

She took a breath.

"What do you know about the Ananya Chauhan case?"

The name froze the wind. Even the birds seemed quieter.

Sandeep didn't answer immediately. He rubbed his jaw, looked away for a moment, and then finally spoke.

"I was a constable back then. Just a few months into the force. Still polishing my shoes twice, a day. Still saluting every senior with both hands. Still thinking justice meant something."

A long silence passed before he continued.

"We were called to the tracks early that morning. Someone had seen smoke. Thought it was a suicide at first. But when we got there..."

His voice faltered. He stared at a patch of earth near the tree.

"It wasn't just burned. It was mutilated. The child... couldn't have been older than ten. Everything was charred. But somehow... her school badge had survived. Metal. Bent but legible."

“That’s how we knew who she was—Ananya Chauhan.”

Nupur swallowed. Her hands were cold despite the heat.

“Who were the accused?”

Sandeep let out a long sigh, like the names tasted foul even now.

“Three. Everyone knew. Everyone pretended they didn’t.”

He ticked them off like old debts.

“Raghav Yadav—eighteen. Son of MLA. Arrogant little bastard. Thought the world was his toy. Had no crime record though.”

“Devraj Singh—mid-twenties. Local muscle. Guarded the farmhouse. The one where the real parties happened. He knew what went on behind those walls. Let it happen. Maybe joined in.”

“And Altaf Khan—mid-thirties. Owner of a car dealership on paper. Real job? Cleaning up messes. Bribing doctors. Changing post-mortem reports. Burning evidence. Literally.”

Nupur’s pen hovered over the page.

“And Abhimanyu Chauhan?” she asked softly. “Why was he arrested?”

Sandeep looked down, visibly ashamed. His voice dropped.

“He wasn’t arrested. He was... handed over. There wasn’t even an FIR. No complaint. No one came forward. The girl’s mother—she stood in the corner like a statue. Not crying. Not speaking. Just... there.”

“But two days later, everything changed.”

He paused.

“Orders came from above. Big ones. Suddenly, the entire case shifted. The narrative was spun.”

He looked at her, eyes tired.

“The story became: Abhimanyu Chauhan killed his wife and daughter. Motive? Insurance money. They even did a DNA test—said the girl wasn’t his. Said she was the child of his friend. It was all over the local news.”

Nupur clenched her jaw.

“Was any of it true?”

“I don’t know,” Sandeep said. “But I do know this—they tortured him. And not the usual slaps and threats. I mean... deep torture. Nails, burns, starvation. I saw the marks myself. But he never cried. Never shouted. Just... stared.”

His voice trembled.

Sandeep leaned in slightly, his voice trembling—not with fear, but with memory.

“Ma’am, we kept him in custody for nearly four months. And yes, he was tortured. Not just questioned—tortured. But never... not even once... did I see fear on his face.”

He looked away for a moment, almost ashamed. Almost in awe.

“There was something about him. He had this... stillness. Like nothing could break him. I’ve been in service for twenty-one years, and I’ve never seen a man like that.”

Nupur narrowed her eyes, her voice low.

“Then how was he released?”

Sandeep gave a humourless chuckle.

“That’s the part no one talks about. Even I don’t have a clear answer. One night, he was inside the cell—next morning, he was in the hospital. And just like that... vanished.”

He paused, then added, almost as if reliving the disbelief.

“The same IPS officer who had ordered us to detain him... came rushing in, middle of the night, demanding his release. He looked like he was following someone else’s orders. Within hours, the guy was out. A few days later—gone.”

Nupur’s breath hitched in her throat.

“And now you hear from my team that he’s in Dehradun...”

Sandeep nodded slowly. His expression softened.

“Honestly, I’m glad he’s alive. Men like him... they don’t survive in this system. But he did. That means something.”

Nupur looked down, collecting her thoughts. Then she asked the question that had been burning in her mind since Jaipur.

“What about the three accused? Raghav Yadav, Devraj Singh, Altaf Khan?”

At that, Sandeep smiled. Not with joy. But something darker—relief, maybe. Or respect for the unseen.

He leaned back and said, like he was delivering a punchline to a long, terrible joke:

“They’re dead.”

Nupur blinked.

“Dead?”

She leaned forward, stunned. The pieces of the puzzle were shifting too fast. She couldn’t keep up.

“But... how?”

Sandeep stood up slowly, brushing off invisible dust from his shirt like his shift had ended.

“That’s a whole different mystery, ma’am. Not mine to solve.”

Then, without warning, he turned his phone toward her.
The wallpaper made her go still.

A smiling girl in school uniform, around fifteen, beamed from the screen.

“My daughter. She’s in Class 10 now. Every morning, I drop her to school, and every morning, I wonder if I’ll get her back safe. No one really knows what a father is capable of... until he’s tested.”

Nupur looked away for a moment. She had left an envelope beside her on the bench. Sandeep glanced at it, picked it up silently, nodded once, and began to walk.

And then—just as his back turned—he tossed one last sentence over his shoulder:

“Since you’re in Sikar, visit Khatu Shyam Temple if you get time. They say the god there listens to first-time visitors. Just a thought. Take care.”

She watched him disappear into the distance.

The envelope was gone.

Her heart was pounding.

The Abhimanyu she had met—soft-spoken, grieving, lost—was nothing like the man Sandeep described. Cold. Unshakable. Fearless.

And yet... could both be true?

She found herself whispering into the wind,

“Did Abhimanyu... kill them?”

Suddenly, Ananya’s charred school badge flashed in her mind. The words from her note echoed again—

“This is for something bigger.”

Everything led back to him. The farmhouse. The silence. The rage buried under grief.

Was Abhimanyu the hero? Or the storm?

She sat on the stone bench, still holding the recorder in her lap.

The park had gone quiet again.

But inside her, the story had just exploded.



CHAPTER 9:

THE MANSION OF FORGOTTEN TRUTHS

The sun in Jaipur had a cruel way of piercing through even the thickest sunglasses. The city, regal and bustling, was smeared in shades of amber and dust. But Nupur wasn't here for its palaces or pink sandstone beauty. Her cab turned off the main road, navigating a quieter lane, tree-lined and lined with aged bungalows built with money and influence.

She reached a palatial whitewashed mansion—grand, silent, and slightly decaying at the edges like power past its prime. The gate was old iron, creaky, and guarded by

a man in uniform who gave her a half-suspicious, half-bored look. Inside, the lawns were manicured but fading, fountains dry, the colonial-era pillars of the porch bearing dust from many summers. This was the residence of Vishwanath Yadav—once a towering political figure, now a shadow in the opposition benches of Rajasthan politics.

She was ushered inside by an old house help—stooped, silent, and sharp-eyed.

The drawing room still held onto its old-world grandeur—Persian carpets, dusty chandeliers, and sepia-toned portraits in thick golden frames. There were photos of a younger Vishwanath shaking hands with foreign dignitaries, receiving garlands, and standing proudly in front of campaign rallies. But the dust on their glass told Nupur what she needed to know: the pride was old; the power was fading.

After a few minutes, Vishwanath entered.

He was taller than she had expected, dressed in a plain white kurta-pyjama, with silver-streaked hair and eyes that had seen too much. His presence was not that of a grieving father or a shamed politician—it was something more ancient, more worn. He nodded as she greeted him and gestured for her to sit, but offered no pleasantries.

“You’re the journalist from Mumbai?” he asked, voice low and emotionless.

“Yes, sir. I’m trying to understand the story behind the Ananya Chauhan case. Your son’s name had come up—”

“I know why you’re here,” he interrupted. “You all come with one question and leave with another.”

His eyes stared beyond her, out the window, as if replaying memories no one else could see.

“Raghav... met with a car accident in 2013. He didn’t survive it,” he said, flatly.

Nupur froze.

The case happened in 2008.

2013.

That’s five years later.

Her journalist’s instinct kicked in instantly. How could Raghav be involved in the rape and murder of Ananya in 2008 and still be alive five years later? This case had been portrayed as a closed chapter. Was Raghav actually involved at all? Or was he a scapegoat?

Still, she stopped herself from pushing the question further.

This was a father who had lost a child. Regardless of history, her conscience wouldn’t allow her to interrogate that pain.

“Thank you for your time,” she said quietly.

Before he could respond, the same house help returned and politely gestured for her to follow. “Ma’am, you wanted to speak to Raghav’s mother. I will take you to her cabin.”

The house grew quieter as they climbed the staircase to the first floor. The hallway had a lingering smell of incense and talcum powder. Family photographs lined the walls—Raghav as a child on a bicycle, Raghav in school uniform, Raghav smiling next to his mother in London.

They stopped before a carved wooden door.

The help knocked softly.

From inside came a fragile voice— “Raghav... is that you?”

The door opened slightly, and the help stepped in.

“Ma’am, there’s a journalist here who wants to talk to you about Raghav.”

A pause.

“No,” came the flat reply. “Please tell her to leave.”

The door closed again with a gentle click.

The house help returned, apologetic. “She doesn’t talk to anyone about him. Since his death... she hasn’t recovered.”

Nupur stood there for a second, heart heavier than before. She took a long breath, forcing herself to stay

composed. The journalist in her wanted answers. But the human in her understood grief, understood silence.

As she made her way back downstairs, she tried to speak with the other staff—drivers, gardeners, kitchen workers. Most were new.

“Saab retired from active politics a few years ago,” one of them said. “Lot of old staff left after that.”

But she finally found a couple of older staff members who had served the Yadav family for over 20 years. They sat with her near the side veranda, their voices low, respectful of the mansion’s walls.

“Raghav baba was very kind,” one of the women said, a maid in her sixties. “He used to take care of everyone—remember our children’s birthdays, bring gifts from abroad.”

The gardener added, “I don’t believe what they said in the newspapers. He was never that kind of boy. He was too soft for that... too much like his mother.”

Nupur noted the unwavering loyalty in their voices. But she also sensed sincerity. These were people who had seen the boy grow. They had no reason to lie to a reporter.

Still, she weighed their words carefully. Their loyalty was tied to their livelihood. Could they have turned a blind eye?

Then came something unexpected.

“You know,” the old gardener said, leaning closer, “after that girl’s case, Raghav baba left for the UK. Didn’t come home for almost three years. When he returned... he wasn’t the same.”

Nupur’s pen froze mid-sentence.

“Not the same how?” she asked.

“He became quiet. Not weak, no... but thoughtful. Questioned everything. Fought with his father a lot. Told him that politics should not be about power, but people. He said he wanted to change things. He wanted to fix wrongs.”

The maid added, “Some even say... he was being watched. That his honesty was a threat to this empire.”

Nupur’s mind reeled. Could it be?

Had Raghav truly been involved in the crime in 2008—or was he simply a name inserted to cover for someone else? Someone more dangerous? Could his transformation later have made him a liability to his father’s political image?

And then... the accident in 2013.

Was it an accident?

Or was it convenient?

Nupur walked out of the mansion dazed. The sun had begun its descent, casting the city in a molten orange haze. She didn't speak a word until she reached her motel room—a modest corner unit with pale yellow walls, a creaky fan, and a desk scattered with notes, photos, and her trusty recorder.

She sat down slowly.

There was no clear enemy in this story. Just shadows. Just wounds.

Had Abhimanyu Chauhan's life been destroyed by a misinterpreted connection? Was Raghav truly involved, or just a name to distract the public? Had the real criminals been eliminated—Devraj and Altaf, both reportedly beaten to death by “local goons”? Or had someone tied up the loose ends deliberately?

Too many questions. Too few truths.

Back in her modest motel room, the ceiling fan spun lazily, offering little relief from the warmth that clung to the air like unanswered questions. The dull glow of the yellow lamp barely lit the stack of notes Nupur had scribbled throughout the day. Photographs, scribbled timelines, and quotes from conversations were spread out like a jigsaw puzzle she couldn't complete.

It had been a mentally exhausting day. Her mind played and replayed every word spoken at the Yadav mansion. Vishwanath Yadav's silence. Raghav's sudden departure

to the UK. The staff's loyal affirmations. His mysterious death in 2013. None of it came together in a clean, logical arc. Instead, each clue seemed to blur the picture further.

There was still one thread she hadn't pulled completely.

Raghav's mother.

She had seemed fragile, but something about her initial reaction— "Raghav, is that you?"—lingered in Nupur's memory like a whisper caught in wind. It wasn't a coincidence. That voice carried more than grief—it carried expectation. As if the mother still waited for her son to return, as if the door might open and he'd walk in, clearing the air with his truth.

Before leaving the mansion, Nupur had subtly handed her phone number to Premlata Ji's son, Chandan, the driver who chauffeured Raghav's mother. Premlata Ji, in her 60s now, had served the Yadav family faithfully for over 35 years. A quiet woman, steeped in the family's private history, she had seen the family's rise and its hidden fractures. Chandan, kind-eyed and soft-spoken, had nodded discreetly when Nupur asked him to let her know if "Madam ever feels like speaking."

There was hope in that gesture—a slim one, but enough to keep Nupur from giving up.

She closed her eyes.

Her mind spun in circles.

What was she even doing? This case was twelve years old. The police had failed. The legal system had failed. What made her think she could do any better?

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Siddhant.

