# And The Chinar BLED

A TALE OF LOVE, LIES AND REVENGE

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***jis khaak ke zameer mein ho aatish-e-Chinar; mumkin nahi ki sard ho wo Khaak-e-arjmand (The earth that enshrines in its bosom the fire of the chinar, this exalted earth can never be dead and cold)***

Dr. Allama Iqbal



# Chapter 1

From behind a soot stained pillar near the tea stall, Afreen watched the Lucknow to Delhi train slide into the station, its roar shaking the concrete beneath her boots. On the platform, the air crackled with the restless energy. But as the rhythmic click clack of the wheels slowed to a final, heavy halt, the crowd's collective sigh was eclipsed by the sheer violence of her own heartbeat, a frantic drumming that echoed straight into her ears, warning her that her life was about to split in two.

What the hell am I doing here?

A cold sweat broke out across her neck. Every instinct screamed at her to turn around, to melt into the crowd and disappear. There was still time to walk away. She was losing her mind, that was the only explanation for why her feet remained glued to the floor.

At five feet seven inches, she carried an innate grace that naturally commanded space. Sunlight caught her fair skin, giving her a soft, almost luminous glow against the grime and soot of the platform. Her outfit was understated yet impeccably sharp, blue denims that fit with effortless precision, paired with a crisp white shirt whose sleeves were neatly rolled up her forearms. Resting atop her dark hair was a pair of classic black Wayfarers, not worn to shield her eyes, but sitting stylishly on her forehead like a subtle

crown. In her right hand, she held a maroon faux leather clutch, its rich hue adding a single, deliberate pop of color to her ensemble.

As she moved through the crowd, eyes trailed after her. Passersby lingered a second too long, men paused mid stride, caught off guard by her poise. Afreen was acutely aware of every gaze, but her expression remained untroubled. Her relaxed demeanor wasn't an act of ignorance, but a fortress of quiet confidence.

It hadn't always been this way.

Her composure was hard won, carved out of years of sharp edges and hard lessons. Life had never offered her a syllabus, it had thrown her into the fire first and left her to figure out the burnt remains afterward. Over time, she had learned the delicate art of emotional regulation. The internal turmoil that once threatened to shatter her was now quietly contained beneath a calm surface. She didn't block the waves anymore, she simply learned how to ride them without losing her footing.

The platform was a swirling vortex of noise and motion.

But the commotion was nothing more than static to Afreen. Her world had shrunk to a single, stationary target, Compartment 2A.

Only minutes earlier, the heavy steel carriage had rumbled past her. Now, it hissed to a halt a good fifty meters down the platform.

She felt a sudden, frantic urge to break cover, to leave the damp shadow of the concrete pillar she had been clinging to and run toward it.

But a sudden, icy knot of apprehension tightened in her chest. Wait, a voice whispered. “Just wait.”

What if he wasn't who he said he was? What if the reality shattered the fragile, beautiful illusion they had spent months building?

Five agonizing minutes stretched by. Each tick of her wristwatch felt like a physical blow. Passengers poured out of 2A in a steady trickle.

And then, he stepped down onto the rusted metal footboard.

Afreen's breath caught in her throat.

Even the high definition lens of a webcam and the carefully curated photos he'd sent hadn't done him justice. The digital world had flattened him, stripping away the subtle dimensions that now took her breath away.

In the flesh, he was striking. He had a quiet, grounded presence that seemed to carve out its own space amidst the station's chaos. The morning light caught the sharp angle of his jaw and the slight, thoughtful crease between his brows as he squinted against the glare of the platform lamps. He looked taller than she had imagined, broader in the shoulders, and entirely real.

It had been over a year since she and Ahmed had met on a chatroom platform on Yahoo chats. The digital air in the "Yoga"chatroom was always thick with a bizarre mix of existential philosophy, regional politics, and terrible jokes, everything, ironically, except yoga. For Afreen, the room was a canvas of nameless, faceless entities, a chaotic background noise she muted until Neel2aaj, the ID, typed.

When he typed, the text seemed to carry a distinct cadence. He was sharp, unapologetically opinionated, and armed with a quick wit that made her feel like she was trying to keep up with a fast-paced tennis match.

That sudden, impulsive "Hello" she threw into his private message box felt like a small defiance of her usual reserve. When his "Hi!!" flashed back almost instantly, the blue light of the monitor illuminated a sudden spike of adrenaline in her chest.

Afreen wasn't online to find love. For her, the Yahoo chatroom was a late night escape valve from a life that felt increasingly rigid and predictable. When online, she could be the most unfiltered version of herself: analytical, slightly cynical, but deeply observant.

Hi!! He had typed

I am Afreen, and you?

Hi Afreen! Lovely name.

Sounds like an Islamic name

Muslim?

Yes!! She answered.

And you?

Ahmed !!

Afreen's heart had skipped a beat.

Oh! Are you a Muslim too?

What a coincidence. . That too in this Yoga chat room. Wasn't it supposed to be a Hindu thing, I mean this Yoga.

Lol! She had typed …the internet slang has become a rage amongst social media users and " Lol", which meant" Laugh Out Loud" was one in many.

Co-incidence, for sure, but a pleasant one. Where are you from Afreen? He asked

Srinagar. But presently in Delhi.

Okay!! I am from Lucknow.. Ahmed had replied.

The rhythmic chime of her morning alarm had long been replaced by a different kind of ritual, a typed "Good morning" sent across the digital void before her feet even touched the floor.

For a year, Ahmed and Afreen had built a world entirely out of pixels, voice notes, and late night webcam chats. Through glowing monitors, their connection had deepened into something magnetic. Every shared glance through a lens made her heart flutter, every late-night conversation forged an undeniable chemistry.

Whenever Ahmed pressed to meet in person, Afreen hesitated. He was a Lieutenant in the Indian Navy, or so he had told her during their very first private exchange. Beyond that, she knew remarkably little about his family or his posting. Out of self-preservation, she had deliberately avoided digging too deep, keeping her distance until she was certain about where they were headed.

After a year of living in emotional limbo, the weight of the arrangement became unbearable. A night of restless tossing and turning brought clarity: it was time to meet, or time to let go.

When she finally pitched the idea, Ahmed's response was instant and ecstatic. As luck, or fate, would have it, he was already scheduled to travel to Delhi the following day for departmental work.

Now, the moment had arrived.

The hum of the crowded meeting point faded into background noise as Afreen took a slow, grounding breath. Stepping out from the shelter of the pillar where she had been hiding, a surge of nervous excitement spiked through her veins.

Across the open space, his eyes locked onto hers almost immediately. A familiar smile broke across his face as he raised a hand to wave.

Afreen lifted her hand in return, her gesture hesitant, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. As the distance between them shrank, a sudden, piercing doubt whispered in the back of her mind, a quiet reminder that she was about to find out if the man she fell for online was truly the man walking toward her.

Too late! She thought. There can be no escape route now.

Ahmed was gleaming while walking toward her.

Come on Afreen! Bring out your best smile forward.. Afreen egged herself on mentally.

Assalam alaikum!! Said Ahmed, greeting her with a warm smile on his face

Hi!! Said Afreen and extended her hand forward.

Hi!! Ahmed grabbed her extended hand lightly.

Any lingering doubts she had harbored during the long, anxious days of waiting dissolved instantly. She had made the right decision. Meeting face-to-face was a gamble, but seeing him now, standing in the flesh, she knew it was a risk she would take a thousand times over.

He wore a pair of crisp Khaki trousers and a simple white linen shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his forearms to reveal strong, sun-bronzed wrists. In his right hand, he carried a compact leather suitcase. He swung it with an easy grace that suggested it was barely packed, perhaps containing only the essentials, or perhaps he was just too strong to care.

Even now, seeing him in the harsh, unfiltered light of the platform, Afreen was reminded of the very first time they had connected over a webcam. She had spent the first half of that call entirely convinced he was Kashmiri, mesmerized by the sharp line of his jaw and the quiet intensity in his eyes.

"How was your trip?" Afreen asked, her voice carrying a slight tremor of excitement that she hoped was masked by the ambient noise of the station.

Ahmed's face broke into a warm, genuine smile that reached his eyes, crinkling the corners. "Slept the whole way!" he answered, his voice a rich, comforting baritone that sounded infinitely better in person than it ever had through a laptop speaker.

"Hope you are not tired?" she asked, stepping a fraction closer, searching his face for any hint of travel fatigue.

"Na! I am alright," Ahmed chuckled, a playful spark dancing in his eyes. "As I said, I slept the whole time. I'm fully charged."

Before she could respond, he reached out. His fingers, warm and reassuringly firm, slipped into hers. The sudden heat of his palm against hers sent a delicious shiver straight up her spine.

"Let's get out of here," he murmured, his eyes locking onto hers with a quiet promise.

Without waiting for an answer, he gently led her toward the concrete stairs. Hand in hand, they navigated the bustling sea of passengers, ascending toward the overhead ramp that would carry them away from the train platforms and out into the vibrant, open city beyond.

Hey! If you are hungry, there's a nice place at Connaught Place that I know of.. Said Afreen.

Yes! Let's sit somewhere…said Ahmed.

The thick, chaotic hum of Delhi hit them like a physical wall the moment they stepped out of the railway station. Amidst the sea of shouting coolies, rushing commuters, and honking cars, Ahmed stepped forward, raising a hand to flag down a passing green and yellow auto rickshaw.

Once they climbed inside, the rickety vehicle sputtered to life, weaving aggressively into the Delhi traffic. Afreen leaned slightly toward the driver, shouting over the roar of the engine.

"Bhaiya, Connaught Place. Nirula's."

The driver nodded, shifting gears, and the auto lurched forward. Afreen settled back into the faux-leather seat, letting out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She turned to look at Ahmed, expecting him to make a dry joke about Delhi's traffic or ask about her journey. Instead, he was pressed against the far side of the auto, his shoulder almost touching the metal frame.

His eyes were fixed on the blur of the city outside, but he wasn't really seeing it. His jaw was clenched so tightly that a tiny muscle in his cheek twitched rhythmically.

"You seem distracted, Ahmed," Afreen said, her voice laced with a growing thread of worry. She reached out, her fingers hovering near his sleeve but not quite touching him. "Are you alright? What's wrong?"

"No, I'm fine," Ahmed muttered. The lie was clumsy, landing flatly between them. "Just overwhelmed, I suppose."

He didn't turn his head. He kept his gaze locked on the passing concrete pillars of the metro line, stubbornly avoiding her eyes as if looking at her might shatter whatever fragile composure he was holding onto.

The auto eventually pulled up near the iconic white colonnades of Connaught Place. Nirula's stood as a testament to

an older, gentler Delhi, a retro sanctuary of bright lights, laminated menus, and the faint, sweet aroma of waffle cones and hot fudge.

They stepped out of the heat and into the blast of the diner's air conditioning. The transition was jarring. Around them, families laughed over pizzas and teenagers shared legendary Hot Chocolate Fudges, their voices bouncing off the tiled floor.

Afreen guided them to a booth in the corner, hoping the familiar, cheerful setting would ease the tension.

She slid into the booth, placing her purse on the seat beside her, and picked up the menu. "What'll you have?" she asked, offering him a warm, encouraging smile. "A quick bite ? Or should we go straight for the ice cream?"

Ahmed didn't look at the menu. He sat with his hands folded tightly on the table, his knuckles white. The bright overhead lights of the diner highlighted the dark circles under his eyes and the deep, troubled furrow of his brow. His mouth was drawn down in a stark line of quiet sorrow.

He swallowed hard, finally raising his eyes to meet hers. The raw vulnerability in his gaze made Afreen's breath hitch.

"Listen, Afreen," Ahmed said, his voice barely a whisper against the background hum of the restaurant. "We need to talk."

"Yes sure!! But let's order first. "

"Ok! I'll just have a Coffee "

I'll have that too then ! Said Afreen.

"Ok wait" ! Ahmed got up from his seat to go to the counter to order.

"Hey ! Wait, I'll order. You are my guest, said Afreen.

Ahmed waved at her, indicating to her to keep sitting. Don't worry about it, “Next time you do it “And went on towards the counter.

“So, how are things at your end?” Asked Ahmed slouching back to his seat.

“You know it's so good to meet you in person. I have been dreaming about this moment, preparing for it.”

“You wanted to talk about something”…Afreen looked straight at Ahmed.

“Yes! Ahmed took a deep breath before starting. “I need to be honest with you “.

“There are certain things that I should have told you while we were interacting online and on the phone. I know this might mean that you won't want to see my face again. But I want to start out on a clean slate with you.”

Afreen was now listening to him with a face showing no emotions. She said nothing.

“My name is not Ahmed, and I am not a Muslim. “

“My name is Rajiv. Rajiv Singh. I am a Hindu.”

Afreen was silently watching him now. A waiter had kept their order on the table and went away. She barely glanced at the cups and then back at him, waiting for him to continue.

“It had started so innocently, or at least, that is the comfort I try to wrap around my conscience now “.

“When you had first mentioned your faith, a warm, casual detail dropped into the early days of our late night chats, panic and a sudden, desperate need to connect had short-circuited my brain. “I’m Muslim too,” I had typed, the lie slipped onto the screen with terrifying ease.”

“At the time, it felt consequence free. The internet is a transient place, a digital transit lounge where people meet, share fragments of their souls, and drift apart. I told myself it didn't matter. We were two avatars crossing paths in the dark, it would start on the internet, and it would end on the internet.”

“But love doesn't respect the boundaries of a screen.”

“One spontaneous lie demanded a second to protect it. The second required a third to give it structure. Before I fully understood the gravity of what I was doing, I had spun a fragile web of fiction around my life.”

“I created family traditions I never practiced, holidays I never celebrated, a heritage that belonged to someone else, all to keep the illusion alive. There was no malice in it, no calculated cruelty. Just the cowardice of a man who had stumbled into a beautiful room and realized he didn’t belong, yet couldn’t bear to step back out into the cold.”

“As the weeks bled into months, You ceased to be a notification on my phone. You became the gravity that pulled my days together. You became real. The feelings became terrifyingly, undeniably true.”

“And with that truth came an agonizing, daily ritual of guilt.”

“Every morning, I would wake up, stare at the ceiling, and resolve that today would be the day. Today I will break the web. Today I will tell her who I really am. But the terror of watching you walk away from a ghost, that was me, paralyzed me.”

“I convinced myself that a text message was too cowardly a medium for a confession this heavy. When we would meet, I promised my reflection. When I can look into your eyes, and let you see my remorse, that’s when I’ll give you the truth. I’ll apologize in person. You'll see I’m real, even if my story wasn’t.”

“The web was choking me, and worse, it was insulting you”

“Whatever you decide now, whether you throw the web back in my face and simply vanish, I would accept it. I had built the foundation on sand, I shouldn't be complaining when the tide comes in.”

Afreen's initial reaction was of disbelief and confusion at first, struggling to comprehend what she had just heard. She was experiencing a flood of emotion, all mixed up. Was it sadness, anger, fear, or anxiety, she wasn't sure, she wasn't able to process.

Is there anything else you need to tell me?” Afreen asked, her voice dangerously level.

“Yes.” Rajiv took a slow, deliberate breath, staring down at his coffee cup as if searching for courage in the dark liquid. “There’s more. I’m not an officer in the Navy. I was in the submarine arm.”

Afreen leaned back, resting her hand lightly against her chin. Her expression remained entirely blank, a carefully constructed mask hiding the sudden spike in her pulse. “What does that mean?”

“It means I was a sailor, enlisted personnel, posted in the Indian Navy submarine fleet. Not a commissioned officer.”

“You just used 'was',” Afreen noted softly, her eyes narrowing as she began observing every minute twitch of his jaw, every break in his posture. “What do you mean by 'was'?”

Rajiv swallowed hard, the silence stretching taut between them before he finally forced the truth out. “I was dismissed from duty. I went on leave, and I didn't go back.”

A faint, chilling stillness settled over the table.

“If a sailor fails to report back after leave, it’s classified as unauthorized absence,” Rajiv explained, his tone flat, almost clinical, as if reading from a military manual to distance himself from reality. “Pass thirty days, and it becomes AWOL or desertion. It triggers a court of inquiry, criminal charges, potential jail time, and a dishonorable discharge. My case is still pending with the Naval court.”

Afreen didn't blink. “Hmm. So why didn't you go back?”

“I had my reasons,” Rajiv said, daring to look up and catch her cold gaze. “It’s another story. One I’ll tell you... if you’re still interested in hearing anything I have to say after this.”

“Of course I want to know,” Afreen replied, the words dripping with a quiet, lethal venom that belied her calm posture. Inside, her chest burned.

Rajiv flinched slightly under her gaze, leaning forward, his voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “Submarine service isn't what people think. It’s brutal. You spend weeks submerged in a steel tube, cramped in dark, suffocating spaces with no sunlight and no room to breathe. Joining the submarine arm is voluntary. After a few months of that living hell, I realized I couldn't handle it. I begged for a transfer to surface warships. They refused.”

He paused, exhaling heavily. “So I took sick leave... and I never walked back through those gates.”

The air in the room suddenly felt impossibly thin, as if the sheer weight of his deceit were vacuuming the oxygen right out of the room.

“'Ahmed'...” Afreen began, the fake name tasting like ash in her mouth. She corrected herself, her tone dripping with bitter sarcasm, “...I mean Rajiv. Or whoever the hell you actually are.”

A bitter, hollow laugh escaped her lips, a dry, jarring sound that felt entirely foreign to her own ears.

“I’m not even sure,” she whispered, leaning over the table until she was inches from his face, “that whatever story you are spinning right now, or whatever name you just gave me, has a single iota of truth in it.”

The words felt like physical blows she was striking against a ghost. For months, she had built a sanctuary out of his voice, his messages, his promises. She had mapped out a future on a foundation made of whispers, believing every sweet, reassuring word. Now, the foundation had crumbled into dust, leaving her standing on the edge of a precipice.

"Do you even realize what you have done?" she murmured under her. "You have put me in a complete fix."

The gravity of her situation pressed down on her chest like a physical weight. It wasn’t just her own broken heart she had to carry, it was the fragile, hopeful heart of her father. Papa, who had always been so protective, so cautious, yet had allowed himself to hope because she had pleaded so earnestly.

"I told Papa about you," "What will I tell him now? I even told him that I am meeting up with you today."

The ultimate betrayal wasn't just the lie itself; it was the vulnerability she had offered up on a silver platter. "I trusted you."

She pondered over those three words. So simple, yet so devastating. They represented every secret shared in the dead of night, every fear confessed, every defense mechanism she had willingly dismantled for him.

And now, the trap was set, and she was the one who had walked right into it, bringing her father along with her. Papa was

already here. He had traveled all this way, his eyes bright with a quiet anticipation she hadn't seen in him since her mother passed.

"My father is here to meet you," she said. "I thought I'd surprise you. I had planned to take you to him and see how it goes. I was supposed to take you to a restaurant in the evening, so that the two of you could meet up."

"What should I tell him now?"

The question hung in the silence of the room, heavy and unanswerable. How could she look into her father's tired, hopeful eyes and admit that the man she loved, the man she had vouched for, was nothing but a shadow? How could she bear the pity that would inevitably soften Papa's face?

The grief in her chest swelled, morphing rapidly into a suffocating, righteous anger. It wasn't fair.

"Why do things like these only happen to me?" she whispered, her voice cracking. "Why can't Allah let me live a normal life?"

The unfairness of it clawed at her throat. She didn't ask for grand romances or extraordinary fates, she just wanted the quiet, simple peace of a normal life. A life where trust wasn't a weapon used against her.

Afreen wanted to scream. She wanted to tear down the walls.

Afreen was seven when she started noticing that things were not normal around her house. She was the only child of her parents. Her Father Mansoor Ali Shah and mother Sara were constantly bickering and fighting. They lived in a palatial house in the posh Raj Bagh area of Srinagar.



# Chapter 2

Mansoor Ali Shah was a man built for a different life than the one he was handed. Tall, broad shouldered, and effortlessly handsome, he carried the easy charm of someone who had spent his formative years away from the conservative, heavy air of the Kashmir Valley.

Having graduated with a degree in Textile Engineering from the bustling, liberal college scene of Amritsar, he was far more comfortable in tailored Western suits and the company of admiring female classmates than he was in the traditional confines of Srinagar.

But Amritsar had also introduced him to a darker, more seductive companion …alcohol. What began as a social lubricant in university hostels quickly hardened into a dependency.

When rumors of Mansoor's "wayward" lifestyle reached his traditional father in Kashmir, the patriarch acted swiftly. The remedy for a wild son, in his eyes, was a traditional marriage.

Sara was undeniably beautiful, but she was the product of a strictly orthodox but affluent family based in Calcutta. From the day of their wedding, their home became a silent battlefield of mismatched expectations.

Mansoor's liberal, unstructured lifestyle directly clashed with Sara's strict Islamic value system.

Mansoor's casual drinking quickly devolved into chronic, aggressive alcoholism.

His father had got him into Govt Service after his graduation through his contacts, and he passed away soon after.

As an official in the Directorate of Handicrafts and Handlooms, Mansoor was eventually caught by the State Anti-Corruption Bureau. He had manipulated a ₹6 crore government tender to fraudulently procure expensive machinery from a favored firm.

Though a childhood friend, now a powerful serving minister intervened to quietly recover the stolen funds and allow Mansoor to resign without criminal charges, the damage was done. Mansoor found a lesser paying job at a private textile mill, but the loss of status only fueled his descent into unmonitored debauchery.

The ultimate fracture occurred when Mansoor began bringing other women into the very house he shared with his wife and their young daughter, Afreen.

"The mind does not break all at once… it unravels like old wool, thread by agonizing thread."

For Sara, this wasn't just a betrayal, it was the final, devastating fracture of her reality. She had been drowning in postpartum depression ever since Afreen's birth ten years prior, a quiet suffering that had gradually ossified into chronic insomnia.

The transition from therapeutic relief to dependency happened in the dark, quiet hours of the night.

Something snapped inside Sara. The doctor had prescribed her sleeping pills, but she had started over using them, resulting in

advanced psychosis. Her mental health started deteriorating drastically.

Sara's brother finally arrived in Srinagar and decided to take Sara and Afreen to Calcutta. Afreen was only ten at that time.

Sara's mental health refused to improve even while being with her parents. It was as if her brain had refused to respond. She was turning violent and started to inflict self harm.

She had banged her head against her bedroom wall. Doctors finally recommended a psychiatric secure unit, a specialized psychiatric facility designed for individuals requiring a more controlled environment due to their mental health condition.

Afreen suddenly found herself all alone. Her maternal grandfather had passed away long back. She was living in a palatial bungalow in Kolkata with her maternal grandmother and three maternal uncles, two of whom were married and had kids. She was constantly subjected to bullying from her cousins.

Coming from a broken family, had a significant psychological and emotional impact on her. She struggled with feelings of anger, resentment and loneliness.

That's when her unmarried maternal uncle came in to fill up that void.

For a long time, Afreen had mistaken the attention for warmth. In a house where affection was rationed like scarce water, her uncle’s early tenderness, the tight hugs, the loud kisses on her forehead, the extra sweets slipped into her hand, felt like a shield. She had adored him. He was the fun uncle, the one who made her laugh when the rest of the household was heavy with silence.

Then, the boundaries began to blur, dissolving so gradually that by the time she realized she was drowning, the water was already over her head.

The warmth curdled into something suffocating. It started with hugs that lasted a few seconds too long, hands lingering on her waist, kisses shifting from her cheek to the corner of her mouth. Then came the heavy, possessive touches under the guise of rough affection, a hand sliding beneath her sleeve, fingers pressing hard enough to leave faint, ghostly impressions on her skin.

"This is our secret," he would whisper, his breath smelling faintly of stale cardamoms and tobacco. His voice was always dangerously soft, laced with a quiet thread of threat. "You see how much I love you? The others won't understand. If you tell them, they'll think you're a bad girl. They'll be jealous, and your grandmother will throw you out on the street. You want to stay here with us, don't you?"

The manipulation was a cage with invisible bars. The affection she had once felt for him became a source of deep, sickening confusion. How could the same hands that had bought her ice cream now make her skin crawl? The guilt ate at her from the inside out, an agonizing, quiet rot. She hated him, yet part of her grieved the uncle he used to be, leaving her stranded in a swamp of revulsion and self-blame.

Nighttimes became a slow motion nightmare.

Afreen would lie paralyzed in the dark, her body locked rigid beneath the heavy cotton quilt, her eyes wide, staring at the ceiling fan spinning silently overhead. She learned to read the house like a map of impending violence.

Clack. The faint sound of his bedroom door latching open.

Creak... creak... The rhythmic groaning of the ancient teak floorboards down the hallway. Each step was a countdown.

Her heart would hammer against her ribs so violently she was certain he would hear it before he even reached the room.

She would pull the blanket over her head, curling into the tightest ball possible, praying to fade into the mattress, to become invisible, to simply cease existing for the next hour.

But the door handle would always turn with a slow, agonizing metallic click. The soft rustle of his clothes, the sudden drop in room temperature as he pulled back her blanket, and the weight of the mattress sinking beside her, it was a precise, terrifying routine. She would close her eyes tight, biting the inside of her cheek until she tasted iron, retreating deep inside her own mind while her body endured the sick, invasive reality of his hands.

Silence was her only defense, but it was suffocating her.

The dam finally broke on a humid afternoon. The shame had grown too heavy, a physical weight crushing her chest until she couldn't breathe. Shaking, with tear stained cheeks and a cracking voice, Afreen stood in the dimly lit kitchen and poured the truth out to her grandmother, the touch, the nights, the floorboards, the threats.

The silence that followed was deafening.

Her grandmother didn't cry. She didn't wrap her arms around Afreen. Instead, her face hardened into a mask of pure, bitter rage.

SLAP.

The impact was sudden and sharp, snapping Afreen's head to the side. Her cheek burned, a blinding flash of heat in the quiet room.

"Shut your filthy mouth!" her grandmother hissed, her fingers gripping Afreen's jaw so tightly her nails dug into the flesh. "Have you no shame? Fabricating such disgusting lies about your

own blood? Do you want to ruin this family? Destroy his life with your dirty imagination?"

Afreen stared at her, the shock freezing the breath in her throat. The betrayal of her abuser was an attack from an enemy; the betrayal of her grandmother was the destruction of her entire universe.

"You will sleep in my room from tonight," the old woman growled, shoving Afreen back against the counter. "Under my eye. Until I decide what to do with a girl who harbors such evil thoughts."

The fluorescent lights of the airport terminal hummed, buzzing with a cold, indifferent energy that felt entirely detached from the weight in Mansoor's chest. Beside him, thirteen year old Afreen sat on the edge of a plastic chair, her small hands tightly clasping her backpack straps. Her gaze was locked onto the scuffed floorboards, fixed on a world that had repeatedly shifted beneath her feet without her consent.

Mansoor stared down at his phone, his thumb hovering over a contact he knew he would never be allowed to call again. The brief text message from his mother in law had been brutal in its brevity, a sharp blade wrapped in ice: Sara is gone. Cardiac arrest. Do not come. You have done enough. We are sending Afreen back. Will let you know the date and time.

No final goodbye. No last rites. Just a closed door, bolted forever from thousands of miles away in Kolkata.

Mansoor glanced at Afreen, his chest aching with a hollow, crushing guilt. He had tried to rebuild his life over the past two years in Srinagar, he had stayed sober, kept his head down, and fought to be the father she deserved. But redemption, he was learning, did not erase history. The shadow of Sara's broken mind, the silent years in the hospital, and now her lonely death

hung between them like a suffocating fog. He wanted to pull Afreen into an embrace, to weep with her, to beg for a forgiveness he knew he hadn't earned.

Yet, when Afreen looked up, her dark eyes were disturbingly calm.

There were no tears. No frantic breaths of panic. The news of her mother's passing had not broken Afreen's heart, it had merely settled into the deep, quiet abyss that had been growing inside her for years. The vibrant mother she had once loved had disappeared long before her heart actually stopped beating, lost to the psychological dark that Kolkata had swallowed up. To Afreen, Sara had been a ghost for years. Now, she was simply official.