“Hey baby. Great news. Call whenever free.”

She stared at the screen.

A part of her wanted to call him—hear his voice, share her confusion, escape into his certainty. But another part of her couldn’t move. Her body was frozen. Her mind was drowning.

She turned to her notes again.

Abhimanyu Chauhan.

Ananya.

A burned photograph.

Sandeep’s testimony.

Raghav’s second life.

Two dead accused.

A grieving mother.

A silenced city.

She looked at the corkboard she had pinned to the motel wall. Strings tied photos, names, and dates together like

a mad detective's map. But in the middle of it all, one photo kept drawing her attention.

Ananya.

Smiling in her school uniform. A childhood cut short. A memory buried alive.

Nupur stared at her for a long time.

Something didn't fit.

Something still didn't fit.

And she knew—she was getting closer.

By the time she looked at the clock, it was 11:45 p.m. Her body felt heavy, her mind still racing.

She sat on the edge of the bed, rubbing her forehead.

That's when her eyes fell on her phone—and the unread message from Sidhant.

"Hey baby, GREAT news! Call whenever free."

She gasped softly. How could she forget?

She immediately hit the call button. After two rings, he picked up.

"Hey Sid, I'm so sorry," she said quickly. "I was completely preoccupied. My head's spinning with everything I saw and heard today."

“That’s okay,” he replied warmly, his voice a welcome comfort in the quiet of the night. “But you saw my message, right?”

“Yes! You said there’s great news. What is it?”

He chuckled, the excitement bubbling through. “So... guess what? MTV Roadies reached out to our agency. They’re scouting for the next season and—are you ready for this? —they asked for my profile! The agency recommended me!”

Nupur’s eyes widened, her lips parting in delight.

“Oh my god, Sid! That’s amazing!”

“Yeah!” he laughed, his voice light with joy. “Auditions are next month in Mumbai. Apparently, a couple of casting heads think I’ve got the look and energy. They said I’m a top contender to make it to the final list.”

“That’s a huge deal,” she said, sitting up straighter. “I’m so, so happy for you! But listen, you’ll have to start prepping seriously. The last few seasons, the contestants have been coming in with professional training—physical fitness, stunts, everything.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” he replied. “Tomorrow, I’m going to start a new routine. Gym, diet, and I’ll cut down on junk completely. No more cheat days!”

“You better not,” she laughed. “And hey... no getting carried away with stardom too soon. Stay grounded.”

He mock-groaned. "Already acting like my manager."

"Manager and biggest cheerleader," she said softly.

There was a pause on the line, one of those quiet moments where love hums louder than words.

"I miss you, Nups," he said. "Wish you were here. I'd have taken you out to celebrate... properly."

She closed her eyes, a faint smile on her lips. "I miss you too, Sid. But I'm so proud of you tonight. Even if I'm not there with you physically, know that I'm cheering from here."

"It's late," he murmured, his voice low. "You should get some rest. You've had a long day."

She sighed. "Yeah, I will. Still can't switch my mind off though. This case—it's getting under my skin."

"I know, baby. But don't burn yourself out. Sometimes, the truth takes time to unfold."

"Maybe," she whispered.

"Good night, love you," he said gently.

"Love you too," she replied. "Sleep well."

As the call ended, she leaned back in her chair, staring up at the ceiling. Outside, Jaipur's night was still and quiet, broken only by the occasional bark of a stray dog or the distant hum of a passing scooter.

She sat there, her notes still sprawled across the table, the fan ticking overhead.

A soft knock seemed to echo in her mind.

Raghav... is that you?

There was something buried in that mansion—something unspoken, something the papers never wrote, something history left behind in the dark hallways of political homes.

She didn't know how, but she knew she would hear from Raghav's mother. And when that happened, perhaps—just perhaps—the final piece of the puzzle would fall into place.



CHAPTER 10 –

A MOTHER’S SILENCE

It was early—5:00 AM. The Jaipur sky was already awash with the soft orange hues of dawn. Peacocks cried in the distance, their haunting calls echoing across the quiet morning. The air held a certain stillness, like the hush before something important.

Nupur’s phone buzzed on the bedside table, dragging her out of a light, dreamless sleep.

“Hello?” she said groggily.

A soft male voice replied, “Madam, good morning. I’m Chandan... the driver from Vishwanath Ji’s house.”

Nupur's heart skipped. Half-asleep seconds ago, she now sat up, wide awake. This was the call.

"Yes, Chandan Ji. How are you?" she asked, trying to sound composed.

He continued calmly, "Madam is willing to talk. She's going to the Shiv Mandir this morning. After that, she wants to meet you. Can you reach there by 8?"

"I'll be there," she replied instantly.

As the call ended, a strange mix of nervousness and hope swirled inside her. She had longed for this moment—an opening, a glimpse into a truth buried for over a decade. But she also knew this would not be easy. She was meeting a grieving mother. A woman who, as everyone had warned her, had grown more silent with each passing year.

By 7:30 AM, Nupur stood near the Shiv Mandir gates. The temple was buzzing with devotees—it was a Monday, after all, sacred to Lord Shiva. The scent of incense floated in the air, blending with the warm aroma of marigold garlands. Devotees chanted softly, some barefoot, some holding copper pots filled with milk.

Nupur, holding her notepad and satchel, waited quietly by the side, eyes scanning the crowd.

Then she saw him—Chandan, walking toward her in a neat white shirt and trouser.

“Madam is calling you. Please come.”

Nupur followed him toward the black Range Rover, which stood parked near the back gate. The SUV looked untouched by time—sleek, polished, commanding.

Inside, seated quietly in the back, was Shraddha Yadav.

She was dressed in an off-white silk saree; her long hair tied back in a loose bun. Her eyes were lined with kohl, yet dulled by grief. She didn’t look at Nupur. She simply made a small gesture with her hand, signalling her to get in.

Nupur slid into the seat beside her. The doors closed. The engine purred. The car began to move.

Shraddha kept her gaze straight ahead.

Then came her first words—barely louder than a whisper, but clear.

“I’m taking you to the place where my son died.”

Nupur’s heart clenched. Her lips parted slightly, unsure whether to speak or just listen. She decided to remain silent.

The drive was long—around 45 minutes. The city faded away slowly, replaced by the widening expanse of highway. Horns blared. Bikes weaved dangerously between cars. But Shraddha remained still, unshaken by the chaos. Her eyes seemed fixed on something far

beyond the windshield. Her silence was not awkward—it was heavy, sacred almost.

Nupur stole glances at her.

A woman carved by loss. Beautiful, poised... but distant. Her fingers clutched a small Rudraksha mala. She moved one bead at a time, not chanting aloud—but each bead seemed to hold a memory.

Nupur fidgeted—glancing at the dashboard clock, admiring the interiors, the leather seats, the soft scent of sandalwood—but her mind was racing with anticipation.

Finally, as they neared an overbridge, Shraddha raised her hand.

Chandan nodded silently and slowed the car. He already knew the routine.

The Range Rover pulled over near a weathered roadside spot. Beyond the railing was the highway curve—steep and sharp. Vehicles zoomed past.

Chandan quickly stepped out, retrieved two umbrellas from the trunk, and handed one to Shraddha.

Shraddha took her red umbrella and stepped out. She didn't say a word.

Nupur followed, declining at first, but Chandan gently insisted.

“Please take it, madam. It’s very hot here. And she stays long.”

Nupur nodded and took the umbrella.

The two women stood side by side on the roadside, their silhouettes cast long by the rising sun. The wind tousled their hair. Down below, where the road curved dangerously, a few flowers were strewn—faded now, perhaps from previous visits.

Shraddha’s voice finally broke the silence.

“He loved that bike,” she said, eyes still ahead.

“A Harley Davidson Iron 883... black. He called it Black Beauty. Got it modified. Custom exhaust. Matte finish. Loud enough that the whole mansion knew when he was back.”

She gave a dry, ghost of a laugh. “Even I used to get annoyed. It was too loud... always too loud.”

She paused, as if waiting to hear that roar one more time.

“And now,” she said, voice trembling slightly,

“I wait for that sound... every day.”

Her hands tightened around the umbrella handle. The wind caught her saree pallu, and she didn’t bother to fix it. She stared at the highway, unmoving.

“That night... the truck didn’t apply brake. It didn’t even stop after hitting him. They say he died on the spot. But

I wonder... if he cried out. If he reached for someone. If he thought of me.”

Nupur turned her face slightly, biting the inside of her cheek to hold back tears.

Shraddha’s voice was low but rich with emotion now.

“He was different when he came back from the UK. Kinder. Calmer. Always talking about fairness, about change... about honesty. Too honest, maybe.”

She paused again. There was something sharp hidden beneath that sentence.

“After his return... he had started questioning his father. About money, about the wrong people, about everything. He told me once... ‘Maa, I’ll clean this mess.’ I should’ve known...”

Her voice trailed.

A silence fell between them again, filled only by the wind and traffic noise.

Nupur didn’t speak. She couldn’t.

She simply stood there—next to a mother who had lost more than a son. She had lost her peace, her voice, and perhaps... the truth.

The drive to the second mansion was wrapped in silence.

Shraddha looked out of the window the entire way; her eyes locked on a past that still breathed through these

roads. Nupur could feel the weight in the air grow heavier as they left the highway and entered a quieter, tree-lined lane. The mansion loomed ahead—grand yet hollow. A regal structure left untouched by time, but scarred by memory.

They stepped out of the car.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet as Chandan opened the iron gate. The house stood still, wrapped in silence. No staff, no footsteps, just the echo of what once was.

As they entered, Shraddha softly said, almost to herself:

“They say... this is the same place where that poor girl was assaulted.”

Her voice quivered slightly.

“What happened to her was wrong, terribly wrong... but Raghav... he was dragged into it. As if he planned it... as if he was some monster.”

She walked ahead, slowly, through the long corridor lined with vintage portraits and wooden furniture, stopping in front of a large teakwood door.

She opened it.

“This... this was his room whenever he came here.”

Nupur stepped inside—and felt time slow down.

It was a princely chamber. Rich maroon curtains draped the tall windows. Antique lamps, brass figurines and rare book collections lined the corners. A painting of a French street hung above the fireplace. There was a sense of stillness in the air, as if the room had been left untouched since the day Raghav was last there.

Shraddha walked to a carved rosewood cabinet and picked up a small metallic showpiece—a miniature Eiffel Tower.

“This is the last one he got for me... from Paris. He said, ‘Maa, next time I’ll take you there.’”

She smiled faintly. Then, the smile faded.

Her words were disjointed, her sentences scattered, like pieces of a broken puzzle. She would start from one memory and jump to another. At first, it was hard to follow, but Nupur didn’t interrupt. She simply sat beside her, allowing Shraddha the space to breathe out her pain.

For almost an hour, she spoke of Raghav as a child.

“He was never like them. I raised him to be kind, to protect, to be gentle. I told him, always... never raise your voice at a girl, let alone a hand. He respected that. He lived by that. I raised him to be a hero.”

She looked at Nupur, her voice trembling.

“He loved that girl... Ananya.”

Nupur's eyes widened, her breath catching.

"Ananya? She was Raghav's girlfriend?"

Shraddha nodded, her face almost collapsing under the weight of memories.

"Yes. He never hid it from me. He loved her. Truly. He wanted to show her the cabin he'd built. That day... that cursed day... he said they were both excited."

She turned away, her voice lowering into a whisper.

"Later, he told me... something felt strange. They had cold drinks in the afternoon. And then... he doesn't remember anything."

Nupur was stunned.

Shraddha's voice grew bitter.

"He told the lawyer. He said maybe someone spiked their drinks... that something wasn't right. But the lawyer said—don't speak of it. It would make the case weak. It would sound like an excuse. Like a lie."

Nupur couldn't believe what she was hearing. It was like another version of the truth was unfolding—hidden all these years.

"But... Abhimanyu ji never told me any of this..." she said aloud, confused.

Shraddha turned sharply.

"You met Abhimanyu? He's alive? Where is he?"

Nupur nodded slowly. "Yes... he's... he's alive."

Shraddha exhaled deeply.

"I tried to meet him. And her mother. Ananya's mother was blinded by grief. She wouldn't even listen. Her anger—I understood. She had lost everything. But she blamed my son for everything. Blamed him like she wanted a villain to hate. And Raghav... he became that villain."

There was a long pause.

Then, with a softness that came from deep heartbreak, she added:

"I met Abhimanyu once... after everything. Quietly. Far away from this city. He looked broken. But in his eyes—I saw it. He knew. He knew Raghav wasn't that kind of man. But Revenge.... Hate.... Anger It turns another side of human behaviour."

Shraddha sat down on the edge of the bed, holding the Eiffel Tower in her hands. Her fingers trembled.

"Raghav wasn't perfect. But he didn't deserve this. Not this death. Not this silence."

Nupur sat beside her, frozen. The mansion around them seemed to shrink, pulling them into a moment where the past was more real than the present.

Nupur knew it would be a long sitting. Words were pouring out of Shraddha's mouth—but in no particular

order. Disjointed, scattered, almost like memories struggling to breathe.

“You know... Raghav liked Ananya,” Shraddha began again, her eyes not meeting Nupur’s. “And he told me the very first day he felt something for her. He didn’t make any move. He waited. Let her come to him. It was mutual... but it was Ananya who proposed to him first.”

She gave a faint smile. “They would talk for hours in school. And even after coming home, he’d speak of her. She wanted to be a doctor. And Raghav... he always pushed her to go higher. Told her she could do anything. He believed in her.”

A pause. Then came a whisper, fragile like paper in the wind.

“She once told Raghav that Abhimanyu wasn’t her real father. She knew it. But she loved him. She said Abhimanyu had sacrificed so much for her. That she didn’t miss her biological father because... she didn’t think anyone could be better than Abhimanyu.”

Nupur leaned in slightly, her voice gentle. “What about the DNA test? Was it real? And... was it you who gave that information?”

Shraddha nodded slowly; the weight of that moment visible on her shoulders.

“Yes. It was a desperate measure. And Raghav hated me for it. But later... he understood. It was all for him.”

She looked down at the Eiffel Tower in her hand, running her fingers across its ridges, as if it was the last thread connecting her to him.

“To be honest... I even apologized to Abhimanyu when I met him. Truly, I did. But what I didn’t know... was that he’d kill my son.”

Nupur’s voice trembled. “Ma’am... are you sure? Are you sure it was Abhimanyu?”

Shraddha stared blankly ahead. “I’m not sure anymore. Sometimes I think it could’ve been Raghav’s paternal uncle too. But what’s the point now...”

Her hand trembled over the Eiffel Tower again. Her voice cracked, like something fragile breaking in the air.

“Abhimanyu was someone important... some hotshot. You know how these things work. Even the police couldn’t hold him. IPS Pandey once told us—he got orders from the top to release Abhimanyu immediately. They even gave him the option to leave the country.”

Her eyes narrowed, a strange fire flickering within.

“But he didn’t go. He chose to stay. And then, just a month later... Devraj and Khan were both found dead.”

She swallowed hard.

“It was brutal. No accident. No random attack. It wasn’t gang-related like they claimed. That was all a cover story.”

Her voice dropped to a chilling calmness.

“It was the work of one man. A trained killer. The kind that leaves no evidence—just a message. They didn’t die. They were executed. And the way it was done... it still brings chills down my spine.”

Nupur’s breath caught.

Shraddha continued, almost in a trance now.

“The whole story about local gang rivalry, communal tension, ‘disharmony’—it was made up. The narrative was crafted carefully. So that the media wouldn’t dig deeper. So that Ananya’s story wouldn’t resurface. And so, no one would question the third survivor—Raghav.”

Nupur whispered, “The police knew?”

Shraddha nodded. “They pushed that version out. Controlled the media coverage. Ensured silence. Because any noise could raise questions. Could bring out truths no one wanted spoken.”

A pause.

Then came Nupur’s hesitant question.

“Ma’am... do you think... Abhimanyu killed Raghav?”

Shraddha closed her eyes, as if she had rehearsed this thought a thousand times.

“I don’t want to believe it. But... too many whispers. Too many pieces that fit. I was given insights. Hints. Not

proof. And yet, they made me question everything. Still, I'm not angry."

Her voice cracked—soft, almost broken.

"I just want to ask him... if he really knew it was Raghav, then why wait so long? Why not do it when it all happened? Why now?"

She looked up, lost in her own storm.

"Or maybe... maybe he didn't do it at all."

Another long pause followed. The silence in the room felt suffocating. Nupur sat motionless, trying to piece together everything she'd just heard. Every thread led to another question, and the answers were slipping like sand through her fingers.

A knock on the door broke the spell.

"Ma'am, it's 11."

It was Chandan—his voice low, polite. But it was more than just the time. It was a signal. The conversation was over.

Shraddha stood up slowly, placing the Eiffel Tower back in its place, her face once again masked with the same distant calm.

Nupur followed her quietly. They both returned to the car.

This time, Shraddha didn't say a word.

The blank expression returned—her public face. The face the world knew. The one that didn't tremble or cry. Only in that chamber... only in Raghav's room... did her real grief bleed through.

As they dropped Nupur at her hotel, the silence in the car was thick, echoing with all that had been said and all that had not.

Back in her room, Nupur sat on the edge of her bed.

Overwhelmed. Stunned. Shaken.

She opened her notebook and began jotting down everything—every word, every look, every pause. The truth wasn't just complicated—it was buried under layers of grief, love, anger... and a silence that still refused to die.

The truth, it seemed, was never simple.

It had love. Betrayal. Silence. Guilt.

And now, maybe... a chance at justice.



CHAPTER 11:

WHISPERS OF THE BRUSH

The school bell rang, echoing through the quiet, leafy streets of Dehradun like a hymn of release—freedom for children, a pause for teachers.

Outside the school gates of **Everstead Residential Academy**, a swarm of students spilled out, chattering, laughing, swinging backpacks. The golden afternoon sun bathed the walls in a soft, honeyed glow.

Nupur stood under the shade of an old peepal tree, watching the faces pass. She wasn't used to waiting like this. It made her feel younger somehow. Nervous.

Then she spotted him—Abhimanyu, walking alone, unhurried, as if untouched by the noise and motion around him. His satchel slung casually over one shoulder; his steps measured. He hadn't seen her yet.

"Hey," she called, her voice quiet but sure.

Abhimanyu turned and smiled faintly, like he'd known she'd be there. "How have you been? Good to see you."

"I am good, how have you been doing?" she said. "It seems you knew I was here."

He nodded, a calmness in his eyes. "Let's walk. I live close."

They set off through the narrow lanes of old Dehradun, shaded by tall Deodar and Gulmohar trees. The scent of fresh guava and rustling leaves followed them.

"You never really told me your story," Nupur said, breaking the silence. "How does a man like you end up teaching in school?"

Abhimanyu's gaze stayed on the road ahead. "Not every story is a straight line. Some meander like rivers—quiet on the surface, but with a strong current underneath."

She gave him a look. "Poetic. But vague. I'm a journalist, Abhimanyu. We hate vague."

He chuckled. "And I'm beginning to see you're relentless."

They turned down a shaded lane where time seemed to pause. Modest colonial-era homes stood with faded paint, flowering vines and chipped fences. He stopped in front of a small house with ivy crawling up the sides and a wooden nameplate that read simply: A Bhardwaj.

“This is it.”

“You live alone?” she asked, already guessing the answer.

He unlocked the door. “Yeah.”

Inside, the air was still, warm, intimate. The living room was simple but alive with detail—sunlight pouring through large windows, walls painted a soft mustard yellow, shelves lined with books that ranged from Tagore to Camus, Murakami to Meena Kandasamy.

But what caught her breath was the far corner—an easel, half-finished paintings, stacks of canvas, trays of acrylics, brushes arranged in mugs. One painting in progress swirled with midnight blues and smoky greys, like a storm caught mid-thought.

“You paint?” she asked, walking toward it.

Abhimanyu’s voice came from the kitchen. “Only when words don’t work.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

“Coffee?” he called.

“Only if it comes with the story behind this,” she said, pointing at the swirling canvas.

Moments later, he walked out with two mugs. She took hers, still captivated by the art.

“When did you start painting?” she asked.

He sat across from her. “After Anaya.”

Nupur didn’t respond. She let the silence speak for them.

“She was my daughter,” he said. “Twelve. Funny. Fierce. Loved painting and hated poetry. When she died...” His voice trailed off. “I didn’t know what to do with the quiet. Then one day I found her brushes. Just started. It made me feel like... maybe she was still near.”

Nupur’s eyes softened. “So, these aren’t just paintings.”

“No,” he said. “They’re conversations I never got to finish.”

She didn’t speak, only nodded and sipped her coffee.

He smiled weakly. “I’m not an artist. Just someone trying not to drown.”

“I think you’re more than that.”

They fell into an easy silence, the kind that only happens when both people have known grief.

Nupur wandered toward the balcony. It was lush—potted herbs and flowers, a bonsai tree in one corner, a little

wind chime catching the late breeze. Below, the street was quiet. Somewhere, a dog barked.

“You’ve created a world here,” she said.

Abhimanyu stood behind her, cup in hand. “A quiet one. It helps.”

She looked back at the canvases again—some bright and peaceful, others jagged and stormy. One had a pair of blurred eyes, haunting and deep. Another showed a single white rose wilting under red skies.

“You paint your thoughts.”

“I try,” he said. “Some days the thoughts are too loud.”

She turned, playfully gesturing at the yoga mat and dumbbells near the bookshelf. “And you work out too? Impressive.”

He smirked. “Trying to outrun middle age.”

“Honestly, you pull off schoolteacher chic very well. But now I see there’s more to you.”

“I wear coats and specs at school. Keeps the kids in check. Here, I get to be... the rest of me.”

She laughed. “That’s a good line.”

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Abhimanyu opened the door to reveal an elderly gentleman with sharp eyes, clean trousers, and a retired

Army officer's unmistakable posture. A faint aroma of cigar trailed behind him.

"Not alone, I see," the man said.

"No, but she was just about to leave," Abhimanyu said, winking at Nupur.

She stood. "Hi, I'm Nupur. Journalist. And apparently being evicted."

The man chuckled. "Col. Bhardwaj. Retired. Neighbour. Philosopher by compulsion. In free time he writes, you should listen to him if you get time."

Abhimanyu added, "And chess master when his wife's out of town."

The Colonel grinned. "She's in the US. Our son just had a baby girl."

"Congratulations," Nupur said warmly. "That's wonderful news."

As she stepped out, Abhimanyu added, "Her father's an Army officer too, now retired. Settled in Clement Town."

The Colonel's eyebrows lifted. "Then you were raised right. We'll talk more next time."

She smiled. "Looking forward."

Abhimanyu said, "It was truly wonderful to see you, Nupur. After such a long time, had a conversation with

a bright, young dynamic girl of your age. Keep this spark alive and enjoy your healthy pasta!" he added with a cheerful grin, bidding her farewell with a smile full of fondness.

The sun had dipped lower now, casting orange shadows across the quiet lane. As Nupur reached her car, her phone buzzed—missed calls and unread messages.

From Sidhant. And her mother.

She called Sid, putting him on speaker as she leaned back in the driver's seat.

"Sid. I just met the most... layered man."

"Oh no," he teased. "You sound smitten."

She laughed. "It's not like that. He's just—he surprises you. He's funny and sad and sharp and soft. All at once."

"I don't think I've heard you describe anyone like this before."

"Neither have I."

There was a pause.

"How's Roadies prep?" she changed the subject.

"Exhausting. I need a clone. Or a manager."

"You'll kill it. Just let your madness show."

"Thanks, Madam Journalist. Go. Your mom must be losing it."

At home, her mother opened the door, half-worried, half-irritated.

“Where were you? You didn’t answer.”

“Got caught up,” Nupur said, slipping off her sandals.

“Dinner’s ready.”

“What is it?”

“Spinach pasta. Your favourite.”

She froze.

Her mom looked at her, puzzled. “What?”

“Nothing,” she said slowly. “Just... nothing.”

But her mind was racing.

How did he know?

Next day early morning, she had only planned to observe—blend into the backdrop of **Everstead Residential Academy**, maybe speak to a few staff members. But curiosity doesn’t stay silent for long, especially in a place that seems to echo with one man’s name.

Nupur spent the morning walking the winding stone paths between the dorm blocks and old brick classrooms. This wasn’t just a school—it was a world built within walls, tucked away in the foothills of Dehradun. Trees bent like they’d been here forever. The silence wasn’t

emptiness—it was reverence. And in the air hung stories. Most of them, about one man.

At lunch, inside the warm, wood-panelled staffroom, Nupur gently nudged conversations toward him.

“Abhimanyu sir? Oh, everyone loves him,” someone said casually at first. But slowly, the fragments began to emerge—like pieces of a man carefully scattered to keep people from seeing the full picture.

One senior teacher leaned closer and said, “He lost his wife. And a daughter. After that... he stopped speaking about his personal life. People respected that.”

Another added, “He studied at RIMC. Right here in Dehradun. Cleared NDA too, they say. Some say he even ranked in UPSC. Got Indian Foreign Service, but opted for IPS instead.”

“Really?”

A shrug. “That’s what we’ve heard. No one really knows for sure. But he left the service after just a few years. Quietly. No announcements, no dramatic goodbyes. And then... he was here.”

There was a pause before someone else added, “But not continuously. He left Everstead for a few years in between. Four, maybe five. No one knows why. Or where he went.”

That silence again. Like people knew not to ask too much.

“He came back the same way he left—quietly. Just showed up one day and started teaching again. As if he’d never been gone.”

She was starting to feel like she’d walked into a myth disguised as a man.

“He’s been offered principal roles elsewhere, but always said no. Everstead is home, he says.”

And it made sense. Because Everstead Residential Academy wasn’t just a school. It was a commitment. A full-time world. Students didn’t just study—they lived here. Teachers weren’t just instructors—they were surrogate parents, mentors, disciplinarians, protectors.

“He knows every student by name,” someone else said. “Not just their marks. Their stories. Their backgrounds. Even when alumni call him years later, he remembers.”

“I heard,” Nupur said carefully, “that he handles the Class 9 intake?”