The silence between father and daughter was heavy, loaded with unsaid apologies and forgotten memories, as the boarding call echoed over the loudspeakers.

A few months later, the quiet in the house was shattered by the sharp clatter of tea sets and slamming doors.

Desperate to escape the suffocating loneliness and terrified of failing at life a second time, Mansoor had remarried. It was a decision born of fear, and fear proved to be a terrible foundation. His new wife, Farida, had entered the house with high expectations and an immediate, sharp resentment for the quiet, watchful girl who inhabited its corners. To Farida, Afreen was not a child grieving a tragic past; she was a living monument to Mansoor's first failure, an unwelcome ghost in a marriage already fraying at the edges.

From the hallway, Afreen stood in the shadows, listening to the muffled, bitter arguments drifting from her father's bedroom.

"I didn't sign up to raise another woman's baggage!" Farida's voice sliced through the thin wooden door, sharp and unrelenting. "She looks at me like I'm an intruder in my own home!"

Mansoor's response was a low, defeated murmur, a desperate attempt to soothe, to placate, to keep a second marriage from crumbling into dust.

Standing outside, Afreen waited for the thunder of her father's voice. She waited for him to defend her, to say that she was his daughter, his only child, the girl he had flown across the country to save. She waited for the protector who had promised her a fresh start.

Instead, there was only silence. A quiet, compliant surrender.

In his desperate, cowardly bid to keep his new wife happy, Mansoor chose silence. When Farida left Afreen's meals cold on the counter, he looked away. When she barked sharp, cruel commands that made Afreen shrink into herself, he found an excuse to step out into the yard. Realizing he had plunged into another catastrophic mistake, Mansoor quietly vowed never to have a child with Farida, a decision that only curdled her resentment into pure malice. And with nowhere else for that venom to go, it rained down entirely on Afreen.

Late that night, Afreen sat on her small bed in the dark, watching the frost form patterns on her window pane.

She was thirteen, yet she felt ancient. She had survived her parents' violent screaming matches, endured the slow fading of her mother's sanity, and adjusted to the hollow peace of a quiet home. But this new quiet was worse. It was the quiet of being abandoned while standing in the exact same room as the person who claimed to love you.

Mansoor had conquered his bottle, but he had lost his spine. And as Afreen listened to the muffled, sharp scolding of her stepmother down the hall, she pulled her knees up to her chest, realizing the cruelest truth of her young life.

She had been brought back to Srinagar not to be saved, but simply to be forgotten in a different house.

Somewhere during her air sojourns between the snow-draped peaks of Srinagar and the humid, sprawling expanse of Calcutta, she found a new obsession. It wasn't the view outside the tiny cabin window, but the choreography unfolding inside it.

The air hostesses moved like royalty through the aisle turbulence. She was utterly transfixed by their immaculate presentation, the sharply pinned scarves, the flawless posture, and a level of polish that suggested they lived in a completely different, more refined dimension. While passengers fretted, barked orders, or complained about delayed connections, these women remained islands of absolute calm. Their smiles never cracked, their composure never wavered, and every detail of their demeanor radiated a quiet, bulletproof sophistication that she instantly wanted for herself.

She couldn't wait to turn eighteen, and be age eligible for the job.

At Presentation Convent school, which was also located in Rajbagh area near their house. Afreen's fluency in English language communication was attributed largely to her convent school education.

Her interpersonal skills were something which made her stand apart in her class. In contrast to her go-getter image in school, she was a quiet child at home. With an overbearing stepmother, no siblings to share her feelings with and an ever busy father, Afreen was waiting for the day she could get out of her house, her city and pursue her dream. She was craving for independence.

The day she had yearned for, came soon enough.

India had started out with the new open sky policy, heralding in new private airlines to come into play and offer services which had previously, largely seen only Govt owned airlines. These airlines started out with recruiting ground and air staff on a war footing.

Afreen had sent her resume to one of these airlines and had been called for the interview. She was eighteen at that time and had just about made it in the eligibility criteria.

Mansoor gave her permission. He was in fact almost relieved that Afreen was carving out her own future away from the toxic environment of Srinagar.

The situation in Kashmir had become so tense that the right thinking Kashmiris didn't want their children to be raised in this environment. This era in Kashmir was grim, not just because of a wave of militant attacks on security forces and occasionally on minority communities of Hindus and Sikhs, but also due to the growing mindset of ‘ othering ‘ in common citizens of Kashmir.The militancy caused widespread disruption, fear, and human suffering in Kashmir.

Though proud of her Kashmiri heritage, Afreen could not identify with the violence and fanatical mindset of the general population in Kashmir that had been taking shape for over a period now.

The ongoing conflict in Kashmir has had a profound impact on the lives of women including Afreen.

The conditions at home weren't good either, and Mansoor knew that he was hardly available for Afreen. It was best for her to go out there and carve out her own destiny.

Getting into the airline as an air hostess proved to be a cakewalk for Afreen. Her personality, her hold on English language, everything proved to be an asset in the interview.

Afreen was to undergo training in New Delhi for six months with a stipend.

For the first time in her life Afreen was overjoyed. She and a couple of other girls immediately rented an apartment. Afreen had now secured her dream job and was financially independent.

But there was a dark underbelly in this profession which Afreen encountered, just one year after she joined the Airline.

The Civil Aviation Minister stood waiting at the center of the red carpet, a powerful, middle aged politician. Afreen was to offer him the bouquet, with her crisp, rehearsed air hostess smile.

The bouquet felt heavy in Afreen's hands, the wet stems bleeding cold dew onto her manicured fingers as the camera flashes strobed across the terminal. Behind her, the sleek nose of the airline's newest jet gleamed under the hangars.

She offered the blooms with a practiced, air hostess smile. But as the Minister reached out, his fingers bypassed the velvet ribbon entirely.

He gripped her wrist. Hard.

Afreen froze. The cameras kept clicking, capturing what the media would print as a warm reception. But beneath the flashbulbs, the Minister held her trapped for three terrifying seconds, his eyes sweeping over her face with a possessive, unsettling heat.

From that moment, Afreen's world contracted into a living nightmare.

The harassment wasn't subtle; it was a siege. Calls flooded her phone at all hours. Shadows lingered outside her crew gates. The Minister's staff stalked her shift schedules, delivering "invitations" to private dinners framed as royal commands. When she turned to her manager, pleading for intervention, the man

couldn't even look her in the eye. "It's the Minister, Afreen," he whispered, wringing his hands. "Do you have any idea what he can do to this airline?" Even her senior colleagues urged her to compromise. "Just go for one dinner," they coaxed. "Play the game. Don't ruin your career over pride."

Afreen refused. But defiance only accelerated the madness.

It culminated on a rainy Tuesday night at the apartment she shared with friends. A sharp, heavy knocking rattled the front door. Standing on the threshold were two muscular security detail officers flanked by a private driver. Their eyes were cold, their tone dripping with veiled threats. “The Minister has a table reserved at the Imperial,” the lead officer said, stepping into the doorway. “He doesn't like to be kept waiting, Afreen. Get your coat.”

Terrified, Afreen slammed the door, bolted it, and fled to the local police station to lodge an FIR.

She expected protection. She got a trap.

The station house officer casually tossed her written complaint onto a pile of scrap paper. "Look, girl," he sneered, leaning back in his chair. "Take this back. Reach an understanding with the Minister. You don't want to make an enemy out of a man who controls the skies."

When Afreen stood her ground, demanding a formal criminal case, the officer’s smile vanished. Instead of an FIR, the police logged a diluted, toothless Daily Diary Register entry, a bureaucratic black hole meant to cover their own tracks.

Five days later, the retaliation landed like a sledgehammer.

At 2:00 AM, the door to Afreen’s apartment was battered down. Flashlights blinded her as armed police personnel swarmed the living room. Screams echoed through the hallway as she and

her roommates were dragged out into the corridor. The charge? A "tip-off" from an anonymous caller claiming the apartment was a front for high-profile prostitution.

It was a blatant, monstrous lie, and everyone in the room knew it. But the truth didn't matter. The next morning, local tabloids printed the story. The smear campaign was complete. Her reputation was in tatters, her landlady evicted her on the spot, and she was cast into the cold with her life packed into two bruised suitcases.

Behind closed doors, the Minister squeezed the airline's throat, demanding Afreen's immediate termination. The CEO, knowing the horrifying reality, refused to throw her to the wolves, but he was backed into a corner. Power demanded a sacrifice.

The compromise was brutal: Afreen was stripped of her wings.

Banished from the skies she loved, she was demoted to ground operations, desk bound, watching the jets she used to fly on soar into the clouds without her.

Yet, Afreen did not cry.

Having survived a childhood riddled with trauma, she had developed a terrifying immunity to tragedy. She simply numbly accepted the blow, bottling the poison deep inside her chest. In Kashmir, her father, Mansoor, was navigating his own quiet ruin, finally severing the dead weight of his sham marriage with Farida, completely oblivious to his daughter's torment in Delhi. Afreen kept him in the dark. To tell him meant returning to Kashmir, surrendering her independence, and letting the Minister win.

Instead, Afreen vanished into the digital ether.

In the late hours of the night, inside cramped cybercafes bathed in the blue glow of CRT monitors, she logged onto Yahoo

Chat. It started as a coping mechanism, a way to bleed off the suffocating pressure of a life spent perpetually on guard. But then, a handle appeared in her chatroom: Ahmed.

Ahmed was different. He didn't ask her for the corporate smile she gave the ground crew, nor did he look at her with the predatory hunger of the Minister. In the anonymity of text, Afreen slowly uncorked the vault of her emotions. What began as guarded exchanges turned into late night hours of raw vulnerability.

Ahmed became her sanctuary. His words carried an emotional warmth that thawed the ice around her heart. For the first time in her life, Afreen wasn't hiding behind a mask. She was investing every fragment of her battered soul into him, falling dangerously, selflessly in love with a voice in the dark, completely unaware of the next storm brewing on the horizon.



# Chapter 3

Listen, Afreen...

"Rajiv's voice cracked slightly, cutting through the heavy, suffocating silence that had settled between them.

"I know I've put you in a spot," he said, his voice dropping an octave, carrying the weight of a confession. "And I know how much is at stake. But I am ready to meet your father. In case... in case you still want me to."

Afreen didn't look at him immediately. The sheer audacity of his offer hung in the air.

"I know it's embarrassing," Rajiv continued, swallowing hard. "For both of us. It's a mess, and I'm the one who tangled the threads. But I am ready to face the music. I won't run, Afreen."

When she still didn't answer, he reached out, his hand pausing in the empty space between his hand and hers before he gently reached out and placed his hands on hers

"All I can say is that I am serious about you."

Rajiv looked straight into her eyes. There was no deflection there, none of the easy charm or defensive humor he usually used as a shield in his online chats with her. It was raw, unpolished, and terrifyingly real.

Afreen searched his face. She wanted to find a crack in the facade, a hint of hesitation that would give her an excuse to call the whole thing off and retreat to the safety of her anger. But there was only sincerity, thick, heavy, and undeniable.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She was exhausted. The secrets, the half-truths, the constant tightrope walk between her family's expectations and her own desires had drained her. She wasn't sure about anything anymore. Did sincerity bridge the massive cultural chasm between them? Would his resolve hold when her father, Mansoor, leveled his terrifying, quiet gaze at him?

She closed her eyes for a brief second and when she opened them, a cold resolve had taken the place of her panic.

"Fine," she whispered, her voice steadying as the decision solidified. "We'll go directly to Papa from here. We walk in, and we tell him everything. Like it is. No more sugarcoating, Rajiv. No more waiting for the 'right time"

Rajiv didn't flinch. He simply nodded, a grim, determined acceptance settling over his features.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go."

The drive in the cab was a blur of taillights and quiet tension. Neither of them spoke, the silence inside the cabin was a stark contrast to the chaotic evening rush hour outside.

By the time the cab reached The Grand Awadh, the dashboard clock of the cab glowed a precise, merciless 7:00 PM.

The restaurant was one of Mansoor's favorites,an upscale, dimly lit establishment known for its traditional Mughlai cuisine and its whisper, quiet atmosphere. It was a place designed for serious conversations, where the clinking of fine crystal was the loudest sound in the room.

As they walked through the heavy wooden doors, the scent of saffron, roasted spices, and expensive perfume washed over them. Afreen's hand instinctively sought Rajiv's. Their fingers intertwined for a brief, desperate second before she let go, smoothing down her shirt as she scanned the dining room.

It didn't take long to find him.

Mansoor sat at a secluded corner table, partially shielded by a carved wooden screen. He was a man who commanded a room without uttering a word. Impeccably dressed in a crisp grey Nehru jacket, he was nursing a cup of black tea. He looked perfectly at peace, entirely unaware of the storm that had just walked through the door.

Afreen took a quiet, deep breath, feeling Rajiv step up right beside her, his shoulder brushing hers in a silent promise.

"There he is," she murmured under her breath. "Keep walking, and don't look down."

Assalam alaikum, Sir." Rajiv extended his hand towards Mansoor.

Mansoor took it, instantly noting the firm, steady grip. "Walekum Assalam," he greeted back.

Afreen stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Mansoor in a quick hug, and sank onto the sofa beside him. "Papa, this is Rajiv."

Mansoor swirled toward her, his face tightening, eyebrows narrowing into a sharp line.

"I know, I know!" Afreen said quickly, holding up a hand. "You came here to meet Ahmed. Well… this is Ahmed. The guy I met online, the one I've been talking to on the phone for months. A couple of hours ago, he finally told me the truth, his real name is Rajiv Singh."

Mansoor offered a dry, bemused look first to Afreen, then across the table to Rajiv. “Ah. The virtual world of internet friendships.” A cold grin touched his lips.

Rajiv sat across from them, rigid, staring down at his untouched glass of water. He took a slow breath, finally raising his eyes to meet Mansoor’s.

“Very true, sir. That’s exactly how I viewed it at first,” Rajiv said, his voice quiet but grounded. “I didn’t take internet interactions seriously. I treated it as entertainment, and my conversations with Afreen started out fitting that exact description.”