“Yes. That’s when we take in about thirty percent new students. Most stay till Class 12. Many are on scholarships.”

“He selects them?”

“He insists. Says academic scores don’t show the full picture. He looks at morality, adaptability, emotional

intelligence... Life-readiness, he calls it. Says Indian education doesn't prepare students for what matters most."

"And our alumni... well," the librarian smiled, "civil servants, defence officers, entrepreneurs. They all remember him."

Nupur didn't speak much after that. What could she say? The man she had awkwardly met yesterday seemed to be the quiet axis around which this place turned.

That evening, as the sun began sinking behind the hills, she found herself waiting again at the gate, schoolbags bouncing behind students as they poured out in waves.

Then came the calm voice she was almost expecting.

"So, how was the investigation?" Abhimanyu asked, hands in his pockets, his half-smile unreadable.

She turned. "What do you mean?"

"I know what you've been doing all day. That wasn't about classroom supplies."

She looked away. "But you never told me about your background."

He shrugged. "It's the past. I believe it's only relevant if you let it be."

He gestured forward. "Shall we walk?"

She followed, still unsure whether she was walking with a schoolteacher or a story that refused to end.

They reached the art room. Familiar—but not quite the same.

Her eyes were drawn immediately to the canvas. It's the same painting on which you were working yesterday. Isn't it?

Yes, it's the same.

"This is complete?" she asked, stepping closer.

He nodded.

"What is it?"

He didn't answer.

It wasn't realism or surrealism. It was raw abstraction, but it pulsed with unspoken history. A child's silhouette faded into a swirl of greys. A uniform-like shape stood rigid in one corner. The background wasn't a place—it was a state of mind. There was loss in it. Silence. Strength. Decisions that left wounds.

It said everything he hadn't.

And yet, he left it to her interpretation.

She stared, unable to move. The room around her blurred. It felt like time had slowed, stretched. In those five minutes, she saw more than she could explain—saw the invisible battle scars, the emotional knots, the retreat

and the return. Perhaps it was Abhimanyu's life or maybe it was her. Or perhaps her mind, wrapped so tightly around him now, that it was drawing lines between them.

He broke the silence with a gentle laugh.

"You ready for coffee?"

She blinked. "Was I staring that long?"

"Not long. Just... deeply."

She followed him silently, and for the first time, wondered if she'd come here looking for answers—or was slowly becoming one of the questions.

They sat outside the modest school café, just beyond the assembly ground, where the concrete ended and the hills began. The sun had just started to dip, casting long golden fingers across the lawn. The faint smell of brewing filter coffee curled around them.

Inside, a kettle hissed. Cups clinked.

As they waited, a group of class eleven boys walked past—trying to act casual, but their glances kept returning to the table. Their voices were low, but the words travelled.

"Is she Sir's daughter?"

"No way," whispered one. "I don't think he's even married."

"Yeah, he never was. He only has us... as his."

Abhimanyu didn't react at first. Then, as the boys disappeared around the hedge, a soft smile broke across his face—brief, quiet, and perhaps the most honest thing about him in that moment.

"You heard them?" Nupur asked, half-amused, half-curious.

"I always hear them," he said, eyes on the cups being brought over. "They speak louder when they think they're whispering."

"And it doesn't bother you?"

"Why would it? That's the closest I'll ever get to having a family."

The smile vanished just as easily as it had come.

She looked at him then—not the teacher, not the IPS officer he once was, not the mystery—but the man who had built a family not through blood, but trust.

They both took their cups, the warmth grounding them.

"I didn't mean to stare at the painting for that long," she said suddenly. "It just... held me."

"That's how grief works. It traps your eyes. Art just reflects it."

She nodded slowly. "It wasn't just grief. It felt like... a life compressed. Lonely, determined, broken, stitched. Like someone trying to be okay for everyone else."

He didn't say anything, but his eyes softened. The breeze stirred. Somewhere far off, the school bell chimed for evening prep.

"You were away from Everstead once," she said. "For some years?"

"Four years, seven months," he replied, sipping his coffee. "But who's counting."

"I am," she said quietly.

He looked away. "I thought I was done with this place once. I wasn't."

"Where did you go?"

"Where people forget names but remember what you did."

"Sounds... heavy."

He chuckled faintly. "Only if you don't have a place to come back to. I did."

"Everstead?"

"More like... these corridors. Those messy hostels. Kids who can't lie properly. They kept something in me alive when I thought I had nothing left."

She hesitated. "You could've been anything, Abhimanyu. IPS, IFS, principal of any big school in the country. But you chose this."

He looked at her, eyes steady now. "Titles can't make you feel less alone. People can."

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was reflective. Weighty.

"And the painting?" she asked finally. "Is it done now?"

He smiled, a little. "That's for you to decide. Art doesn't explain. It waits."

She looked down at her coffee, then at him. "Then maybe... I'll come see it again tomorrow. Just to be sure."

"You're welcome. Just don't bring those students' rumours with you."

"Why? Embarrassed?"

"No," he said, standing, voice almost tender. "Just... afraid it might feel too good to be true."

He walked away slowly, hands behind his back, posture still precise despite everything life had chipped away.

And for the first time since arriving, Nupur felt that she wasn't just discovering a story—she was walking straight into the heart of it.



CHAPTER 12:

THE ANCHOR BENEATH HER WAVES

The sun had just begun to mellow, casting long, dappled shadows across the front lawn of her parents' home in Dehradun. The hills stood like old friends at a polite distance, their blue-green folds quietly watching the day pass. It was a Saturday, and for the first time in weeks, Nupur allowed herself the comfort of slowing down. No newsroom chaos, no phone buzzing with scripts, no urgent calls. Just the whisper of pine trees and the warmth of familiar walls.

She sat in the living room with her parents—her mother sipping tea from a China cup, her father leafing through an old issue of India Today. The air smelled of cardamom and old wood.

“So, you visited Everstead Academy?” her mother asked, eyes twinkling with interest behind her spectacles.

Nupur nodded, settling into the armchair. “Just wandered around. Didn’t go inside. The place has a stillness to it, almost like it’s thinking.”

Her mother smiled knowingly. “That stillness comes with responsibility. It’s a serious place.”

Her father grunted in agreement, flipping a page but clearly listening.

“I’ve heard about it,” her mother continued. “Everstead Residential Academy runs one of the best CSR-led scholarship programmes in North India. They take in students from Class 9 to 12, fully residential, and very rigorous in both academics and discipline. You remember Madhu’s nephew? The one who was always into science fairs? He studied there on full scholarship—now he’s in IIT Kanpur.”

Nupur’s eyebrows rose, mildly impressed. “I didn’t know that.”

Her mother nodded proudly. “They’ve built a very solid reputation. The faculty is consistent, and it’s not a money-making circus like some of these fancy schools in

Gurgaon. It's one of those places that believes in building character. Not just producing marks."

Her father looked up. "Do you remember Colonel Rathore from next door? His son Pranav studied at Everstead. Cracked UPSC in his first attempt."

"IFS?" Nupur asked.

"Yes," her father replied. "Currently finishing training in Mussoorie. He'll be flying out to Europe soon, I think."

Her mother gave him a side glance, as if anticipating the conversation turning uncomfortable. She quickly added, "But even then, people in the neighbourhood talk more about you than him. Especially after that Anantnag expose and your recent show."

There was a pause. Her father didn't react. Nupur chuckled lightly, placing her teacup down. "It's okay, Ma. Don't worry. I know what you mean."

She gave her father a small, almost imperceptible look—a soft gesture that said, I understand. She knew the comment wasn't meant as comparison. Her mother was simply proud. Her father, protective. That had always been the silent pact between them.

She leaned back. "So, tell me more about the school. I didn't want to disturb anyone there, but it feels like it has a pulse."

Her mother brightened at the invitation and started describing how the school's curriculum blended traditional discipline with modern academics. "There's a big emphasis on civic awareness, debate culture, physical training. Not too many gadgets allowed. They focus on mental and emotional health too. The school counsellor is a full-time faculty member."

"And the staff?" Nupur asked.

"Long-serving," her father replied. "No flashy turnover. The principal has been there for almost a decade. That says something."

There was a pause in the conversation. Nupur stood, stretched a little, and glanced at her buzzing phone.

It was Sidhant.

She smiled.

"I'll just take this upstairs," she said, already walking toward the staircase. She could feel her mother watching her with a teasing smirk and her father pretending not to notice.

Once in her old room—still filled with books, posters, and the quiet breath of memories—she shut the door gently and picked up.

"Hey," she said, a warmth slipping into her voice, "I'm so sorry, love. I've been terrible at calling back."

On the other end, Sidhant's voice was reassuring. "I figured you needed the quiet. How's Dehradun?"

"Peaceful," she said. "Smells like rain and old stories."

They both chuckled.

He told her about his week—shoots that ran over schedule, voice-overs that had to be redone, and how his producer accidentally aired the wrong episode during a rerun slot.

"I swear," he sighed. "I need to hire two clones."

"Make one for me too," she teased.

There was a soft pause. "You know," he said, "people are talking about your show. The one on the college fresher case? Some are angry. But most... they're thinking."

Nupur didn't reply immediately. She could feel the weight of that statement. It wasn't applause she was after. It was reflection.

"I couldn't have done it without you," she finally said. "You're the one who said I should stop being safe."

He let the silence affirm his pride.

"I'm flying back tomorrow," she added. "Sunday evening. Back to the newsroom."

"Good," he said. "I miss you. And Mumbai misses your fire."

Back downstairs, her parents had moved to the veranda. Her father sat with his tea now cold, while her mother watered the potted indoor plants.

“She still calls him first,” her mother said quietly.

Her father nodded, eyes resting on the hills. “I know.”

“She’s grown, you know,” her mother said. “Strong. Balanced.”

“I can see that,” he said, finally meeting her eyes. “But still... I don’t know if I trust this world. Or that Roadies world of his.”

His wife smiled, gently chiding. “You think UPSC is the only respectable route to a life? The man has stood by her like a rock. That counts for more than rank lists.”

“But it’s not concrete,” he said, the words edged with worry. “TV fame comes and goes. There’s no pension in passion.”

Her smile softened. “Your daughter knows how to build something real out of nothing. She always did.”

The father looked toward the sky. “I just want her safe.”

“She’s not a little girl anymore.”

“She’ll always be.”

They sat quietly after that, the air between them full of unspoken love – the kind that doesn’t intrude, but never let’s go.

Later that night, Nupur sat by her bedroom window, watching Dehradun slip into silence. Her bags were mostly packed. Her flight was at 2:10 p.m. tomorrow. A part of her didn't want to leave. But she knew her place wasn't here anymore. It wasn't in the safety of hills. It was in the fire of unfinished stories.

She texted Sidhant: "Flight tomorrow. See you soon. I love you."

And then, before closing the window, Nupur stood still for a moment, her fingers brushing against the old wooden frame. The night air from the hills wrapped around her like a shawl—cool, fragrant, and full of memories.

She looked out at the streetlight below, flickering gently near the gate. Her father had fixed it himself last winter, climbing up the ladder with stubborn pride, refusing to call an electrician. She remembered standing at this very window then, worrying he'd fall, wanting to scold him but knowing he'd never let her.

A tiny smile curled at her lips. But there was something else rising now—thicker, heavier, almost painful.

Her throat tightened.

In all these years—amid the fights, silences, and rare hugs—she had never really said it aloud, but tonight, it pressed against her chest like a wave too big to hold back.

"I know you worry, Papa," she whispered into the wind. Her voice trembled, but she didn't stop.

"I know you worry when I fly to war zones. When I speak too boldly on national television. When I walk into police stations and courthouses asking questions no one else will. I know it keeps you up some nights, even if you never say a word."

A tear slipped down her cheek. She didn't wipe it.

"I used to think you didn't believe in me. That maybe you wanted me to take a safer route, a quieter one. But now I see it wasn't doubt. It was love... disguised as caution."

Her gaze lifted to the stars, voice soft, but steady.

"You've never said too much. Never pushed. But you've always been there—in your own silent, awkward way. Fixing broken things. Paying for my mistakes without telling me. Defending me in rooms I didn't know you entered."

The wind rustled the leaves of the Gulmohar tree, as if listening.

"I know you look at Sidhant and worry—because you want someone for me who's steady, who'll never let go. And I know... it's not about his career, or Roadies, or TV. It's about me. You just want someone who will love me the way you do."

She paused, her voice catching again.

“But Papa... no one can love me the way you do. Not even him. You were my first shelter. You still are.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting the weight of it all sink in.

“If I’ve ever done anything brave... it’s because I was your daughter first.”

Another breath. Another memory. Another tear.

And finally, in a whisper that barely escaped her lips:

“I understand now. Everything you did... every silence, every question, every hard word... was love. And I carry it with me. Every time I speak. Every time I fight. Every time I fall and stand up again... it’s you.”

She opened her eyes.

The sky stretched above her, vast and velvet black, sprinkled with stars.

And in the middle of that quiet night in Dehradun, something inside her heart quietly settled.

She wasn’t just going back to Mumbai.

She was going forward—with the weight of her father’s love like armour around her bones.

“I’m not walking alone, Papa,” she whispered again, voice steadier now. “Not ever.”

And gently, she shut the window.



CHAPTER 13:

THE INVISIBLE SCALES

The amber light from the studio bathed Nupur in a warm, almost surreal glow. She sat at her desk, spine poised, fingers lightly interlocked, eyes steady beneath the camera's gaze. The teleprompter rolled slowly ahead of her, but she didn't need it. The words were etched deeper than the script – into her bones, into memory.

This was not a prime-time slot. It was barely even television territory. The 11:45 p.m. show was tucked away into the shadows of a sleeping audience and dying TRP charts but none of that mattered to her. The faces

of Ananya and Raghav were seared in her mind — two parents whose world had collapsed in slow motion. What followed was not justice, just an irreversible void filled with silence, court dates, and camera flashes. Their entire team had gone over numerous story which faded away but had a very strong impact on the families which faced it.

When Nupur first pitched the show, Saxena, her senior editor, was visibly confused. He flipped through her notes — real case files, blurry victim photographs and an eerie segment structure that had no resolution, no closure, just open-ended questions.

“You want to end each episode without saying who was right?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied.

Saxena frowned, unsure whether she was naive or stubborn. “This format is not television, Nupur. This... this is moral philosophy. We can’t afford moral philosophy at midnight.”

What he didn’t say was: We were banking on you. Nupur had returned after a long break and with her came a silent expectation that she’d drive political content — something punchy, spicy, something for the election crowd. Especially with the UP elections around the corner, everyone in the newsroom was in overdrive.

Soundbites, rallies, exit polls – that was the oxygen of the network.

But Nupur didn't care.

Whenever Saxena brought up UP elections, she would blink at him slowly, as if he had switched languages. "Let others cover that," she would say softly. "I want to talk about the stories no one listens to."

Mithun, the channel head, sat in silence as the debate played out in his cabin one evening. Finally, he said, "Let her try."

Saxena looked up, surprised.

"Tell her she'll get a very small team for research. No in-house crew. And she'll get three slots a week – 45 minutes each. Late night. If the company feels the TRPs grow, we'll decide what next. But for now... this is all we can offer."

Mithun had his doubts too. But something in Nupur's stillness, in her clarity, made him believe this wasn't just another vanity project. Deep down, he wanted to believe that maybe television still had room for something unpolished, raw and true.

She had designed the show deliberately. Each episode opened with a single, real case – a rape, molestation, or an alleged attempt – sometimes as old as a decade, sometimes fresh as yesterday's news. The format was simple: outline the facts, show the timeline, highlight the

narrative that had emerged in the media, and then unravel it. This show was not about ratings. It was about resonance.

Each episode began the same way: a muted title card over a black-and-white photograph — a date, a district, a headline most had forgotten. The cases weren't all viral. Some were barely reported. But each one mattered. Each was a story where justice — if it happened — had arrived too late, too blurred, or too quietly.

Then came the debate.

Tonight's panel sat in solemn formation:

- Dr. Farheen, a forensic psychologist with thirty years of reading trauma behind her eyes.
- Mr. Rawat, a retired IPS officer, who still wore his past like a second skin.
- A law professor from Delhi University who had published work on gender bias in courts.
- A man named Gurpreet, acquitted after four years of wrongful imprisonment.
- And Gunjan, a mother whose daughter's rape case was still crawling through the judicial pipeline.

They all sat around the table, breathing the same air, each one waiting for their turn to declare what justice meant to them.

And, always — always — the final five minutes belonged to the viewers. Unfiltered. Raw.

The First Episode: A Boy, a Night and a Void

The screen faded in slowly, revealing a blurred image of a lit college corridor — lined with fairy lights, drenched in pink and blue hues, the soundtrack of celebration faintly humming in the background.

It was footage from the annual cultural fest of North Central University — recorded on someone's phone. Students in kurtas and crop tops danced on the lawn. You could see laughter frozen in pixels. Music echoing over cheap loudspeakers. A night like hundreds of others in campuses across India — young, wild, forgettable.

Except this one would be remembered.

Nupur's voice, soft yet charged with gravity, cut in:

“On February 16, around midnight, a complaint was filed at Sector 9 police station by a 19-year-old undergraduate girl from the sociology department. Her statement: that her batchmate — a boy named Rishabh— had raped her in his hostel room after the fest. No witnesses. No surveillance footage. One girl. One boy. One night.”

The episode didn't begin with sensationalism. There were no red tickers, no outrage-infected headlines.

Just silence. And then, facts.

Rishabh was a final-year economics student. Smart. Reserved. On the college debating team. Loved reading Greek philosophy. Had once won a state-level essay competition on "Moral Ambiguity in Modern Law."

That night, according to his roommate's testimony, he had returned to the room by 10:45 p.m., "quiet, not drunk, not high." The girl arrived at 11:30 p.m., "consensually," said the defence. "Under pressure," said the complaint.

The medical report was ambiguous. No clear signs of assault. Some bruises. The toxicology screen for alcohol was positive for both.

But bruises don't tell intention. And consent doesn't always wear clarity.

Nupur let the camera rest on Rishabh's ID card – a thin laminated rectangle with a slight tear on the top-right corner. His face in it was awkward, as if caught mid-thought. Just a boy trying to smile.

He died by suicide twenty-one days later.

His body was found in a rented flat, three kilometres from campus. The suicide note, handwritten and unsent, was addressed to his father:

“Baba, I swear I didn’t do anything wrong. But I don’t know how to live with the noise. I can’t breathe in college anymore. I can’t sleep. Every friend who once called me for notes now looks away. Even Ma stopped asking if I’m okay. I don’t know how to prove something I didn’t do. Maybe if I go away, at least you’ll be left in peace. Please tell her... I’m sorry if she thinks I hurt her. But I never meant to. I swear on you.”

The screen lingered on that note. Then faded to black.

And Nupur’s voice returned.

“Three days after his death, the girl withdrew her complaint. She didn’t appear for her final semester. Her last location pinged from a bus stop in Delhi. She was never traced.”

A hushed silence sat over the studio before anyone spoke.

Dr. Farheen, the psychologist, was the first to speak.

“There is such fragility on both ends of this story,” she said, “It’s a case of he said, she said – and somewhere in the middle, the truth drowned in shame, isolation, and fear. Trauma responses are unpredictable. But so is guilt.”

Mr. Rawat, the retired IPS officer, frowned slightly.

“We’ve had hundreds of such cases. We’re trained to follow procedure, but procedure can’t always parse

morality. I've seen both — genuine victims go unheard and innocent boys destroyed by whispers.”

Gurpreet, the man who had spent four years in jail on a false rape charge, looked visibly shaken.

“It starts with one screenshot. One status update. Suddenly, you are no longer a person. You are a ‘type.’ Rapist. Pervert. Bastard. My mother stopped going to temple because people stared. My sister didn’t get married because they thought she carried shame.”

Professor Malini, soft-spoken and articulate, interjected gently.

“But we must remember: False accusations are rare. Most survivors don’t even report. And the cost of speaking up — for a woman in India — is brutal. This show cannot become a platform that undermines their voices.”

Gunjan, the grieving mother, said nothing for a long time. Then, in a voice just above a whisper:

“I lost my daughter two years ago. Her rapist is out on bail. My daughter... is ashes. And I still wonder, every day — did the world judge her by what she wore? Did they believe her? Does it even matter now?”

The silence that followed was no longer studio-produced. It was real. The kind that breathes.

Viewers were invited to submit responses anonymously. Hundreds poured in.

"I knew Rishabh. He was kind, not creepy. I can't believe it."

"My sister faced the same thing. This episode reminded me of how no one believed her."

"This is dangerous. You're playing with people's emotions."

"This is the first time I've seen a channel not take sides. Thank you."

"I still don't know what to feel."

That last one, Nupur said, was her favourite.

"Was he guilty?" one viewer, calling in.

"No," said another. "She was pressured to accuse him."

"He's dead. That's guilt enough."

"She vanished. That's fear."

Everyone had an opinion. No one had clarity.

And that was exactly the point.

Nupur had built her show not around certainty, but discomfort. Not to tell people what justice looked like — but to remind them it wasn't always obvious.

Tonight, her closing monologue came like a storm after a still night.

Her eyes didn't blink. Her voice held no tremor. But her words did.

“Who decides what justice looks like — the court, society or those who never got to speak?”

“As a society, are we even learned enough to understand what justice demands? Are we qualified enough to weigh someone’s life with hashtags and hot takes? Or do we just shout louder than the other side?”

“We post without thinking. ‘The bastard should be killed.’ That’s what we write. Before we even know what happened. Before we hear both sides. We don’t ask — what if the accused was your son?”

“Justice... it’s not a slogan. It’s not a viral post. It’s not a punishment wrapped in public outrage.”

“Sometimes, justice is just a pause — a refusal to judge before you understand.”

Her voice lowered.

“We speak about victims and accused like we know their lives. But the truth is — we’re just people behind screens, playing god.”

“Justice is not the ending of a story. It’s the willingness to listen before you turn the page.”

And then the screen faded — not to black, but to a slow dissolve of a courtroom, half-lit, empty.

Across the country, people watched.

In her mother's house in Dehradun, a cup of tea went cold in her hand as she stared at the screen. Nupur's words lingered in her living room like incense. The mother who had once dismissed her daughter's fire now sat still, humbled.

"I didn't give her this voice," she whispered. "But I'm glad she found it anyway."

In her flat in Mumbai, Sidhant sitting at the edge of his couch, elbows on knees, face in his palms. The room was silent, except for the sound of the ticking clock. Nupur's words had shaken something in him – not just about justice, but about her. The fire in her voice... it had always been there, just buried beneath layers of compromise when they were together. He hadn't held space for that fire. He picked up his phone, typed something, paused... and kept it aside.

Some words didn't deserve to be messaged. They deserved to be lived.

In Jaipur, Shraddha ji – Raghav's mother – watched the closing monologue from the corner of her son's abandoned study. His old trophies lined the shelves. Her hands trembled slightly as Nupur said: "What if the accused was your son?" She whispered a soft, trembling prayer – not for punishment. For understanding.

In the barracks, ASI Sandeep lit a cigarette against the breeze and replayed Nupur's show silently. He

remembered the girl from that night – so determined, so stubborn. He had once thought her immature. Now, she was doing what no uniform had dared.

At Abhimanyu Flat in Dehradun, studio light still reflected faintly on his glasses. He hadn't moved since the episode ended.

The room was silent – except for the gentle flutter of wind brushing against the canvas near the window. Nupur's voice had entered not just his ears, but someplace deeper.

He smiled – not wide, not proud – but knowing.

He knew this wasn't just journalism. It was healing. For her. For Ananya. For so many like them.

And somewhere deep inside, he knew he had played a part – quietly, protectively – in nurturing that spark.

He looked at the painting in front of him, the same one Nupur had once been lost in.

"You found your canvas, Nupur," he whispered.

And for the first time in years, he allowed himself to feel... content.

It was past 12:30 AM.

One by one, the lights blinked out – like tiny fireflies ending their silent vigil. In small towns and crowded

metros, the aftermath of Nupur's words hung like incense smoke: subtle, invisible, unforgettable.

Some television screens went dark as soon as the credits rolled. Some remained on, flickering dimly in the background while their viewers sat frozen — not in awe, but in quiet contemplation. Many didn't have the words to explain what they had just seen. A few didn't even fully understand it.

Some had tuned in out of curiosity.

Some, by accident.

A few had waited — eyes on the clock — as if the show were a ritual.

But no one had walked away untouched.

Not Tonight.

They were left with questions.

What is justice?

What if I've judged too quickly?

What if I've been wrong before?

Who am I to decide what someone deserves?

Above, the air remained still. But within that stillness, a strange electricity stirred — the hum of conscience waking from slumber

It wasn't the story that lingered.

It was the question.

Do we even think before we post?

In homes, hostel corridors, police barracks, and dormitory bunks, silence spread like a blanket – not cold but heavy with thought.

Justice had never been an answer.

It had become... a conversation.

And across India, that conversation had begun.

Far above, the Earth rotated in silence, the Indian subcontinent glowing softly in its dark hemisphere. From the skies – if you looked down like a watchful guardian – you would see it: a sleeping land interrupted only by the flicker of light.

Bedroom lamps. TV screens. Phone displays fading gently as tired thumbs finally stopped scrolling.

In a quiet room in Pune, a 19-year-old law student sat up in bed, replaying the episode on his phone. His notebook now bore a single sentence in hurried handwriting:

“Justice is not an event. It’s a process.”

In Lucknow, a mother kissed her sleeping son’s forehead and thought about a case from three years ago – one that had shaken her trust in the system and left her silent at family gatherings ever since.

In Hyderabad, a retired judge poured himself a single glass of whisky. His fingers trembled — not with age, but with the uncomfortable weight of realisation.

The glow of the Indian landmass slowly began to shrink as the Earth turned.

Outside, the world was quiet.

But inside — inside millions — something stirred.

Not noise. Not rebellion.

Thought.

And with it came questions. Quiet ones, the kind that echo softly through the back of the mind:

What don't I know yet?

What if I had waited before deciding?

What would justice look like if I stopped shouting and started listening?

They weren't ready to speak. But they had begun to listen.