He paused, letting the confession settle before continuing. “but the more we spoke, the more I realized there was real substance here. I know I kept my identity hidden until today, but Afreen deserved to hear the truth face to face. I wanted to look her in the eye and apologize. And I want to look you in the eye and do the same. If my intentions were malicious, I would have disappeared like a coward the moment you arrived. Instead, I stayed. I’m here to face whatever consequences come with my actions.”

Mansoor watched him closely, searching for the tell tale signs of a scammer or a smooth talker. But there was no theatrical deflection, no rehearsed desperation, just raw honesty. Mansoor respected that.

“Thank you for being straightforward and setting the record straight, Rajiv,” Mansoor said quietly. He glanced at Afreen, who sat motionless, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, completely ignoring the tea on the table.

Turning back to Rajiv, Mansoor offered a measured compromise. “If you two decide to remain friends after this, I won't stand in the way. Naturally, that choice rests with Afreen.”

“Sir, I have no interest in being Afreen’s friend,” Rajiv cut in smoothly. “I want to marry your daughter. And I’m asking for your blessing.”

Afreen jolted back, staring at Rajiv as if he’d spoken in a foreign language.

“I’m afraid, Rajiv, that won’t be possible,” Mansoor interjected instantly, his voice dropping an octave into strict authority. “I don’t need to elaborate on the reasons, they are obvious to anyone in this room. We are Kashmiri Muslims, and…”

“I know who you are, Sir,” Rajiv interrupted, holding his ground without raising his voice. “And I still want to marry her. Whatever it takes.”

“Marriage? Wait, where is this coming from?” Afreen’s voice broke the air, sharp and bewildered.

Rajiv turned his eyes toward her, softer this time. “I know I haven’t formally asked you yet, Afreen. But with your father here, I felt it was only right to speak to him first. Of course, you hold every right to say no.”

“Well, Papa isn’t the one you’re proposing to!” Afreen snapped, leaning forward, her eyes wide. “You ask me first.”

“There are serious considerations here,” Mansoor interjected, raising a hand to signal Afreen to hold her tongue. “Law, religion, society, culture… I will not allow my daughter to abandon her faith, nor will I allow a conversion forced by circumstance.”

“I’ll convert,” Rajiv said plainly, without a second’s hesitation.

Mansoor rubbed his forehead, deeply exasperated. “We are putting the cart way before the horse. I don’t even know if Afreen

actually wants this." He turned his gaze on his daughter, his brow deeply furrowed. "Afreen?"

Afreen couldn't meet his eyes. She dropped her gaze to the floor, her teeth pulling at her lower lip, maintaining a heavy, telltale silence.

Mansoor let out a quiet sigh. "Right. Your silence speaks loud enough."

He turned back to Rajiv, shifting into a pragmatic tone. "Even if we entertain this fantasy, what about your family? Will a Hindu family in Lucknow accept a Kashmiri Muslim bride? Or a son who changes his faith?"

"It doesn't matter what they accept," Rajiv replied, a dark, unwavering resolve behind his words. "I've made my decision."

"Alright. We've heard you out, Rajiv," Mansoor said, rising to his feet to signal the end of the meeting. "Obviously, no life-altering decisions are being made in a restaurant today. I need to speak with my daughter in private. She needs to fully understand the weight of what this means, and you need time to step back and think logically. Afreen and I leave for Srinagar tomorrow morning. We'll be in touch once things settle."

Afreen slowly stood up, offering Rajiv a faint, reassuring smile that spoke volumes beyond her silence.

"Understood, sir," Rajiv said, standing up and straightening his jacket. "My train back to Lucknow leaves this evening." He paused, looking directly into Afreen's eyes. "I hope we meet again soon. I promise you, I will never give you a reason to regret this."

The farewell was brief, clipped by the immense weight of everything left unsaid. As they walked out, Afreen carried a heavy heart, knowing that the real battle had only just begun



# Chapter 4

The overcast Srinagar sky hung heavy over the valley, mirroring the quiet anxiety that had settled in Mansoor's mind. For weeks, his thoughts had circled the same inescapable reality, in Kashmir, faith was not merely a matter of private devotion, it was the scaffolding of society, law, and lineage.

Mansoor was no stranger to the friction of tradition. His own past marriages, though conducted in strict adherence to religious and cultural norms, had fractured and collapsed. Those failures had cured him of any lingering reverence for societal expectations. When it came to his only daughter, Afreen, he had deliberately raised her on liberal values, teaching her to think independently. Social stigma alone would not have made him sleep light at night; he cared little for the whispers of neighbors or the disapproval of distant relatives.

What truly terrified Mansoor was the cold, unyielding mechanics of the law.

Under Islamic jurisprudence, particularly the consensus among Sunni and Shia scholars, a Muslim woman marrying a non-Muslim man presented an insurmountable religious prohibition. In Kashmir, where personal law governed inheritance and marriage, the legal ramifications of such a union were perilous.

Compounding the issue were the rigid provisions of Article 35A and Article 370. Under state subject laws, if a Kashmiri woman married someone from outside the state, she faced the real prospect of losing her right to inherit or own property in Jammu and Kashmir.

For Mansoor, this was not an abstract legal puzzle, it was a direct threat to Afreen's future. His home in Rajbagh was an ancestral property, split down the middle between him and his elder brother. Their houses stood adjacent, sharing a wall and decades of quiet rivalry. His brother had two ambitious sons who kept a watchful eye on Mansoor's side of the compound. If Afreen married outside the faith and the state, losing her inheritance rights, those two nephews stood first in line to lay claim to Mansoor's share.

That was the law, Mansoor knew. And in Kashmir, family disputes over land rarely remained gentle.

Afreen, however, was resolute. She was sure about Rajiv, but she was pragmatically aware of the world they lived in. In their late night telephone calls, her voice had carried an unyielding clarity: if they were to have any life together in Srinagar, Rajiv had to convert to Islam.

Mansoor had stepped in with his own strict terms. He was willing to facilitate the union, but only on one condition, Afreen had to leave her job elsewhere and settle permanently in Srinagar. He promised to convert the commercially viable front portion of their Rajbagh home into a beauty parlor for her. As for Rajiv, Mansoor offered him a home under his own roof and pledged to use his personal network to secure him local employment.

To Mansoor's surprise, Rajiv had agreed without hesitation.

Coming from a modest farming family in Uttar Pradesh with six siblings and a small holding of land, Rajiv's options back home

were sparse, especially now, without his Indian Navy job. Settling in Kashmir as part of Mansoor's household offered a stability he could hardly have envisioned otherwise. When Mansoor had tentatively offered to travel to UP to meet Rajiv's parents, Rajiv had quickly shut down the idea.

"My conversion to Islam is my choice, Sir "" Rajiv had said firmly over the phone. "I'll do whatever it takes to be with Afreen. If my parents are against it, let them be. I'm an adult, and I follow my own heart."

A month later, Rajiv's flight touched down at Sheikh ul-Alam International Airport.

It was a bandh day, a complete strike that had paralyzed the city into an uneasy stillness. Stepping out of the terminal, Rajiv was immediately struck by the stark, atmospheric shift. Green-painted sandbag bunkers, rolls of concertina wire, and heavily armed security personnel lined the airport perimeter.

Mansoor was waiting near the pickup curb, his face worn with the strain of navigating multiple security checkpoints just to enter the airport grounds.

"Welcome to Srinagar, Rajiv," Mansoor said, extending a hand before wrapping him in a brief, polite embrace.

"Thank you, Sir. It's... quite something," Rajiv admitted, eyes darting toward a troop of armed personnel patrolling nearby.

They climbed into Mansoor's sedan and pulled out onto the airport road. The silence outside was absolute. Shops were tightly shuttered, streets were devoid of pedestrians, and only the occasional military convoy broke the emptiness.

Rajiv leaned against the passenger window, taking in the passing views. He had read about Kashmir, but seeing it stripped

of tourists and cloaked in a total shutdown felt like stepping onto another planet.

"It's always quiet on strike days," Mansoor remarked softly, keeping his hands firm on the steering wheel. "You get used to the rhythm of it."

As they drove toward the Civil Lines, the landscape shifted subtly. Mansoor explained how Srinagar was divided not just by geography, but by temperament. Downtown Srinagar, the old city, was a maze of dense brick homes, narrow alleyways, and intense political energy.This was where the call for Bandh was given every other day.

Radicalization of Islam had taken shape in this area. This area, used to be a stronghold of the banned Al Umar Mujahideen (AuM) group and where kidnappings were the order of the day.

The emergence of protracted insurgency along with the radicalization of local youth had taken a toll on this beautiful state of Jammu and Kashmir.

It was as if someone had cast an evil eye on this place.

But here in the Civil Lines, in neighborhoods like Rajbagh and Bemina, life unfolded differently.

Here, affluent families lived in sprawling nuclear units set back from wide, tree-lined streets. Modern concrete homes sat beside traditional wooden structures, shielded by high boundary walls. It was a world dominated by civil servants, business owners, and quiet wealth, a place that felt distant from the restless pulse of the old city, yet remained inexorably tied to its fate.

Mansoor turned the car into the quiet lane of Rajbagh, pulling up in front of the two-story ancestral house. Next door, through the iron gate, Rajiv caught a glimpse of Mansoor's

nephews standing on the porch, watching the car arrive with slow, deliberate attention.

He cut the engine, turned to Rajiv, and said quietly, "We are home. Let's go inside."

Rajiv stepped out of the car, his joints stiff from the long drive, and the flight. Standing in the shaded frame of the arched doorway was Afreen. The moment their eyes met, her face lit up, a brilliant, genuine smile banishing the afternoon slump.

Standing just a step behind her was an older man in a simple, immaculate kurta pyjama. The moment Rajiv's feet hit the gravel, the man, with an agility that defied his graying hair, shuffled forward toward the trunk to gather the luggage.

Afreen stepped out onto the veranda, her hand already extended in a warm, welcoming gesture.

"This is Rashid Chacha, Rajiv!" she said, her voice carrying a bright, melodic ring. "He helps us with our domestic chores, but honestly, he's practically family to us."

"Aadaab, Rajiv Sahab," Rashid Chacha murmured, offering a respectful, slight bow of his head as he balanced a heavy suitcase in one hand.

Rajiv clasped Afreen's hand, feeling the grounding warmth of her grip, before turning to offer Rashid a genuine, respectful nod. "Please, just Rajiv, Chacha. Thank you for your help."

"Come on, let's go inside!"

The booming voice belonged to Mansoor, who came jogging around the side of the car, jingling the keys he had just pulled from the ignition. He slapped a heavy, affectionate hand on Rajiv's shoulder, ushering him toward the threshold. "Our guest must be absolutely starving and tired to the bone."

"He certainly looks it," Afreen agreed, her eyes crinkling at the corners with amusement as she swept her arm toward the cool, darkened interior of the house. "Don't worry, the food is ready and waiting."

Rajiv stepped into the main room, his eyes scanning the wooden beams and intricate carvings. It was his first time seeing a traditional Kashmiri house from the inside, and the architecture carried a quiet, centuries-old weight that held him spellbound.

Before he could fully process the space, Mansoor gestured towards a narrow wooden staircase tucked into the lobby. "Up here," he said softly.

Rajiv followed, the stairs creaking gently beneath their weight. They emerged into a vast attic hall tucked directly beneath the steep, pitched roof. Warm light filtered through the wooden lattice windows, illuminating a thick, hand-woven Kashmiri carpet that sprawled across the center of the room. Plush mattresses and velvet bolsters lined the perimeter against the cedar-paneled walls. Surprisingly, the modern furniture from the floor below was completely absent here, the space felt older, unburdened by time.

Mansoor paused at the threshold, slip-sliding his shoes off. Rajiv immediately followed suit, leaving his footwear at the door.

They crossed the threshold and settled onto the floor cushions opposite one another. Soon, dish after dish was served, rich, aromatic, and steeped in spices Rajiv couldn't quite name. Everything felt delightfully otherworldly. The faint knot of anxiety that had been tightening in Rajiv's chest since his arrival began to loosen, dissolved by the effortless warmth and quiet affection showered upon him by Mansoor and Afreen.

After the feast, as the quiet of the evening settled over the house, Mansoor led Rajiv back down the creaking staircase to the living room below.

The warmth of dinner evaporated the moment Mansoor stopped near the window. He turned, his silhouette dark against the fading evening light, his expression unreadable.

"We leave for the Mosque tomorrow at dawn," Mansoor said, his voice dropping an octave.

He stepped closer, his eyes locking onto Rajiv's with unsettling intensity.

"Look at me, Rajiv. Are you truly certain you want to go through with this?" Mansoor paused, letting the silence stretch between them until the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner sounded like a heartbeat. "If you have even an iota of doubt about the arrangement, if any part of you is second-guessing what happens tomorrow, you step back right now. No shame, no questions asked. But once we walk through those doors... there is no turning back.

I have been extremely liberal with my views about religion.

If it wasn't absolutely necessary, I would not have asked you for it. The reasons are not religious as far as I am concerned. It's plain and simple commerce.

Being my only child, I don't want Afreen to lose her inheritance rights.

She cannot settle with you outside the state. You have to live with us in this house after ‘Nikah ‘

I understand Sir! I am aware. I had left all the doubts behind when I decided to come here.. . Said Rajiv.

I have no other consideration, except being with Afreen

Mansoor seemed pleased with the answer

Your room is ready Rajiv.. It's late, you must be tired... Said Afreen walking in where the two were sitting.

Yes! You have a long day ahead tomorrow.

Said Mansoor getting up from his Sofa.

The next morning Mansoor drove to the famous Jama Masjid mosque, where Mansoor had already prefixed the conversion ceremony with the Maulana.

Rajiv read the "Shahada" which was a simple affirmation of faith.

In the presence of the Maulana. The two required witnesses were Mansoor and Mansoor's servant cum man Friday Rashid who had been working for his family since the days of his father. After the short ceremony, the Maulana gave Rajiv a Certificate of conversion. Rajiv was now officially Ahmed.

He had chosen to name himself with the name that Afreen knew of him initially.

Mansoor then took him to the local district court for the next step, to make an affidavit stating that he had converted to Islam on his own free will.

The "Nikah "ceremony took place two days later. It was a simple affair officiated by the Qazi, attended by only 6 people, all from Afreen's side. It marked the official beginning of the married life for Ahmed and Afreen.