In the fading light, Nupur's voice — not live, but remembered — lingered in people's minds like a prayer half-whispered.

“Who decides what justice looks like — the court, society, or those who never got to speak?”

“Are we, as a society, even learned enough, qualified enough... to decide what someone deserves?”

“Do we even pause before posting a status – before typing ‘the bastard should be killed’? Before a trial even begins?”

“Or do we simply trust the first voice that cries the loudest?”

There was no applause.

Just darkness.

But not the kind born of fear.

A stillness. The kind born of reckoning.

One night, Nupur had stayed behind in the editing bay, watching raw footage of a case from a Tier-2 town. A young girl had accused the son of a local MLA of rape. Days later, her photographs were plastered across WhatsApp groups. Screenshots. Private messages. A web of rumours, framed as truth.

The boy had left the country.

The girl dropped out of college.

Nupur had sat for hours, silent, her fingers resting near the pause button but never pressing it. It wasn't about this girl or that boy. It was about something deeper – something rotten at the root. A grotesque dance in

which a woman's dignity was always weighed against a man's future.

She remembered Ananya. She remembered how her voice cracked the first time she whispered the word rape. And she remembered how the courtroom had reduced her to a character flaw.

She hadn't told Ananya's story on the show yet. Couldn't.

It didn't belong in a segment.

It wasn't content.

It was grief.

Still healing. Still raw.

Still hers.

That night, her inbox began to flood.

The responses weren't clean or complimentary. They were messy. Real.

From survivors.

From falsely accused men.

From mothers.

From bitter aunts.

From law students. From anonymous strangers.

You're brave.

You're biased.

You're dangerous.

You're what this country needs.

Some stayed up watching through tear-clouded eyes.
Some downloaded it to watch before morning shift.
Some hid it behind silent hostel windows, headphones
plugged in at 1 a.m.

Even TRP-hungry anchors whispered in studio corners
about this odd, late-night show.

It wasn't a hit.

It was something rarer.

It was haunting.

In Fifth Episode

That night's case had been particularly cruel.

Two sisters — both minors — raped and murdered in a
village on the outskirts of Aligarh. The prime suspect:
their maternal uncle.

There had been outrage.

Until doubts crept in. The timeline was wrong. The
physical evidence weak. The motive unclear.

Before the second hearing, the man had been dragged
from police custody and lynched.

The courtroom never got its say.

That night, Nupur waited till the final segment to speak.

She looked into the camera — not like a journalist.

But like a witness.

“What is justice?” she asked, her voice soft and steady.

“Is it a verdict? A gavel? A final word?”

“Or is it an idea — blurry, contested, changing shape depending on who holds it?”

“To a father, justice is punishment.

To a falsely accused man, it’s dignity.

To a survivor, it’s belief.

To a mother, it’s safety.”

“Sometimes justice is the courtroom.

Sometimes... it’s just an apology.

Sometimes it’s the silence that follows a truth too complicated to judge.”

She paused.

And then, with her voice barely above a whisper:

“And sometimes, justice is just... remembering.

Not letting a name vanish into a case number.”

“Tonight, we close another file.

Not because we found an answer —

But because we dared to ask the question.”

She didn’t smile.

She simply lowered her eyes.

And ended the broadcast.

The studio slowly emptied. Monitors dimmed. The control room lights shut down one by one.

Nupur remained seated. Alone.

Her phone buzzed. A message from an unknown number.

“Keep doing what you’re doing.

Some of us are listening,

even if we never clap.”

She turned the phone over, screen down.

Outside, the country returned to noise.

But within that tiny studio — beneath overhead lights and behind a single lens — something rare had been created.

Not a platform.

Not a protest.

A mirror.

One that didn’t say who was right or wrong.

Only asked:

Are you sure you're ready to judge?

Somewhere, in that hush that follows hard truths, something had begun — a quiet drive, not of outrage but of understanding. From homes to colleges, from tea stalls to classrooms, people weren't just demanding justice anymore.

They were trying to understand.

And perhaps for the first time, India wasn't just waking up angry.

It was waking up aware.



CHAPTER 14:

THE JUSTICE MAN RISES

Morning broke, but the silence in Nupur's apartment was shattered by the persistent buzzing of her phone. Scores of missed calls—team members, editors, and anxious viewers—flashed across the screen. Finally, Abhinav called Sidhant, hey Sid, where is Nupur? we are trying to reach her out. She is not picking our phone. If she is around, can you tell her it's really urgent. Rubbing her eyes, she answered the call.

“Hey, Abhinav. What happened?”

“Big news, Nupur. Banda, Uttar Pradesh... a horrific gang rape case. Victim tortured for six days; nineteen suspects involved, six arrested. It’s spiralling—communal tensions, political flashpoint during the UP election.”

Her heart clenched. This was beyond breaking news. It was an opportunity—a storm which had been running in her nerves, this was something which she couldn’t ignore.

It was hardly 7 o’clock in morning, the entire team which were working last night had again assembled in the Mumbai newsroom, fluorescent lights flickered over a cluttered table strewn with photographs, FIR copies, protest footage and legal documents. Nupur paced as her team assembled around her.

“We’ll call it the Banda case. Six in custody, thirteen on the loose. The situation is volatile—police warnings, communal undertones, local elections hitting fever pitch.”

Preeti held up her phone with a viral clip playing: a student leader from Allahabad University thrashing a podium, calling for people to be the Justice Man if justice failed them.

Nupur nodded. “We launch “Incomplete Stories”. We’ll cover the crime, the fallout, the moral dilemmas—accurate, responsible, compelling.”

The newsroom was silent for a beat. The kind of silence that hangs heavy just before a tide turns. Saxena shifted

uncomfortably, a tinge of doubt in his voice. “I still don’t know if this is the right format... it’s politically sensitive, it’s raw. We’re giving a face to rage—this could go either way.”

All eyes turned to Mithun.

He stood up slowly from his seat at the end of the long conference table. There was no paper in his hand, no notes. Just a calm but unmistakable conviction in his eyes. He looked first at Saxena, then at the rest of the team, and finally let his gaze settle on Nupur.

“Nupur,” he said, “you’ve been carrying this idea for months—maybe longer. You didn’t wait for a prime slot. You didn’t wait for headlines to follow. You just... followed the truth.”

He took a step forward, raising his voice just enough to be heard over the pounding hearts in the room.

“I’ve watched every episode. Every panel you curated. Every story you told. And what you’ve built isn’t just news—it’s a movement. A mirror. You’re asking this country to look at itself, even when it’s ugly, even when it hurts.”

He turned to the team now, letting his words rise with intensity.

“This isn’t just another show. This is the moment a newsroom becomes a battleground for conscience. This

is when journalism moves beyond TRPs and becomes legacy.”

He paused, then looked back at Nupur.

“You asked for a chance. You’ve earned it. From tonight, your team gets the prime slot—every day, 2000 to 2200 hours. And the show won’t be buried under hashtags or slogans. It will be The Justice Man. No anchors shouting. No breaking news tickers flashing. Just truth. Raw, bold and unflinching.”

A hush fell over the room again—but this time, it was different. Not hesitation. It was fire being lit in everyone’s eyes.

“Go out there,” Mithun said, his voice soft now but resolute.

“And show this country what you’ve been building in silence.”

There was no applause—but it wasn’t needed. What came next was far more powerful.

Every reporter, every researcher, every technician in that room—stood straighter.

Because The Justice Man wasn’t just a title anymore.

It was their responsibility. Their reckoning. Their moment.

And they were ready.

By afternoon, groundwork was underway. A reporter was dispatched to Banda to interview the victim's family, gather ground footage, monitor protests. Another covered campus rallies, while others dug into police records and legal frameworks. The newsroom hummed with effort—data, interviews, coordination.

That evening, the newsroom lights glowed with energy. Security updates echoed on live phones; the district administration was requesting military support; ministers issued statements; hashtags were trending. The Justice Man movement had begun to crystallize.

Nupur called Siddhant. "It's intense."

He replied, "Take care—you're doing something important."

At 7:55 pm, The Justice Man set was ready. Behind her, screens displayed images from Banda—the victim's frightened family, police barricades, nationwide protests. A countdown ticked softly.

Nupur launched: "Good evening. You're watching The Justice Man. Tonight; we bring you the Banda gang rape—a crime shaking the state in the middle of election madness. But who is The Justice Man? And why are words of vigilante rage echoing across university campuses?"

The first segment delivered a cold, hard timeline. The second brought raw footage of protests, chants

demanding justice and a daily commute interrupted by curfews.

The third segment assembled a panel of voices—legal scholars cautioning against mob justice, a psychologist explaining vigilante psychology, a victim rights activist highlighting systemic failures. Every opinion cut deeper.

Finally, Nupur's monologue:

“Who decides what justice looks like—the courts, society or the silent unheard voices? Are we—as a society—educated, qualified to end a life based on a headline? Do we stop to think before shouting ‘kill the bastard’ on Facebook? Or is it now a popularity contest—who goes viral, wins the sympathy, drowns out the facts?”

Her voice quivered, tears glistening under the studio lights as she spoke with quiet power.

Meanwhile, Shraddha's tear-streaked face by Raghav's bike, Abhimanyu watching in thoughtful repose and Sub-Inspector Sandeep adding his daughter's photo to his desk. Each contributed to the spark—intentionally or not.

The final scene left viewers in their homes glued to their screens. Nupur's words had stirred something larger than a show—they had held a mirror to a nation poised between Order and Fury.

In the lab control room, faces were tense, exhausted—but alive. Mithun placed his hand on Nupur's shoulder: "This—that was brave. That was necessary."

She nodded, voice caught. "Now... we wait."

As the feed ended, lights in suburban homes stayed on past midnight. Discussion spilled over apps and family chat groups. The Justice Man had become a turning point, not just another broadcast.

Long after the cameras shut off, the nation still watched. Some applauded. Some scolded. Many simmered in uneasy reflection, as more lights flickered on in the darkness—questions demanding more than answers.

The Justice Man Rises didn't just air. It ignited a national conversation about justice, ethics and shared humanity. For Nupur, it was the culmination of her relentless pursuit—a testament that stories, when told with courage, can light the path forward.

Late into the night, long after Mumbai's noise had been swallowed by silence, Nupur stirred in her bed. Her phone buzzed again — a notification blinking dimly on the side table.

"Check this new app: THE JUSTICE MAN."

Her brows furrowed as she sat up, the chill of the late hour crawling under her skin. She clicked on the link, half asleep. Within seconds, the download began. The app icon was simple — a black scale on a deep crimson

background, with the title written in sharp white serif font: The Justice Man.

The app opened to a haunting piano tune playing in the background, giving the sensation of entering something sacred or something dangerous. A clean interface appeared with a stark question at the top of the screen.

“Do you think this person is GUILTY or NOT GUILTY?”

Below it was a detailed, yet lucidly written case file. No cold court language, no legal jargon. It was storytelling — the kind that drew you in. The app described the Banda gangrape incident, line by line, like a novel:

“She had gone to the village temple at dusk. Six days later, she emerged from cattle shed, barely conscious, telling the world what had been done to her. She named 19 men. 6 are in custody. 13 are still at large. A father, watching. A brother, numb. A nation, silent.”

Then came the section: “Charges Filed:”

- Section 70(1): Gang rape
- Section 74: Assault or use of criminal force to woman with intent to outrage her modesty
- Section 123: Causing hurt by means of poison, etc., with intent to commit an offence
- Section 126(2): Wrongful restraint
- Section 127(2): Wrongful confinement

- Section 351(2): Criminal intimidation

Each section was hyperlinked. Curious, Nupur tapped on one. A minimalistic, 2-minute animated explainer popped up, like an educational reel, explaining the charge with a voiceover. It wasn't preachy — it was precise. Clean. Elegant. Powerful.

Below the case file blinked two buttons:

[GUILTY]



[NOT GUILTY]



She hovered her thumb over “GUILTY,” but just before pressing it, the screen flickered, and a new prompt appeared.

“To make your vote count, sync your Aadhar. Your input will help build India’s People-Weighted Justice System.”

She froze.

Aadhaar? KYC ??

Nupur immediately called Preeti. “Did you send this?” she whispered, her voice now fully awake.

“Yes,” came Preeti’s calm response. “I wanted you to see it. It’s viral.”

“Where did this come from?” Nupur asked. “Who’s behind it?”

“That’s the thing... no one knows for sure. The app’s built by a private tech collective. No government seal. No

news coverage yet. But it has already crossed five lakh downloads in a single day.”

Nupur blinked. “What?!”

Preeti continued, “It’s designed like a legal simulation tool, but built with gamified civic engagement. They’re calling it the People’s Judiciary Layer. A crowdsourced opinion platform that mimics the justice system – but with one twist.”

“And what’s that?”

“It scores you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Yeah. Every user is graded based on something called a Kalman Filter. It’s a mathematical algorithm. If you’re a qualified lawyer, your vote carries more weight. If you’re a common citizen with no legal background, you can still vote, but your weightage is lower.”

Nupur was stunned.

Preeti added, “But here’s the twist. You can upgrade your influence. The app has learning modules – legal definitions, civic rights, judiciary precedents, even interactive ethical case studies. You clear these? Your vote starts mattering more.”