The engine of the battered sedan hummed a low, vibrating note that seemed to echo the ache in Adil's chest. Just across the road, the world was alive with light and laughter. The scent of jasmine and heavy rosewater drifted through the open window, riding on the cool night air, mocking him.

Bright, warm string lights draped the facade of the house like a golden net. Guests in silk and brocade floated past the windows, their silhouettes a cruel shadow-play of a life Adil would never touch. Inside, the Nikah was concluding. The vows were being sealed.

Adil's gaze was locked on the upper story window of Afreen's room. In his mind, he could see her. He could see the heavy crimson of her bridal lehenga and the weight of the gold around her neck. His dream hadn't just died tonight, it had been systematically dismantled, piece by piece, by a society that valued lineage over love, and family pride over a quiet unsaid promise

His knuckles turned a bloodless, snowy white. His hand had found its way to the cold, unforgiving steel of the AK-47 resting on the floorboard of the passenger side. The textured grip felt real. Solid. Lethal. Unlike the phantom of the future he had spent years building, this weapon promised an immediate, visceral resolution.

He wanted to tear through that front door. He wanted the shattered glass, the screams, the abrupt halt of the festive music. He wanted them to feel the ragged, suffocating agony that had been clawing at his throat for years. He wanted to make his pain theirs.

Before his fingers could slip to safety, a heavy, warm palm came down over his hand.

Azhar didn't grab the gun. He didn't panic. He simply rested his hand over Adil's, applying a firm, anchoring pressure.

They had been parked under the dying streetlamp for over an hour. Azhar hadn't asked questions when Adil had loaded the rifle into the trunk earlier that evening. He hadn't argued when Adil demanded they drive to the venue. But Azhar knew his friend. He knew that grief, when left to curdle, becomes a poison that consumes the vessel holding it. He had refused to let Adil

make this journey alone, knowing that the thin line between a broken heart and a broken life might be crossed tonight.

"It is bittersweet pain," Azhar murmured, his voice barely a whisper against the hum of the engine. He stared out at the glittering house, his eyes filled with a quiet, ancient sorrow.

"A love that's felt, but all in vain,

A love that's pure, but never returned,

A heart that's broken, but never spurned."

The words hung in the cramped, tense air of the car. They weren't a lecture; they were an epitaph for a ghost. Their love had been a beautiful, doomed thing from the very first day, a fragile flower planted in a war zone. It was never meant to survive the harsh winter of their reality.

"Let's get out of here, Adil," Azhar said softly. He gave Adil's tense hand a gentle, reassuring pat, urging him back from the edge of the abyss.

Adil stared at the warm lights across the street for one last, agonizing second. A sudden burst of laughter echoed from the courtyard, sharp and clear. He closed his eyes, let out a long, shuddering breath that rattled deep in his lungs, and slowly released his grip on the cold metal. The tension drained from his shoulders, leaving behind a hollow, exhausting emptiness.

He opened his eyes, the fire in them replaced by a quiet, tragic clarity.

"Yea," Adil whispered, his voice cracking slightly before settling into a flat, decisive calm. "Let's get out of here."



# Chapter 5

The lawn behind Mansoor Sahib's house was always greener than the rest of Srinagar. It smelled of freshly cut clover, expensive fertilizers, and the unspoken boundaries of society.

"Come!"

Afreen's hand was warm and small in Adil's. Seven year old Adil paused, turning his head back toward the driveway. His father, Rashid, stood beside Mansoor's shiny black sedan, a polishing cloth draped over his forearm. Rashid offered a small, quick nod, a silent command to be polite, to be quiet, to remember where they were.

"Ammi! Can Adil play with us too?" Afreen called out.

Sara Begum smiled down at them, placing a delicate, ringed hand gently on Adil's head. "Of course, sweetheart. Go on, Adil."

In those early years, the divide was invisible to Adil. It existed only as a quiet baseline, his father served Mansoor Sahib, just as his grandfather had served Mansoor Sahib's father. But as the innocence of childhood faded into the sharp awareness of his teens, the geography of his life laid itself bare. Downtown Srinagar, where Adil lived with his parents, with its tight,

decaying alleys and damp rooms, was only four kilometers from Mansoor's sprawling estate.

Yet the distance felt unspannable. Unspannable because social status gaps reflected rigid class where rigid hierarchies and economic inequality prevented upward bridging between different strata

Adil grew to despise the quiet compliance in his father's eyes. Rashid and his grandfather were conformists, men who wore their servitude like a birthmark. Adil felt the shame of it like a cold weight in his chest, a subtle humiliation that ate away at his self worth. He didn't want their quiet life. He wanted to be seen. He wanted to be respected. He wanted to be feared. He wanted, above all else, to stand as an equal before Afreen.

When the Valley fractured into endless cycles of curfews, military patrols, and shutdowns, the rhythm of ordinary life broke down. Schools closed for months on end. The streets became classrooms of a different kind, teaching the youth that anger was the only language that got heard.

For Adil, the street was an equalizer.

By fifteen, he had traded his boyhood insecurity for leadership on the pavement. He became a fixture at the front lines of the clashes near Lal Chowk, a leader among the stone pelters. Stones gave way to slingshots, and slingshots soon gave way to something far more lethal, the Molotov cocktail.

Adil mastered the art of the incendiary bottle. His specific blend of petrol, motor oil, and stuffed rag wicks burned hotter and longer than anyone else's, earning him a dark reputation among the local youth. To the boys in the alleys, he was a hero standing up against authority. To himself, he was finally carving out a name that couldn't be ignored.

Then came the afternoon that destroyed what was left of his home.

During a violent skirmish outside their neighborhood, Adil's seven year old sister, Humaira, stepped onto the balcony to look for him. A stray pellet from a security patrol's shotgun caught her full in the face.

The military personnel themselves rushed the screaming child to the base hospital, where surgeons worked for hours. Mansoor Sahib quietly paid for extra medical supplies. But the damage was done. Humaira was left permanently blind.

The guilt and rage that consumed Adil was absolute. Mansoor's charity felt like an insult, and the military's medical intervention felt like a cruel joke. The remaining light in Adil's world went out with his sister's eyes, replaced by a cold, sharp need for vengeance.

It was during this period of raw, unchanneled fury that Maulana Khursheed Alam Qasim found him.

The firebrand preacher, backed by shadowy networks across the border, spotted Adil's talent immediately. Adil wasn't just another angry teenager; he was a local icon with a tragic story that the media had already broadcast across the country.

Maulana Khursheed reframed Adil's rage. What Adil had viewed as a localized struggle against class and circumstance was reframed into a grand, absolute war, a Jihad.

Three months after meeting the Maulana, Adil hurled a petrol bomb into an army transport vehicle, severely burning a soldier. The retaliation was swift. At seventeen, he was picked up by security forces and disappeared into an "off the books"detention facility meant for hardened insurgents. Because his captors hid his actual age, he was subjected to harsh, unrelenting interrogations.

For five months, Rashid searched frantically, using every connection Mansoor possessed, but the local police were powerless against military intelligence.

Inside the cold concrete cells, Adil's transformation was completed. He shared a cell block with Azhar Hajini, a veteran commander of the Kashmir Liberation Front. Azhar took the battered young man under his wing, treating him not as a prisoner, but as a prodigy. Together, they recited the Quran, debated politics, and forged a brotherhood rooted in ideological certainty.

When Adil was finally released, bruised, skeletal, and silent, his father barely recognized him. Rashid tried to lock him inside, tried to find him menial work, tried to save him. But Adil was already gone.

The new strategy handed to Adil by the Maulana was brutal and systemic, targeting the minority Kashmiri Pandit community to fracture the social fabric of the Valley permanently.

On a foggy Sunday morning in Srinagar, Ratan Kaul, a mild mannered local schoolteacher, walked to the neighborhood bakery to pick up fresh Girda bread for breakfast with his family.

As Kaul stepped out into the biting morning chill, his breath blooming white, a matte black sedan slid up silently beside him, cutting through the frost. Three men spilled out in a synchronized blur. Before the paralyzed onlookers or the old baker could even register the shift in the air, a heavy, grease-slicked cloth was shoved down Kaul's throat, choking back his scream. Heavy hands seized him by the limbs, bones cracking against the cold pavement as they hauled him, and slammed him into the back seat. Adil sat behind the wheel, eyes dead in the rearview mirror, tapping his fingers in rhythm.

The rear doors slammed shut. The entire abduction took less than forty seconds.

Two weeks later, Kaul's remains were discovered dangling from the limb of a chinar tree in the center of the public park.

The torture had been methodical, designed for horror. His fingers had been peeled back to the bone, the fingernails ripped out and replaced with rusted iron nails driven into the quick. Deep, jagged gashes crisscrossed his chest, not meant to kill him quickly, but carved just shallow enough to keep him awake as his own blood pooled around his feet. His eye sockets were empty, dark hollows staring back at a horrified crowd, and his tongue had been severed and pinned to his throat with a crude handwritten note.

The air around the park reeked of copper and decay.

The KLF proudly claimed responsibility for the atrocity, painting their insignia in Kaul's blood across the tree trunk. Accompanying the brutal display was a chilling seven day ultimatum, Leave the Valley, or every house will have its own hanging tree.

Panic didn't just spread, it mutated into a frantic, hysterical fever. Within forty eight hours, the roads out of the Valley were choked with families fleeing in the dead of night, leaving behind warm teacups and lit stoves in a desperate bid to outrun the bloody shadows.

With his name now at the very top of the intelligence red list, Adil slipped across the Line of Control into Pakistan Administered Kashmir. For six months in the mountain camps, he exchanged homemade incendiaries for assault rifles, tactical navigation, and explosives training. He returned not as a street protester, but as an operative with resources, money, and men at his disposal.

Adil's crowning operation had been conceived in the air conditioned war rooms across the border, but its success rested entirely on his own jagged, cold adaptability.

When heightened airport security in Srinagar threatened to choke the plan before it could breathe, Adil didn't panic; he pivoted. He and three operatives drove in grueling, silent shifts across the state border to Pathankot. They butchered a local driver for his sedan, donned immaculate, stolen suits, and slipped onto an Indian Airlines flight departing from Chandigarh to Delhi, passing effortlessly through security checkpoints that were far too relaxed to catch men with blood under their fingernails.

Thirty minutes into the flight, the illusion of safety shattered.

Adil stood up in the aisle, drawing a concealed, heavy gauge pistol. Before the flight attendant could scream, he grabbed her by the hair, yanked her head back, and slammed the butt of his gun into her face with a sickening, wet crunch of shattered nose and bone. Blood sprayed across the pristine white bulkhead. Moving with lethal efficiency, his men secured the cabin with box cutters and grenades, forcing their way into the cockpit.

Adil pressed the warm, grease-smeared barrel of his gun against the captain's temple, feeling the man's pulse hammering violently beneath his skin. "Lahore," Adil whispered, his voice dead of all human warmth. "Or I repaint this windshield with your brain matter."

Diverted to Pakistan, the plane sat baking on the sun-scorched tarmac of Lahore Airport. Their demand was absolute: the immediate release of four top militants held in Indian prisons, including Adil's mentor, Azhar Hajini.

When Indian negotiators stalled, Adil decided to break the deadlock with a bloodbath.

He dragged two male hostages into the doorway of the aircraft. As the terrified passengers watched in frozen horror, Adil forced the first man to his knees. Without a word of hesitation or a flicker of emotion, he pressed the barrel to the back of the man's neck and pulled the trigger. The gunshot erupted like thunder in the pressurized cabin. Brain tissue, bone fragments, and thick blood painted the open doorway and soaked the top of the airstairs. Before the second man could even scream, Adil's operative cut his throat from ear to ear, letting him drown in his own arterial blood before shoving both convulsing, ruined bodies out into the blinding light, where they crumpled onto the scalding tarmac below.

The message was delivered in bone and copper.

Panic broke the diplomatic deadlock. High stakes international negotiations buckled under the threat of a full cabin massacre. The Indian government conceded; the four prisoners were flown directly to Lahore. While Pakistani officials staged a theatrical, public denial of safe haven for the cameras, intelligence handlers quietly escorted Adil, his men, and the released commanders into a fleet of tinted SUVs, disappearing them into the shadowy network of safehouses waiting in the Punjab heartland.

The mug of tea slipped from Afreen's fingers, shattering against the hardwood floor. Hot liquid splashed across her ankles, but she didn't feel the burn. All warmth had evacuated her body the second the news ticker flashed crimson across the television screen: LAHORE HIJACK: ARCH-STRATEGIST IDENTIFIED.

There, right beneath the word TERRORIST, was the face of the only boy who had ever truly been her only childhood companion.

The news anchor's voice faded into a deafening, metallic ring. Afreen stared at the screen, her heart hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird. The man in the military dossier photograph was hardened, his skin weathered, his jaw set in a permanent, ruthless line. His eyes, once warm, deep pools that held a quiet, unspoken tenderness, were dead. Blank. Stripped of all humanity.

Adil.

A sob caught in her throat, raw and suffocating. Her mind fractured, violently pulling her out of her quiet New Delhi apartment and hurling her back into the sun drenched, rose-scented garden of her youth in Srinagar.

She saw him as he used to be. Fourteen, wearing a faded wool pheran, standing by the edge of her father's lush lawn. He had been a servant's son, forbidden from stepping onto the manicured grass, yet he had held himself with a soft, natural grace. She remembered the secret glances shared over tea trays, the way his hands would tremble slightly whenever their fingers accidentally brushed, and the quiet, breathtaking smile he reserved only for her when no one else was looking.

She had often thought of him as her first love. But then brushed the thought aside, taking it as a childhood crush. Silently. Secretly. Almost guiltily, she had thought about him. In a world bound by class, caste, and rigid family pride, her affection for Adil had been her most dangerous, sacred truth. She had dreamed about him, with the soft innocence of a young girl.

And now, the boy who used to gently rescue trapped butterflies from her window sill was the monster who had carved men to pieces and ordered executions on a scorching airport tarmac.

"Intelligence sources confirm Adil as the mastermind behind the Kashmir terror cell..."