“That’s insane,” Nupur muttered.

“I thought so too,” Preeti replied. “Until I found out retired judges are on it. A couple of them even gave

interviews anonymously on blogs. They say it's a new democratic experiment — like justice in the age of blockchain and social media.”

“But what happens to the data?” Nupur asked.

“No one knows yet. And the app doesn't claim to send verdicts to courts. It's... an ecosystem. A living debate. For now.”

The app was disturbingly seductive.

Everything about it — from the hauntingly beautiful writing to the seamless design — felt like it was built by artists disguised as coders. Nupur scrolled deeper. Some case stories had more than 1 million votes, and under each verdict appeared a collective bar chart. In some, ‘Not Guilty’ dominated, surprisingly. In others, ‘Guilty’ had overwhelming support. Each story ended with a philosophical quote — almost like a punch to the conscience.

“Justice is not always about what happened. It is about what we choose to see.”

“What if this spirals out of control?” Nupur asked.

Preeti sighed. “That's already happening. Anonymous protests are forming based on verdicts from this app. Youth groups are using it as a filter to decide whom to support. Some think this is dangerous. Others... think this is revolutionary.”

“But how is it even legal?”

“There’s already a complaint filed against the app developer,” Preeti admitted. “But it’s all grey zone. The app doesn’t claim to deliver actual justice. It claims to spark informed justice discourse. The legal community is split on it.”

“And the government?” Nupur asked.

“They’re watching. Carefully. But they can’t shut it down unless it incites violence or breaks explicit laws. So far, it’s walking a very clever line.”

Nupur stared back at the two blinking buttons. GUILTY. NOT GUILTY.

Her thumb trembled over them again, then pulled back.

She exited the app.

Later that night, lying awake in the dark, Nupur felt a slow unease crawl over her. The app had tapped into something terrifying and fascinating – the desire of every common man to feel like a judge.

Was this the evolution of democracy?

Or was it just a more poetic kind of mob?

She wasn’t sure.

But one thing was certain – The Justice Man was no longer just a show.

It was an idea. An app. A mirror. And maybe... a storm.



CHAPTER 15:

A NATION AWAKENS

In just four days, something strange had begun to unfold. At first, it was subtle—like a quiet breeze before a monsoon. But soon, it was everywhere. The Justice Man app, once a curiosity, had exploded into a movement.

The numbers told part of the story—more than 2.9 million downloads in less than a week—but what was happening on the ground was far more gripping. People weren't just voting on cases anymore. They were reading. Learning. Discussing. Understanding.

In colleges, the transformation was palpable. At one of Mumbai's old university campuses, a group of engineering students were huddled on a weathered railing near the courtyard. A few days ago, one of them might have cracked a crude joke or carelessly whistled at girls passing by. It was common, normal even—something that would be brushed off or, worse, laughed at.

But today was different.

Two girls walked past, and just as one of the boys opened his mouth, another interrupted sharply—not with aggression, but calm clarity.

“Section 354 of BNS—Outraging the modesty of a woman. You get what, three years? Maybe more?”

A third one chuckled, “Actually, with intent and repeated offense, it's five. Read it last night on the app.”

The first boy grinned awkwardly. “Chalo chalo... enough gyaan. But okay, okay. Point taken.”

What could've been a moment of mockery turned into a genuine, even humorous discussion about boundaries, consequences, and what had changed.

Across the city, in a narrow alleyway of Andheri, the usual tension of evening crowds gave way to another ripple of this awakening.

A thief had been caught red-handed snatching a purse. Earlier, a mob might've broken into chaos—kicks, slaps, public shaming. But this time, a man stepped forward and held the thief firmly, calmly reciting the law.

“This falls under Section 356, theft with assault. That’s not just jail time, bhai, it’s a criminal record for life.”

Another man raised a hand to strike.

“Stop,” someone else said sharply. “Section 323—voluntarily causing hurt. You hit him now; you become the criminal.”

And the moment paused—no violence, just the thief returning the stolen purse, face flushed, trembling. The woman forgave him. The crowd applauded.

It was surreal.

In yet another part of the city, autorickshaw drivers who once sat idle under the flyover, engrossed in cards and gossip, were now sitting with their mobile phones open. The Justice Man app had a new section—Interactive Modules—that explained laws in simple Hindi, with gamified quizzes and certifications.

“Arre Ram Bhai,” one driver exclaimed, “you know under Section 184, we can lose our license for over speeding if caught twice!”

“Bas, I’m not taking flyovers anymore,” laughed another.

Their laughter wasn't cynical—it was proud. They were learning, not because they had to, but because they wanted to. Because now, knowledge gave power. Not loudness. Not aggression.

In the chawls of Dharavi, the change was more personal. One night, a drunken husband came home and raised his hand—like every other night. Only this time, his wife stood up, firm but composed.

“Section 85(1). Assault. And if I go to the police, they'll add 85(3), because you're intoxicated.”

The man stared, his raised hand frozen mid-air.

“And,” she continued, “if you raise it again, I'll make sure our son testifies.”

From the corner, their eight-year-old boy stood—skinny, wearing an old brown vest and blue shorts—clutching a tablet with the app open.

“Papa, it's also called domestic violence. That's another case.”

The man sank into a plastic chair, stunned.

What had changed? Just an app?

No. It was more than that.

The Justice Man app had begun as a story. Then a movement. And now, it was an education revolution. Structured like finance learning apps like Zerodha

Varsity or Khan Academy, its modules had everything: visuals, stories, courtroom role-plays, regional language support, live Q&A from verified lawyers. And it graded users based on learning, letting them “earn” voting power.

Law students devoured it. Science students debated it. Housewives and bus conductors, gym trainers and schoolteachers—they were all logging in. Not to troll, not to virtue signal—but to understand. To be part of something that felt real.

Schools began integrating mini legal literacy classes using it. Law colleges used it in moot court preparation. There was talk of introducing it in civil services coaching. It was the democratization of justice—not just for the rich, not just for the powerful.

Somewhere in Varanasi, a street hawker stopped his son on his way to school.

“Beta, you read that module on children’s rights?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“What does it say about child labour?”

“That no one should make me work. And if they do, they go to jail.”

“Good. Now go and study. You’ll argue for us one day.”

Even the language on the streets was shifting—from anger to articulation. From violence to awareness.

And it wasn't just in urban India.

From villages in Bihar to towns in Karnataka, the Justice Man app was creating new kinds of conversations—in chai stalls, in WhatsApp groups, in college corridors. Where once only gossip flowed, now the air held the weight of something deeper: the beginnings of civic consciousness.

It wasn't perfect. There were misinterpretations, yes. People quoting the wrong sections, or being overzealous. But the point wasn't perfection—it was participation.

Quizzes unlocked higher voting powers. Certifications were gamified. A digital badge of "Level 3 Citizen Law" became a mark of pride on Instagram bios.

India had never seen anything like this before. Not in civics textbooks. Not in courtroom dramas. Not even in massive social campaigns. This was organic, rooted in rage and reborn in resolve.

The app's developers, still anonymous, kept upgrading it. Gamification features. Regional translations. Real-time court updates. An option for verified lawyers to respond to public queries. A "Law League" for top scorers. It was addictive—but for the right reasons.

Back in Mumbai, Nupur sat in her small editing room, watching one of the new videos uploaded from a remote village where schoolchildren had enacted a skit on dowry laws. It wasn't flashy. It wasn't viral yet.

But it was powerful.

As she watched, tears welled in her eyes—not from sadness, but from awe. Somehow, the spark that had haunted her was now igniting minds across the country.

Evenings were quieter now in Nupur's apartment, though her mind rarely rested. That night, her mother called. The television buzzed softly in the background—a panel debate was airing, and The Justice Man app flashed across the screen.

“Ma?” Nupur answered, cradling the phone to her shoulder while scribbling notes from a document she was reviewing.

“Nupur,” her mother's voice was soft, almost hesitant. “I just saw that boy on the news again... the one who was protesting with the poster, quoting your episode. It's happening, isn't it?”

Nupur leaned back in her chair, exhausted but oddly content. “Yes, Ma. It's happening.”

There was a pause. Then her mother spoke again, this time with a pride tinged in fear, “You're at the centre of something much bigger now. People are watching. Listening. Some will love you, some may... not.”

“I know,” Nupur said quietly. Then, with a sigh, “We may not have become a just country yet, but at least we're learning how to ask the right questions.”

From the other end, her mother didn't respond immediately. But in that silence, something maternal and eternal passed between them—a shared understanding of why Nupur had chosen this path, and how far she had come.

In another part of the city, in the quiet compound behind Shraddha Ji's house, a conversation was unfolding under the soft orange hue of the veranda bulb. The old matriarch, Premrata Devi, sat on a wooden charpoy, oiling her silver-streaked hair. Beside her stood Chandan, her son and loyal driver to Shraddha Ji for over 12 years. And tonight, Shraddha Ji wasn't just his employer—she was his teacher.

"Premrata ji," Shraddha said gently, pointing to the tablet in Chandan's hands, "do you know why it's important to know these laws? Not for others. For yourself. For your granddaughter."

Premrata shook her head slowly. "Ham log kya samjhen memsaab? Kanoon toh bade logon ke liye hota hai." (*"What would we understand, mam? The law is for big and strong people, not for us"*)

"No, Amma," Chandan said, his tone unusually firm. "The law is ours too. You remember when uncle beat bua? And we all said 'ghar ki baat hai' (*"It's a family matter"*). This app—this Justice Man thing—it teaches how that's not okay. That there are laws protecting her. Us."

Shraddha smiled softly and nodded. “Even if you don’t remember the numbers... just knowing that there is a number, a rule—it changes something.”

Premlata looked down at her wrinkled hands. After a long moment, she said, “Achha... fir sikhado humko bhi.”

Chandan grinned. For the first time in years, he wasn’t just a driver. He was a son who had something powerful to offer.

At a modest two-bedroom flat in Ghaziabad, Inspector Sandeep was sipping his evening tea when his younger daughter, Mehak, burst into the room waving a notebook.

“Papa!” she chirped. “Do you know what Section 82 says?”

He looked up, amused. “You’re quizzing me now?”

She grinned wide. “It’s about criminal responsibility of children under twelve. I read it today on the Justice Man app! They even had a video of a fake court. I played the judge!”

Sandeep chuckled, setting his cup down. “Well, I’ll be careful then. I have a future public prosecutor in the house.”

Mehak beamed. “No, Papa. I’ll be the judge. And I’ll make sure no innocent ever goes to jail.”

Something in her certainty made him pause. For years, he had walked in and out of courtrooms. Seen broken victims, angry mobs, corrupt files. But in his daughter's eyes, the law was not stained yet. It was clean. Powerful. Hopeful.

He reached out and tousled her hair. "Then I'll be your first fan."

Even in the green hills of Dehradun, the wind had shifted.

At Abhimanyu's academy, a sleepy post-lunch session had just ended. Students were stretching, yawning, shuffling to the canteen. But as Abhimanyu passed by one group near the stone wall outside the classroom, he heard soft murmurs—snippets of law being exchanged like gossip.

"Section 120B is criminal conspiracy, right?"

"No bro, that's different. You need intent for that. Check the app again."

Another voice piped up, "I scored 9 out of 10 on the quiz today! One more and I get the bronze badge."

Abhimanyu smiled silently, hiding behind the trunk of a Gul mohar tree. These weren't law students. They were aspiring officers, engineers, civil servants. And they were finally speaking the language of responsibility.

One of them looked up and saw Abhimanyu walking by. He elbowed his friend.

“Do you think sir uses the app too?”

“I don’t think sir needs it,” another said. “He’s always been like this. Like... Justice Man without the mask.”

Abhimanyu laughed quietly, pretending not to hear. But the warmth in his chest betrayed him. Maybe, he thought, the idea had worked because it wasn’t tied to one man. It belonged to everyone now.

And somewhere in between the forests, cities, rivers and shadows of India—a million other conversations were unfolding. Mothers explaining laws to daughters. Rickshaw drivers quoting sections to friends. Grandfathers opening their phones for the first time not to watch news, but to understand it.

The movement had begun not with a war cry, but with a question.

And that question had opened a thousand doors.

Justice wasn’t perfect yet. But it was no longer asleep.

India was awakening. Not with rage. But with reason.

The Justice Man was no longer a myth.

He was an idea.

An app.

A movement.

And perhaps... the first step toward a nation finally awakening to the true meaning of justice.



CHAPTER 16:

THE COUNTDOWN BEGINS

The winds in India had changed. What began as a whisper from an anonymous app had now become the voice of a million minds asking sharper, more informed questions. On a sleepy morning in Lucknow, the rally ground wasn't as sleepy anymore. For once, the political air wasn't filled with mere promises or grandstanding. It was filled with fear. Not of losing votes — but of being asked real questions.

At a mid-sized rally in Banda, the local MLA climbed the stage with the same overconfidence that had once brought him glory. The crowd seemed warm, but their

eyes were different now. There was alertness, a strange calm, as if they were waiting for something. The leader began his usual address, but halfway through a student stood up — a girl in a mustard kurta, voice confident but firm.

“You’ve promised women’s safety for five years. Can you tell me what Section 70(1) under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita covers?”

The MLA paused. Stumbled. Then smiled, awkwardly. “Sure, But I will answer that later—”

“That’s for gang rape,” she said clearly into the mic. “You should know it. You’ve used it twice in your FIRs during your tenure.”

The silence from the audience wasn’t stunned — it was satisfied. She wasn’t alone. One by one, more voices followed.

At another rally in Allahabad, a young man interrupted a minister’s speech on youth development. “Sir, why is education on law not part of every school curriculum yet? Why does a commerce student need ten years to understand what harassment means legally?”

The minister glanced sideways at his aides. That wasn’t a planted question. That was the voice of change. He fumbled, tried to spin an answer about ‘policy under review,’ but his voice lacked conviction. The crowd knew it.

Across Uttar Pradesh, as election heat reached its peak, political manifestos began to shift – first subtly, then visibly. Banners now read:

“Legal literacy for all!”

“Law to be part of every school syllabus by 2026.”

“Monthly legal aid camps for the elderly.”

The app, The Justice Man, had passed 10 million downloads. And what was astonishing wasn’t the number – but the depth of engagement. Every user had a profile, a weightage, a section of law they had mastered. Some had begun live sessions – common people educating others. Some were housewives who now knew what to say when a relative crossed the line. Some were auto drivers who quoted sections like they once did film dialogues.

International media had taken note. BBC called it “India’s Digital Legal Awakening.” Al Jazeera called it “Justice Crowdsourced: A People’s App.” CNN had run a segment with the title: “Can a country re-learn law from the bottom up?”

And amidst it all, politicians were evolving. They had no choice. Gone were days of blustering over crowds – now they paused to prepare legal clauses before drafting speeches. Every rally was rehearsed with a new advisor – not a strategist, but a law consultant. They had learned that this election would not be about caste, region, or even economy.

It would be about knowledge.

Back in Mumbai, at the studio of “The Justice Man,” Nupur sat with her team. The show now ran prime time, and ratings were soaring. But it wasn’t just TRP she watched.

It was impact.

A clip played on the screen. A rural school in eastern UP, where law had just been made part of the curriculum. Children were reciting basic rights, clapping with enthusiasm. Another clip – a training session in Delhi for senior citizens, learning how to lodge online complaints. In a remote corner of Himachal, an open theatre showed street plays on sections related to domestic violence.

Preeti turns towards Nupur. “This... this is why we started, right?”

Nupur smiled. “This is bigger than we imagined.”

Elsewhere, Abhimanyu stood silently in his academy in Dehradun. The air carried the usual chill of the hills, but inside the classroom, something unusual was happening. Students were forming circles, discussing Section 123 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita – and not because it was homework.

“Sir, is wrongful confinement only when someone locks you in?” a boy asked curiously.

“No,” Abhimanyu replied. “It can be psychological too. Control is not always about locks.”

His eyes softened. This wasn’t just education. It was evolution.

In Jaipur, Shraddha watched the show quietly with Chandan and his mother Premlata. The woman, once confused about legal jargon, now asked questions and even answered some. “So, this is what my son drives her for,” she said with pride. Chandan beamed.

At Nupur’s home, her mother held the phone tightly. “Are you sleeping enough?” she asked.

“Sometimes. But not today. Maa, we may not be a just country yet, but at least we’re learning how to ask the right questions.”

On the other side of the city, Sid was poring over news clippings, both proud and reflective. He wasn’t the same man anymore — none of them were.

And late that night, a million phones slowly dimmed, as viewers who had just watched the latest episode finally rested their heads. The nation wasn’t healed, but it had awakened.

A satellite view from the night sky would’ve seen the switchboards fade out — not from apathy, but from hope. A new light had been lit, inside every thinking mind.

It was still dark outside. A pale pre-dawn haze hung over the sleeping cities and villages of India. But inside

homes, hostels, chawls, apartments and even slums, phones vibrated and flashed with the same eerie consistency – as if some invisible network had silently agreed to jolt the nation awake.

At exactly 5:30 a.m., it began.

A piercing siren – shrill, unsettling, almost like a wartime emergency alert – echoed from lakhs of smartphones. Not a regular push notification. This was different. It bypassed silent modes. It cut through locked screens. It was loud, deliberate, and unignorable.

Nupur sat upright in bed, heart thudding. Her phone screen glowed with a red banner flashing just two words: “THIS IS JUSTICE.”

Below it:

“Your knowledge will now decide. Your decision will now have consequence.”

And then – a countdown timer. 48:00:00. Ticking down.

The app had updated overnight.

Every user who had downloaded The Justice Man app now saw the same interface. Gone was the warm, gamified tone. Gone were the interactive modules and light animations. Now it was stark – white font on black background, pulsing slowly like a heartbeat.

And then it hit.

A short film – no longer than 90 seconds – began auto-playing. It showed the Banda case, narrated like a courtroom drama. The face of the 23-year-old survivor blurred, her voice cracked but determined. She spoke of her six days in captivity, of screams swallowed by locked doors, of 19 men – one after the other.

Each accused man's face flashed, one after another – names, photos, details. The charges listed in bold:

- Section 70(1): Gang Rape
- Section 74: Criminal Force to Outrage Modesty
- Section 123: Hurt by Poison or Intent to Offend
- Section 126(2): Wrongful Restraint
- Section 127(2): Confinement
- Section 351(2): Criminal Intimidation

And then the screen went cold again. Two buttons appeared.

 GUILTY

 NOT GUILTY

But it wasn't simple anymore.

Because now, every user had a level tag next to their name: “Learner,” “Informed,” “Certified,” “Practitioner,” or “Expert.” This wasn't a vote for fun. Every choice carried weightage. It was no longer an app.

It was a public tribunal.

Below the two main options was a smaller line:

“Would you like to review testimonies, evidence summaries, cross-examinations, and previous judgments under similar sections?”

The temptation to skip was there — but the sense of responsibility now ran deeper. What once felt like digital empowerment now felt like moral burden.

In homes across the nation, the reaction was universal: Silence.

The laughter of the earlier days — when laws were quoted playfully, when children mimicked lawyers, when housewives corrected husbands — had vanished. Now, even touching the screen felt heavy.

In a hostel room in Allahabad, a group of students sat frozen. One boy whispered, “This isn’t what we signed up for.” Another murmured, “I thought we were just learning... not deciding.”

In Mumbai, Nupur dialled Preeti. Her voice was dry. “Is this real? Who released this?”

“I... I don’t know. It’s not from our backend. The core team never added this module. I think it was a dormant feature. Maybe it activated at a million downloads?”

Nupur stared at the screen. The timer was ticking.

47:58:44

47:58:43

47:58:42

Preeti's voice returned, shakier this time. "Nupur, this isn't hypothetical. Look — read the terms. The app says the final count will be submitted to the highest judicial authority as people's mandate. There's a clause about crowd consensus in modern jurisprudence. They're trying to set a legal precedent."

"Who is they, Preeti?"

No answer.

In Dehradun, Abhimanyu's cadets were whispering in the corridors. Even the senior instructors had fallen silent. A 15-year-old looked up and asked, "Sir, how do I know for sure? What if I make a mistake?"

Abhimanyu didn't have an answer. Because this was no longer about knowledge. It was about conscience.

Premlata held her phone with both hands. Her son Chandan sat beside her, unsure whether to stop her or help her. Her face was pale. "This... this girl... she could be anyone's daughter, na?"

"Yes, Ma," Chandan whispered.

"But I didn't see her. I didn't hear all of it. What if... what if someone innocent gets trapped?"

That was the question hanging over a billion hearts now. Some protested online. "This is mob justice disguised in law!"

Some celebrated. “Finally! The public gets a say in real cases.”

And some simply wept. For the first time, clicking a button felt heavier than lifting a gun.

By mid-morning, the entire country was gripped. Offices ran slower. Classrooms were quieter. Families skipped breakfast. Television channels now ran only one story:

“THE JUSTICE MAN COUNTDOWN: THE NATION DECIDES”

In Parliament, urgent discussions were underway. Could this become admissible in court? Was it a mass trial? Was it lawful?

But legal or not, one thing was certain — it was real.

Back in the newsroom, Nupur stood with her team. Her voice steady, but eyes lost.

“This isn’t just journalism now,” she said quietly. “This... this is us holding the matchstick to dry leaves.”

She looked up at the screen.

46:00:02

46:00:01

46:00:00

All eyes turned to the clock.

It was no longer about a show. Or an app. Or a girl in Banda.

It was about the soul of a nation deciding whether it was ready... to judge.

Studio lights dim. One close camera. No music. Just Nupur — standing, not seated. Eyes steady. The screen behind her still shows the shrinking countdown.]

“I never thought I’d come here this morning with more fear than faith. But here I am, not just as a journalist — not even as a woman — but as a citizen who believed in the power of awareness, not the machinery of manipulation.”

“To those behind this app... I have just one question for you: Who gave you the right to take the burden of justice and put it on trembling fingertips at dawn? Who gave you the right to turn trauma into a touchscreen dilemma? You played with people’s rage and you packaged it as democracy. That’s not innovation — that’s cruelty with code.”

“You turned a sacred right into a public performance. You didn’t empower India, you tried to weaponise its conscience. And for that... you will be held accountable.”

(She pauses, eyes flickering with restrained fire. Then her voice softens.)

“But to my fellow citizens — to every man, woman and child who paused, who are still thinking before pressing a button — I want to say this:”

“You may not wear a robe. You may not sit on a bench. But today... you proved that India is not a mob. You proved that our anger can be loud — but our justice will be quiet, deliberate and earned.”

(She walks a few steps forward toward the camera.)

“Yes, we have flaws. Yes, our legal system is slow, sometimes broken. But that doesn’t mean you, some anonymous genius with a server and a scheme, can hijack the soul of our Republic and call it progress.”

“Justice is not a swipe. Not a vote. Not a trend. It is earned through law, soaked in struggle, and delivered by courage.”

(A beat. Silence. Then one last line — direct, unflinching.)

“You tested us. And you thought we’d break.

But this... is India.

We may take time. But when we rise —

we rise as a nation that thinks. Not one that clicks.”

(The lights fade. The countdown keeps ticking. But something, somewhere... shifts.)

The newsroom lights dimmed. The countdown ticked in a thousand homes, but for now, in the studio, silence reigned. The ticking countdown glowed behind her — now down to 45:23:07.

Nupur stepped away from the camera, her heart still thudding like a distant war drum. The monologue had shaken even her. She had meant every word. And yet, as she walked down the corridor past the humming servers and blinking screens, the weight of her own unanswered questions pressed against her spine.

She stopped near the editorial room's window. Mumbai's skyline was still bruised with dawn. Below her, life was stirring — not in chaos, not in revolution, but in contemplation.

Her voice still echoed in the heads of those watching:

“You’ve made Indians read law. You made them argue with knowledge, not noise. You forced us to become more than what we were. But... you also played with our emotions.

This was never supposed to be a game.

Justice is sacred — and you made it a vote.

You thought you built a revolution.

You may have built something far more dangerous.”

She walked into her office. Her body carried the weight of the country's questions. She sat at her desk, the only light now the amber beam from the city outside. She let out a breath, slowly. Her hands trembling slightly.

“Just ten minutes,” she whispered to herself. “Ten minutes of sleep.”

THE JUSTICE MAN

She leaned back on the chair, head resting, eyes falling shut.

And then—

[THE DREAM]

She didn't know when the dream began.

Or if it was even a dream.

She stood in the middle of a courtroom.

No judge.

No jury.

Just empty seats.

And silence.

The ceiling fan creaked like a swinging noose. A single paper fluttered down from above. As it landed on the floor, she saw the words:

“Judgment Deferred.”

Suddenly, she was outside — the same field in Banda.

A girl stood before her.

Face blurry. Voice silent.

Behind her: 19 figures. Shaded, faceless.

Except one.

One had Raghav's eyes. Watching her. Asking her.

Now, she stood in Everstead's old staff room.

Dusty trophies. Faded timetables.

Abhimanyu sat there, younger.

A journal in his hand.

His eyes met hers but didn't speak.

He simply turned the page and circled a child's face in red. A boy from the past.

"Who was he?" she asked.

But Abhimanyu was already fading.

Devraj appeared in his place – then Khan, then Sandeep.

Then Shraddha ji, looking out of a train window.

And Ananya's mother, screaming... in reverse.

Her voice pulling back into her throat.

Now, she was in a dark tunnel. A mirror stood at the end – cracked, shimmering.

Words began to appear.

One by one.

Bleeding in red.

WHO WAS ANANYA'S FATHER?

WHO KILLED RAGHAV?

WHO KILLED DEVRAJ? AND KHAN?

WHO KILLED ALL THESE RAPE ACCUSED?

WHERE DID ABHIMANYU VANISH FOR FOUR YEARS?

WHO CREATED THE APP? AND WHY?

WAS THIS A MOVEMENT – OR MANIPULATION?

Then her own reflection appeared.

But older.

And it spoke:

“You thought justice was a conclusion.

Justice was always the question.”

And the countdown returned.

From the app.

Ticking again.

But this time – 00:00:01.

Frozen.

Not ended.

Just... paused.

To be continued.....