The anchor's words were daggers. The tragedy hit her not just as a shock, but as a devastating, irreparable grief. She realized with horrifying clarity that the gentle boy she adored hadn't just vanished, he had been slowly, systematically destroyed by the very world. The cruelty, the constant humiliation, the systemic weight of being invisible had twisted his devotion into a dark, toxic ambition.

He hadn't just become a militant to wage a war, he had burned his own soul to ashes so that he could never be looked down upon again.

"What did they do to you?" she whispered to the empty room, tears finally breaking free and spilling hot down her cheeks. "What did you let them turn you into?"

She collapsed to her knees amidst the sharp ceramic shards and spilled tea, clutching her chest as if trying to hold her shattering heart together. The shy, sweet boy she knew was dead, buried beneath layers of blood, hatred, and gunpowder. In his place stood a phantom feared by millions, a man who had brought a nation to its knees just to scream to the world, and to her, that he was no longer a shadow.



# Chapter 6

What are you saying? How do you know all this?"

Afreen's voice was barely a whisper, yet it felt heavy, vibrating with a sudden, suffocating dread. Her eyes widened, losing their focus as she stared blankly at Nilofer. The familiar walls of her living room seemed to tilt, the cozy sanctuary suddenly feeling like an interrogation chamber.

Nilofer shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, her expression a fragile mask of embarrassment and pity. She reached out, her fingers twitching before she spoke. "I know it's hard to believe, Afreen. It came as a shock for me too. I didn't believe it the first time I saw them together. I truly didn't."

She paused, looking down at her own lap before forcing herself to meet Afreen's frozen gaze. "I thought they were just colleagues. I told myself it was perfectly fine for them to sit in a restaurant, have a cup of coffee, and discuss work. But trust me... they are always together. I've heard the whispers echoing in the office corridors. This has been happening for over a year now."

Nilofer swallowed hard, the weight of the confession hanging heavily between them. "I chose not to tell you. I kept quiet because I knew how much it would hurt you. But today, I decided enough

was enough. You had to know. You couldn't keep living in the dark."

Afreen sat entirely paralyzed. The words washed over her, but her mind refused to process their full, devastating weight. Silence stretched across the room, thick and suffocating. She didn't know what to say. She didn't even know what to feel.

"Listen," Nilofer said gently, breaking the quiet. "You don't need to be rash about anything. Why don't you investigate a bit on your own level before you confront him?"

"How do I do that?" Afreen's voice cracked, the shock finally giving way to a frantic, disorganized panic. "You mean I need to follow him? Make enquiries about this in his office? What do you think I should do?"

"Yes! Why not?" Nilofer countered, her tone sharpening with a sudden surge of protective energy. "You can absolutely do that. Hey, look at me. You are not alone in this. I'll come with you. I won't let you go through this by yourself."

Looking down, Afreen's blurred vision settled on Zain. The three-month-old was lying quietly in her lap, his tiny fingers curled inward. He was looking up at her with wide, unblinking eyes, completely attuned to the sudden shift in his mother's energy.

A single, hot tear escaped Afreen's eye, tracing a slow path down her cheek before falling directly onto Zain's soft face.

The infant startled slightly at the sudden warmth. His small brow furrowed, his dark eyes probing Afreen's face with a devastating innocence, as if silently asking, What's wrong, Mama?

The sight broke something deep inside her. Nilofer gently placed her hand over Afreen's trembling fingers, trying to anchor her, to calm the storm brewing beneath the surface.

"Where's Sada?" Nilofer asked softly, looking around the quiet house.

"She's in the backyard... with Rashid Chacha," Afreen murmured mechanically.

Sada, at three years old, was old enough to sense tension. Zain, at just three months, was entirely dependent on the fragile peace of his mother's arms. The contrast between her children's innocence and the betrayal she was facing felt like a physical blow.

"I need to discuss it with Papa," Afreen said suddenly, desperate for the shielding comfort of her father's wisdom.

"I don't think that'll be wise just yet," Nilofer cautioned immediately, her brow knitting together. "Maybe it's not as serious as it looks. Maybe it's just... sort of a fling for him. You need to confront him at your own level first. Try to find out exactly what's happening straight from the horse's mouth."

"But Papa has to know," Afreen insisted, her voice small.

"Yes, he has to, but not right now. Not until he has explained himself to you. Not until you are absolutely sure about what you want to do next."

Afreen let out a long, ragged breath, staring at the floor. The logic was cold, but it made sense. "Hmm. I think you are right." A sudden spark of resolve flared through the numbness. "But I want to see it with my own eyes first. Then I'll confront him."

A visible wave of relief washed over Nilofer's face, her shoulders dropping. "Of course."

"What time do they usually go out?" Afreen asked. She kept her eyes fixed on Zain, purposefully avoiding Nilofer's gaze, as if speaking the words out loud made the nightmare too real.

"Around lunchtime," Nilofer replied quietly. "And then after office hours, too. They leave the building together and head somewhere."

"He comes home around nine o'clock daily," Afreen whispered, calculating the missing hours in her head. The math was simple, yet entirely devastating.

"The office is over by six o'clock, Afreen," Nilofer said, laying the final piece of the puzzle into place. Three hours. Every single day.

Afreen tightened her grip on her son, her jaw setting. The grief was still there, but a cold, hard determination was beginning to take its place.

"We'll go and wait outside his office tomorrow at six o'clock, then."

"Okay. I'll come to pick you up," Nilofer agreed instantly. "You can bring Zain along in the car. Sada can stay back here with Mansoor Uncle."

"Sounds alright," Afreen said, her voice steadying. "Yeah. Let's do it tomorrow."

Lifting her head, Afreen looked straight into Nilofer's eyes. The blank, shocked stare was gone, replaced by the terrifying clarity of a woman whose world had just been set on fire, and who was ready to walk into the flames to find the truth.

The five years of marriage to Ahmed had been a relentless series of trial and toll for Afreen.

Against the odds, she had poured her sweat into setting up her salon, and through pure grit, it had finally begun to thrive. But life rarely moves in a single direction. Just a year after their wedding, she found herself pregnant with their first child, throwing her into an exhausting juggling act. Balancing the

grueling demands of a growing business with the round the clock duties of motherhood became an uphill battle, one she largely fought alone.

Ahmed was rarely there. For the entire first year, he had been unemployed, floating without direction. It was Afreen's father, Mansoor, who finally pulled the levers to land him a position at Aircel, a cell phone company newly expanding its footprint into Kashmir. Mansoor's childhood friend had been appointed as the regional manager, and after a personal plea, he agreed to adjust his son in law into the marketing team.

Because the branch was fresh and aggressively expanding, the job demanded endless hours. Early mornings vanished into late nights, and Ahmed's absence quickly settled into a cold daily routine.

Then, while Afreen was already drowning in work and domestic responsibility, the second pregnancy came.

To make matters heavier, the shadow of her father's failing health hung constantly over her head.

A year prior, while traveling for business in Chandigarh, Mansoor had suffered a mild heart attack. A friend had rushed him to a private hospital where an emergency angiography revealed two severely blocked arteries, requiring immediate angioplasty and two stents. The cardiologist's directives were stern, absolute dietary control, regular light exercise, a sharp reduction in work, and above all, zero stress.

That diagnosis was the sole reason Afreen had kept her current suspicions locked away inside her. She couldn't risk telling him, not until she had undeniable proof.

Marrying Ahmed had been her choice, and her father had championed it. Mansoor had stood by her side despite bitter resistance from their family and community. His only sister,

Afreen's Phuphi jaan, had been so incensed by the union that she cut ties, leaving their relationship strained and cold ever since.

Over time, Ahmed's behavior had drifted from distant to alien. Deep down, Afreen felt the shift, a subtle, growing fracture in their bond. She tried to rationalize it. She was consumed by her salon and the kids, he was buried under corporate pressure. People change, she told herself. Priorities shift. She knew that maintaining intimacy required effort they simply hadn't had the bandwidth to give. Yet, even in her darkest thoughts, she had never imagined that the distance between them would lead him into another woman's arms.

Now, standing near her house's parking area with baby Zain heavy in her arms, Afreen's nerves felt stretched to the point of snapping. The air was thick with a terrifying uncertainty. Nilofer was due any second.

To spare her father the strain, Afreen had told him she was just stepping out with Nilofer for some quick errands. Gratefully, Mansoor had insisted on keeping little Sada at home with him, leaving her to handle only the baby.

Nilofer pulled up right on time. They loaded into the car, and the five kilometer drive toward the Aircel regional office began. Neither spoke. The silence inside the cabin was heavy, suffocating.

Afreen hadn't slept a wink. The agony of suspicion was worse than any truth could be; at least the truth promised closure. It would give her a floor to stand on, a point from which she could finally decide her next move. No more waiting. No more living in the dark. She needed to look Ahmed in the eye and confront him head on.

The fifteen minute drive stretched out like an eternity.

When they arrived, Nilofer smoothly slid her car into an open spot across the street from the office, sandwiched between two parked sedans. It was a calculated choice. Ahmed knew the car well, Nilofer was Afreen's friend, but she also worked for Aircel, stationed at an outpost in Sumbal, fourteen kilometers outside Srinagar. She frequented the main branch often enough that even if Ahmed happened to spot her car from a window, he would assume it was just a routine work visit.

Sitting motionless in the passenger seat, Afreen felt her world shrink to the narrow boundaries of the car window. The walls of reality seemed to press inward, the air turning thick and asphyxiating with an overwhelming dread. Every breath caught jagged in her throat, a sharp reminder of whatever revelation waited just across the road.

And then came the pounding in her chest, not a steady rhythm, but a wild, erratic drum beating against her ribs. Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird against a cage, its terrifying crescendo echoing in her ears as she stared at the office entrance, waiting for the truth to walk out.

Then she saw him ….him and her. He was leading the way and she followed suit. Her head bowed. Straight towards a car, parked just opposite to where both Nilofer and she had been sitting in their car.

She was wearing huge shades, which seemed to cover practically her entire face. It's the distance maybe, Afreen thought. She could feel the bile rising in her throat. A feeling of intense anger combined with frustration was overwhelming her.

She wanted to get out of Nilofer's car immediately and walk towards them. Perhaps that' ll save Ahmed, and herself from the imminent embarrassment that she could clearly visualize now.

But she stopped herself. She wanted to witness the entire naked dance of shamelessness. Ahmed had intentionally disrespected the social norms. He had disrespected their marriage. He had broken her trust. The brazen audacity, the impudent display, and the unabashed spectacle were all his doing. Let him face the music now.

Afreen's jaw tightened and she decided to wait.

What's her name? Did you tell me? Afreen suddenly looked towards Nilofer and asked.

No I didn't tell you and you didn't ask?

I was in fact wondering why haven't you asked?

Knowing her name would have given her an identity. A nameless, faceless hypothetical intruder is so much easier to deal with. That intruder might just disappear one day with no traces of leaving behind painful memories at a later stage when this is all over.

Afreen was hoping that not knowing her would somehow help her cope with Ahmed's adulterous behaviour. In reality she knew that she was just trying to brush off the whole thing under the carpet. She was trying hard to undermine her own reality, just like a person who banishes all his problems to an elephant graveyard where they fester and wait to resurrect.

What's her name? Asked Afreen.

Sneha Razdan

She is from Jammu, posted here, and lives alone. Her family is in Jammu.

A Hindu!! said Afreen taking a deep breath

A Kashmiri Pandit.. Elaborated Nilofer.

So he is going back to his roots.. Said Afreen with a resigned smile on her face.

Have you heard about the Similarity-Attraction theory Nilofer?

No I haven't, but I can make out what you are trying to imply

That's exactly what it is. In spite of me, my father, our community giving everything to Ahmed, he still remains Rajiv at heart.

Do you think that this is because of the psychological comfort that he is getting in being with a person who has a similar belief system as the one that he was raised in ? Maybe he hasn't accepted us at all and now feels that he has made a mistake.

Maybe it not that complex

Maybe his hormones are leading him on and like most men he seeks variety.

Maybe it's just sex.

Nilofer did not reply, she had been following the car from a distance.

I think they have arrived. They are parking the car…. Nilofer glanced at Afreen and pulled over beside a tree, just round the corner from the place where Ahmed had just parked Sneha's car.

Afreen watched Sneha come out of the car and enter the house. Ahmed was still inside the car.

“ Please don’t get out of the car Ahmed. Please stay where you are. Maybe this girl wanted something from her house and you just accompanied her like a true gentleman and good colleague. She'll come out and then you'll leave. Go towards your office, drop her, pick your car and drive home. “ I am waiting for

you at home Ahmed, your kids are waiting for you at home. Just don't get out of the car and follow her inside " Afreen had closed her eyes and was praying quietly now.

"There he goes !.." said Nilofer, almost whispering. "Their standard Modus Operandi."

Sorry Afreen! But I followed them before as well. Only when I was sure, I decided to disclose the whole matter to you.

Don't jump out of the car as yet. Wait for ten minutes. Then go inside. I'll come with you if you want.

Ahmed had waited for a good three to four minutes before he too alighted and followed her inside.

No! You stay here. I'll take Zain.

Ok as you wish, I am right here in the car.. Said Nilofer

Afreen waited for a full ten minutes before getting out of the car. With Zain in her arms, Afreen crossed over the road divider and entered the main gate of the house where the two of them had gone inside

The main door of the house was open, leading to a main hall. There was a door just ahead and one door on the left. A stairway on the right side of the hall was leading to the first floor. Afreen hesitated. She didn't know what to do. Which door to knock. There was a doorbell but she didn't want to alert the whole house.

She decided to walk over to the main door right ahead of her and knocked it softly.

No one answered. She knocked again with a heavier hand this time.

She could hear some activity, some movement, then the latch was opened and an old lady peeped out.

Assalam alaikum! Does Sneha live here?"

“Namaste,” the old woman replied, her voice dry as crackling leaves.

She squinted at Afreen, her eyes narrowing with sharp suspicion as she took in the stranger on her doorstep. But as her gaze drifted down to the small, breathing bundle cradled tightly in Afreen’s arms, the hard lines around her mouth softened, just a fraction.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Afreen. A friend of Sneha’s,” Afreen lied smoothly, her chest tightening. “She gave me this address. Is she in?”

Without a word, the landlady gestured toward a dark wooden door tucked into the far left corner of the hall, the very door Afreen’s eyes had gravitated toward the moment she walked in.

“She lives there. She’s my tenant,” the old woman said, taking a slow step forward. “I’ll knock for you. Wait ”

“No, no, Aunty ji! Please, don’t bother,” Afreen interrupted quickly, forcing a light, breathy chuckle. “You go back inside. I… I wanted to surprise her.”

The old woman stopped dead in her tracks. Her sharp eyes darted across Afreen’s face, reading the slight tremor in her smile. Slowly, she turned and retraced her steps, but instead of retreating into her own quarters, she stood rooted at her doorway, watching Afreen like a hawk guarding its nest.

Afreen offered her another polite smile and turned toward the left door. Each step felt heavy, like dragging iron chains across the floorboards. Halfway there, she cast a glance over her shoulder.

“Thank you, Aunty. You really don't have to wait up.”

The landlady didn't smile back. She remained motionless, a silent shadow leaning against the doorframe, her stubborn silence speaking volumes. She knows, Afreen thought. She senses something is deeply wrong.

Standing right in front of the door, Afreen froze. Her hand hovered an inch above the wood.

If I knock, what then?

The door would open. He would stand there, shocked. Sneha would peek over his shoulder. A loud, ugly screaming match would erupt right here in this dim hallway. She would create a cheap spectacle for the neighbors, humiliating herself, that girl, and Ahmed.

Worse yet, catching them red handed solved nothing. It would only unleash a firestorm of drama that her fragile world couldn't withstand. Her mind flashed to her father, his frail heart, his labored breathing. A scandal like this would destroy him. He was the only person in this world who genuinely, unconditionally loved her. She couldn't lose him. She wouldn't sacrifice his life for a moment of vengeful satisfaction.

Afreen took a deep, shaky breath, lowered her hand, and turned back to the old woman.

She walked up to the landlady, the mask of the polite visitor completely slipping away.

“Aunty ji,” Afreen whispered, her voice trembling slightly. “There is a man in that room with your tenant.”

The old woman didn't blink.

“When he comes out,” Afreen continued, holding the woman’s piercing gaze, “just tell him that Afreen was here with Zain. Tell him I didn't knock because I didn't want to disturb him. And please… make sure your tenant hears every single word.”

Silence hung heavy between them. The landlady slowly nodded, her stern facade melting into a quiet, solemn understanding. She didn't ask questions. She didn't need to, the raw, suffocating pain radiating from Afreen's eyes and hollow voice spoke louder than any explanation ever could.

Afreen turned on her heel and walked out, step by heavy step, stepping into the glaring daylight outside.

She reached Nilofer's parked car, pulled the heavy door open, and collapsed into the passenger seat, sinking as low as she could.

Nilofer glanced over, her hands tightening on the steering wheel. "Is it done?"

"Yes," Afreen gasped out. The word barely carried any sound, less like a voice, and more like the desperate final exhale of a drowning woman. "It's done."



# Chapter 7

Azhar paced the length of the claustrophobic room, the floorboards groaning under his weight like a death rattle. He stopped dead, turning sharply toward Adil, who sat enveloped in the shadows, unmoving, unreadable, a carved monument of cold intent.

"I can't find the damn logic in any of this," Azhar snapped, his voice a volatile mix of exasperation and raw bewilderment. "What are you gaining? What's the endgame of keeping her under round-the-clock surveillance?"

Adil didn't even blink. His silence was an oxygen-thief, only stoking Azhar's agitation.

"It's obvious her world is burning down!" Azhar pressed, leaning into the gloom. "Her husband. a former Kafir, is screwing around behind her back. But where the hell do you fit into this picture? Make me understand, Adil. Give me something."

Azhar searched his face, desperate for a tactical justification, a ruthless counter logic, anything that fit the icy commander he had built. But Adil's expression remained an impenetrable vault.

"I don't expect you to understand anything," Adil said softly.

There was no heat in the words, no defense. Just a terrifying void of emotion that made Azhar's blood run cold.

Azhar's posture crumbled. His mouth drawn down, eyes widening, he looked at the monster he had helped create, now paralyzed by the ghost of a woman. He threw his hands up, a total, desperate surrender.

"Ashiqui is beyond logic, I suppose."

Adil offered no rebuttal. His gaze drifted back to the single candle trembling on the table. Explaining the labyrinth of his mind to Azhar was like trying to explain color to the blind. How could he describe the ghost-scent of a lost life? The subterranean, tragic bond that had devoured him from the inside out?

From the very first day, his obsession with Afreen had acted like a slow acting neurotoxin on his psyche. But somewhere in the dark, the grief had mutated. He had learned to crave the agony. For Adil, this sharp, relentless ache was the only anchor keeping him tethered to reality, the sole proof that his soul wasn't entirely ash. The suffering was love.

He had nurtured the pain until it twisted into an exquisite, sickening pleasure. In his quietest hours, he felt a dark kinship with an alcoholic. A man who knows the liquid in his glass is poison, designed to destroy him, yet reaches for it anyway, begging for the fleeting euphoria of the burn.

Adil had never touched liquor, it was Haram, a defilement of the flesh. But he had drowned in love, and he knew with terrifying certainty that it was far more addictive, and far more lethal, than any wine.

"So what now?" Azhar asked, stripping the emotion from his voice, desperately trying to drag the conversation back to hard logistics. "What's the play? The bastard is leading her on, and she knows it. Khurram confirmed she actually tracked him down, followed him right to the safehouse he uses with that girl."

Azhar stepped closer, his analytical mind mapping out operational solutions to a domestic parasite.

"If you want, I can handle the girl. She's a Kafir. The landlady's a Kafir too. They have no standing here, no protection." Azhar's eyes narrowed to cruel slits. "Or... we snatch this Ahmed. Give him a thrashing he won't survive without a limp. We don't bring your name into it, or Afreen's. We just remind him where he is, and that his little game is anti Islamic. That'll scare him straight overnight."

Azhar exhaled heavily, running a calloused hand through his beard. "Whatever you decide, Adil. Let's just bleed this dry and move on. We have more pressing issues at hand."

The air in the room plummeted into sub zero territory.

Adil's eyes snapped from the candle flare, locking onto Azhar with predatory precision. The atmosphere thickened, suddenly starved of oxygen.

"I don't think I have ever overlooked a pressing issue, Azhar bhai," Adil purred. The voice was soft, barely a whisper, but it carried the weight of a drawn blade. "If I have... by all means, enlighten me."

Azhar froze. The words hovered between them, razor sharp. He tried to hold the younger man's gaze, but the sheer, void-like intensity behind Adil's eyes forced him to look away, his pulse hammering against his ribs. He couldn't muster the nerve to face the nightmare he had nurtured.

Years ago, Adil had been nothing more than Azhar's protege, a street kid scraped out of the gutter and taught the cold mechanics of rebellion. But the student had long since butchered the master's legacy. Adil hadn't just risen through the ranks of the Kashmiri insurgency through sheer violence; he had climbed on

a ladder of terrifying, clinical intellect. He hadn't just played the game.

He had rewritten the playbook in blood.

Adil had operationalized a new method to terrorism, earning a fearsome reputation for "Lone Wolf" attacks. Where older commanders relied on large, clunky cells, Adil's operations were lethal, localized, and executed with absolute precision.

Long ago, Adil had visualized the fatal flaw of the old ways. The success of the state's security forces almost always depended on the faltering of a single team member. The more moving parts in a conspiracy, the higher the mathematical probability of a mistake, a leak, or a betrayal.

To eliminate the variable of human weakness, Adil became the flag bearer of combining radicalization with solitary execution. Just as the Maulana had once picked a broken, angry Adil off the streets, Adil now hunted for a very specific type of recruit. He zeroed in on individuals fractured by personal grievances, men who had suffered devastating past tragedies.

Adil didn't need to build soldiers, he just needed to find people who were already ticking time bombs. Their personal trauma made them fiercely self-motivated, willing to go to any lengths because they felt they had already lost everything.

With no external support networks to intercept, no digital footprint, and no complex plans to overhear, these "Lone Wolves" proved to be entirely invisible to intelligence agencies until they struck. They were deadly, unpredictable, and devastatingly effective.

Adil's role was simple yet profound. He would adopt these broken boys, provide them with rudimentary but lethal training in explosive handling and firearms, and set them on their designated paths. He gave them a purpose wrapped in sacred

rhetoric, promising them that if they attained Martyrdom, their families would be taken care of forever.

It was a hollow promise of survival. Adil knew, as he watched them walk away into the Kashmiri mist, that these boys rarely, if ever, made it back alive.

And as he turned his mind back to Afreen, he realized he was using the exact same clinical precision to dismantle his own soul.

The midday chill of the valley seemed to seep through the heavy wooden window frames, but inside, the air was thick with the aroma of cardamoms and steam. Azhar poured himself another cup of Noon chai from the copper samovar, the liquid a pale, comforting pink. He poured it into a khos, a delicate, handleless porcelain cup that felt fragile against his calloused hands. This was his fourth cup since the morning light had broken over the mountains. He loved the salty, traditional tea, it was perhaps the only familiar comfort left in a world that was rapidly shifting beneath their feet.

Holding the warm porcelain, Azhar walked over and sat down cross-legged beside Adil on the dastarkhan. The white cloth spread across the rug was bare, save for a few crumbs of local bread.

"Our coffers are drying up, Adil," Azhar said, his voice low, barely carrying over the faint hiss of the embers. He took a slow sip, letting the salt linger on his tongue. "We have to do something to remain relevant. The old goat Maulana has lost his fire. We can't depend on him anymore."

Adil didn't look up immediately. He was staring at the floorboards, his posture relaxed but his mind clearly working at a furious pace.

Azhar leaned in closer, bitterness sharpening his tone. "The rascal has sent both his sons to settle down in London. It's an open

secret that he was diverting half of the money to Vilayat that the KLF received from the ISI. He was siphoning off the organization slowly this whole time. I heard he is planning to leave soon to London himself, with his wife and daughter."

"You think I don't know about all this, Azhar bhai?" Adil's voice was remarkably calm, devoid of the anger that choked Azhar. "The ISI is back to playing its dirty game of use and throw. Where do you think all of a sudden Hizbul Mujahideen cropped up from?"

Adil shifted his weight, his eyes finally meeting Azhar's. "I met Brigadier Kamran Bajwa in Muzaffarabad six months back. He very clearly said that the Pakistani Army and the ISI are not very keen to keep supporting us financially and materially till we change our basic policy of demanding an independent Kashmir. They have, in fact, started to view us as an obstacle in their path."

Azhar's brows furrowed slightly. He tilted his head to one side, heeding every syllable, the khos forgotten in his lap.

"Out of nowhere they have brought in Maqbool Butt and his Hizbul Mujahideen," Adil continued, his tone chillingly analytical. "All of a sudden, the demand for an independent Kashmir has taken a backseat. Hizbul is now clearly stating that they want a Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. So it's obvious that's where the funds will flow."

"So what do you think we should do now?" Azhar asked, the weight of their isolation pressing down on him.

"We stay relevant!" Adil said, the words striking the room with a tone of absolute finality. "They closed one door on us, we will open another one. We should be clear about one thing though, we cannot depend on anyone. The ISI supported us till we served their purpose. The moment they got an option that

suited their plans, they switched over. We have to show the ISI that we have options too."

Azhar stared at him, skeptical. "What options are you exactly referring to here?"

Adil looked at Azhar and gave him the expression he was famous for, the Mona Lisa smile. It wasn't an overt parting of the lips, it was a subtle shift in the muscles of his face, a shadow of amusement that the other person could sense rather than see. In truth, no one in the underground network had ever seen Adil truly laugh or smile. It was the face of a man who lived entirely behind his own eyes.

"Al Qaeda," Adil said, the name dropping like a heavy stone.

Azhar stiffened, but Adil kept going, the momentum of his strategy taking over. "Hizbul has recruited around three hundred boys from the valley and sent them over to Muzaffarabad for armed training. For the youth, it's no longer about the independence of Kashmir. That no longer motivates them. They are taking it as an employment opportunity. The lure of money is enough for them. The reason I changed our strategy to lone wolf attacks recently was out of sheer compulsion, Azhar bhai. Hizbul is flush with financial support from the ISI, while we are running on fumes."

Adil leaned forward, his eyes boring into Azhar's. "Al Qaeda has been looking to make a foray into Kashmir for a while now. They need a base here. Financial support is not a problem for them. With Saudi and Qatari money muscles behind Al Qaeda, our problems will be solved. And unlike Maulana, we are not going to use the money for our own pleasure. We need the money to buy sophisticated munitions, buy off informers inside the state police, and distribute resources to the local population who are our first line of defense. In short, we need the money to survive."

Azhar swallowed hard, the implications crashing over him. "So... we need to break away from Maulana?"

"Not just break away," Adil corrected coldly. "We need to take care of him. He knows everything about us. Once Al Qaeda comes into the picture, Maulana Sahab is bound to feel offended. He'll either give us up to the security forces, or he'll ask his friends in the ISI to contain us through Hizbul. It's a turf war now, Azhar bhai. We need a stronger player on our side, or we become that stronger side. If we are backed by Al Qaeda, Hizbul or the ISI cannot dare to touch us."

Adil stood up, pacing the small expanse of the dastarkhan. "Al Qaeda wants an independent Kashmir, and the ISI doesn't want that. We are not choosing a side; the side has chosen us. Look at what Hizbul is doing. The Hizbul Mujahideen has been targeting Kashmiri Muslim police officers. They have killed around fifteen of them in the past four months. We will make this a point of contention, Azhar Bhai."

He paused, looking out the narrow window. "Our stand will be that no harm should come to any Kashmiri Muslim, even if they are police officers. Our fight is strictly against the Indian security forces. Maulana Sahab is now discreetly backing Hizbul's policy of targeting local policemen. His team of over-ground workers are giving tactical advantage to Hizbul. We have to take out Maulana with Al Qaeda's blessings."

"Take him out?" Azhar whispered.

"Think about it," Adil said, turning around. "This will serve many purposes. First, it will announce the official arrival of Al Qaeda in Kashmir. Second, the local population will rally to our cause because we are protecting their sons in the police. Thirdly, Hizbul and the ISI will think a thousand times before they make any plans to retaliate against an Al Qaeda franchise. And fourthly, the State Police will start looking towards us sympathetically."

Azhar rubbed his forehead, his mind racing through the dangerous labyrinth Adil had constructed. "This is a very dangerous plot, Adil..."

"Yes, it's dangerous, but it's well thought out, Azhar Bhai, so don't worry," Adil replied, his confidence unshakeable. "The ISI is on the verge of finishing off the KLF with Maulana Sahab's help. What they don't know is that they'll have to deal with a far superior adversary now."

Azhar nodded slowly, remembering the recent casualties. "Seven of our operatives have been killed by the security forces in the last one month alone. The finger of suspicion is already being pointed at Maulana."

"Yes! You are right," Adil seized on the point, his eyes gleaming. "People are already suspecting him of being an informer. We will assassinate him tomorrow and issue a statement in the name of Al Qaeda that Maulana was colluding with the security forces and died a traitor's death. We'll approach Al Qaeda through someone I know, this man is supposed to be the 'Ear' of Al Qaeda in Kashmir. This will mark the official arrival of the network here."

Azhar set his empty khos down on the white cloth, looking up at the young strategist who had just rewritten their entire destiny over a cup of tea.

"So what's the plan now?" Azhar asked, a tense resignation settling into his bones. "How do we do this? You must have it all planned out by now."

Adil looked at him, that unreadable, phantom smile returning to his face.

"Of course," Adil murmured, his voice dropping to a whisper that sealed the old man's fate. "You'll see what happens tomorrow, Azhar Bhai."

The crisp morning air of the Kashmir Valley did not merely hold the chill of the mountains; it carried the weight of a quiet, brewing storm. For Adil, there was never any chaos without calculation. Madness, when weaponized correctly, became a meticulous science.

His latest instrument was Irfan Karra.

At nineteen, the boy from Baramulla was a blank slate written upon by decades of smoke, stone-pelting, and sirens. Like thousands of his peers, Irfan's geography was his prison and his purpose; he had never seen the world beyond the jagged peaks that rimmed the valley. He had grown up under the heavy, suffocating blanket of a perpetual security presence. To him, the uniforms were not protectors; they were the architects of his anger. When Adil and Azhar spoke of war against the "occupiers," it didn't sound like radicalism to Irfan, it sounded like the only logical conclusion to his existence.

The bond was sealed not with words, but with Bayat. The ancient oath of allegiance bound Irfan's will to Adil's command. In the secularized, consumer-driven West, the raw, mobilizing power of absolute faith might have been dismissed as an archaic relic. But here, in the fertile soil of historical resentment and religious devotion, it flourished. Irfan didn't just offer his life; he surrendered his autonomy.

The Friday Fajr prayers at the historic Jama Masjid in Srinagar's Nowhatta locality always carried a distinct solemnity. As the first light of dawn struggled against the night sky, the grand mosque exhaled its worshippers into the courtyard.

It was roughly 6:15 AM when Maulana Khursheed Alam Qasim stepped out into the crisp air. Around him, the mosque grounds buzzed with the quiet, routine rhythms of the faithful, some lingered by the fountains for ablutions, others exchanged

whispered greetings. It was an atmosphere of peaceful reflection, a fragile sanctuary from the politics outside.

The Maulana, a towering figure in the community, nodded graciously to the congregants who cleared a path for him. He walked toward his vehicle, flanked by two private security guards who would follow him in a secondary escort car.

Usually, the routine was rigid: prayers, a direct drive home, and the safety of his compound. But today, the script changed. Waiting in the passenger seat of his sedan was his twenty-year-old daughter. She had bypassed her usual morning routine to join him, eager for a rare, quiet walk through the terraced lawns of Nishant Bagh.

As the driver shifted the car into gear, they bypassed the familiar route home, turning instead toward the famous Mughal garden.

They did not notice the sedan that slipped into the sparse morning traffic behind them, maintaining a disciplined distance just past the bumper of their security escort.

The twelve-kilometer stretch from Nowhatta to Nishant Bagh was eerily desolate. The empty roads allowed the two-car convoy to cut through the morning mist with ease, reaching the outskirts of the gardens in barely twenty minutes.

The driver slowed, turning the wheel to pull into the vacant parking lot lined with ancient Chinar trees. The security vehicle slowed down just behind them, preparing to form a defensive perimeter.

Then, the world shattered.

The trailing car accelerated violently. It swerved, overtaking the security detail in a blur of screeching tires, and rammed directly into the flank of the Maulana's nearly stationary vehicle.

For Adil, this was never merely about the assassination of a moderate voice. It was psychological warfare. A suicide attack was a declaration that safety was an illusion, designed to pierce the very heart of the adversary's secure zones. It wasn't about the noise, the blood, or the immediate gore, it was a brutal statement of absolute reach.

The detonation was instantaneous.

A blinding flash preceded a catastrophic shock wave that tore through the morning silence. The sound was an ear-splitting, thunderous roar that physically struck the chest of anyone within a half-mile radius, leaving a deafening, metallic ringing in its wake. The pressure wave ripped the air open, shattering windowpanes blocks away.

When the smoke finally cleared over the parking lot of Nishant Bagh, there were no bodies to recover.

The blast site was a grim tapestry of pulverized metal, scorched asphalt, and spilled oil. Human remains were intermingled with the debris, charred completely beyond recognition. The violence of the impact was so absolute that the responding forensic teams had to look upward; the concussive force had thrown severed limbs high into the skeletal branches of the surrounding Chinar trees.

Thick, viscous droplets pooled along the sweeping branches before trickling downward in dark, irregular rivulets, tracing the deep fissures of the bark like blood coursing through exposed veins. As the crimson gathering at the tips of the leaves slowly succumbed to gravity, it dripped onto the scorched earth in a slow, rhythmic cadence.

The horror was compounded by the nature of the Chinar itself, a tree famed for turning vivid scarlet in autumn. Here, out of season, that red was supplied not by nature, but by human

devastation. To the forensic teams looking upward through the hazy light, the illusion was total and haunting, it appeared as though the ancient trees themselves had been mortally wounded by the shockwave, weeping sap turned to blood in profound, agonizing sympathy with the carnage beneath them.

By the following morning, the digital landscape caught up with the physical tragedy.

A polished video message surfaced across encrypted networks, stamped with the insignia of Al Qaeda. The rhetoric was cold, precise, and devoid of mercy. They claimed full responsibility for the execution of Maulana Khursheed Alam Qasim.

The message sent a chilling shockwave through every faction of the Kashmir separatist movement. It was a stern, bloody warning to anyone attempting to dilute or negotiate the independence of the struggle: any compromise would be met with extreme, spectacular brutality.

In the eyes of Adil's network, there was no room for dialogue. And traitors, no matter how revered, would be erased.



# Chapter 8

The hum of the hair dryers had long since faded into memory.

For years, Afreen's beauty parlour had been her sanctuary, a brightly lit space filled with the sweet, chemical perfume of rosewater, warm wax, and lively gossip that brought women from three blocks away. Now, it felt like a museum of a past life. Standing before the wide, illuminated mirrors, comb in hand, she would often catch her own reflection and realize she had been staring blankly for ten minutes, utterly detached from the world. The vibrant woman who could thread the finest eyebrows with a quick joke had vanished. In her place moved a ghost on autopilot.

The ledger was relentless. The figures inked in red weren't merely financial losses; they were the slow, steady bleeding out of her independence.

Every evening, the silence of her declining business was broken by the sound of her father, Mansoor, dragging his feet through the front door. His shoulders hunched under the crushing weight of a job his frail body could no longer support. Then came the cough, a dry, hacking rattle that sliced right through Afreen's chest. The guilt was physical, a suffocating mass in her sternum.

Meanwhile, Ahmed's presence in the house had shifted from a minor annoyance to an active toxin.

From the beginning, his financial contribution had been zero, a fact Afreen had easily brushed off when her own pockets were full and her father's income was steady. She had loved him enough, or perhaps been distracted enough, to let it slide. But now, every unpaid bill on the glass counter felt like a silent indictment of his parasitic existence. He walked into the kitchen, ate the food her father's dwindling strength paid for, and used the electricity she struggled to afford, all while harboring the secret of another woman.

It had been over a year since the day her world fractured. The day when Nilofer told her everything. The day she went to that house, the land lady' s eyes watched her while she stood outside the door with Zain, contemplating what to do next. The image was permanently seared into her mind, and Ahmed had arrived an hour later, face pale, waiting in the car for thirty agonizing minutes before coming inside to face her.

He had dropped to his knees, eyes glistening, begging for a single chance.

"You are free to go to her, Ahmed," she had told him, her voice terrifyingly composed. "I don't want you if you don't want me. I am perfectly capable of raising my kids without you."

He had sworn it was a mistake, promised he had broken it off before even walking through the door, and vowed to make it right. But trust, once shattered, leaves razor-sharp edges. Every day since, Afreen felt unattractive, unworthy, and deeply betrayed. She had kept silent only to protect her children and her ailing father from the domestic upheaval.

When Mansoor had noticed the shadows under her eyes and asked, "What's the problem, Beta? I am your mother too," she had

simply forced a smile and called him Papa, the word she had always used instead of the traditional Abba. She had shielded him to the end.

Then came the night Mansoor's chest gave out.

The fluorescent lights of the Ujala Cygnus Multispeciality Hospital hummed with a low, mechanical vibration, casting a clinical pallor over Mansoor's sunken features. The air was thick, heavy with the sharp, medicinal stench of antiseptic and the suffocating weight of an unspoken sentence.

Unstable angina. Surgery is too risky. The chances are dim.

The attending doctor's words were still echoing in Afreen's ears like a tolling bell. She sat at the edge of the vinyl-upholstered chair, her hand trembling over her father's cold, papery fingers. Mansoor lay propped against the bleached white pillows, his chest rising in shallow, erratic hitches. Every breath looked like a deliberate, painful effort.

"You have to be really careful, Beta," Mansoor rasped. His voice was a thin thread of sound, barely cutting through the steady beep of the vital monitors. He kept his eyelids shut, as though opening them demanded a currency of strength he no longer possessed. "Once I am gone... trust no one except Rasheed. Or your own instincts."

"Papa, please," Afreen pleaded, squeezing his fingers, trying desperately to pour her own warmth into his chilling skin. "You're going to be alright. Please... don't talk like this."

Mansoor ignored her plea with the stubborn resolve of a man running out of time. "I have a few FDs in the almirah," he continued, his breathing heavy and rasping. "I nominated you for all of them. It isn't a fortune, Afreen, but it is every single rupee I managed to save. And the house... I willed it to you. The papers are with Shaukat Ali, my lawyer."

Suddenly, his eyes snapped open. He fixed her with a gaze so dark and desperate it made her heart freeze.

"Don't ever sell the house for money, Afreen," he whispered, the intensity in his fading eyes burning into her soul. "You will never build another like it. It's all I had left in this world... and now it belongs to you."

He sank back, his chest heaving as he gestured faintly toward the heavy wooden door. "Can you... send Rasheed in? I need to talk to him alone."

Afreen stumbled out into the frigid hospital corridor, her vision blurring behind a wall of scalding tears. She motioned to Rashid, who had been leaning against the tiled wall like an unyielding shadow. Rashid, faithful, taciturn, the man who had never left her father's side, nodded silently and stepped inside, closing the door firmly behind him.

A day later, Mansoor breathed his last, passing away in the quiet hours before dawn.

The days that followed dissolved into a gray, featureless blur of grief.

Rasheed performed the ritual Ghusl with practiced, reverent solemnity, cleansing Mansoor's frail body before wrapping him in the stark white linen of the Kaffan. They carried the wooden bier under a weeping, overcast sky toward the ancient Malkah cemetery. Ahmed was there throughout, quiet, dutiful, standing steadfast by Afreen's side as the dark Kashmiri earth was shovelled over her father's resting place.

Being an only child made the loss feel absolute. Without siblings to share the weight, Afreen felt untethered, drifting in a vast, empty expanse. She tried to seek sanctuary in the rhythmic recitation of the Quran, but the verses brought only temporary stillness to a wound that remained raw and bleeding.

Years ago, after losing her mother and enduring the agonizing trials of Kolkata, she had managed to gather the scattered pieces of her life and rebuild. But this second loss felt final. The foundational pillars of her life had collapsed, leaving her disoriented, unable to gauge whether she was surviving or drowning.

Then, the merciless demands of reality broke through the fog of mourning.

With monthly overheads quietly devouring her meager reserves, Afreen was forced to make the agonizing decision to close her beauty parlour for good. The modest interest yields from her father's fixed deposits were nowhere near enough to sustain the household.

And then the second blow landed.

The telecom firm where Ahmed was employed abruptly halted its operations across the Kashmir circle, buckling under mounting debts and impending bankruptcy. Almost overnight, Ahmed was left without a job.

In a region trapped in economic paralysis, where decades of unrest had left the tourism sector gut-strung and private enterprise nearly non-existent, finding another job was like searching for rain in a desert.

"We need to figure something out, Ahmed," Afreen said one evening, sitting at the dining table under the dim light of a single bulb. The empty household account ledger lay open between them.

Ahmed looked up, his brow furrowed with exhaustion. "I know. You've been breaking Papa's fixed deposits just to buy groceries. I'm trying, Afreen... but nothing is opening up here." He hesitated, leaning his elbows on the table, his eyes searching hers. "Why don't you talk to your father's cousin, Tabraiz Malik?

He got me the opening at Aircel. I heard he's taken over as DIG for the Kashmir range now."

Afreen's spine stiffened. "He didn't even come to the funeral, Ahmed. He didn't even bother to make a condolence call. I don't trust him. You know what kind of reputation he carries."

"Why does that matter now?" Ahmed pressed, his voice tightening. "Papa went to him for me, and he delivered. He is family, Afreen."

"Papa only went to him because he was desperate!" she shot back, her voice dropping into a cold, hard register. "Men who hold that kind of power in this valley expect a price for every favor. I know things about him, Ahmed. If I am telling you we aren't asking him for help, there is a reason."

Ahmed raised his hands in a gesture of swift defeat. "Alright. Fine. If that's how you feel, I won't bring him up again. But we can't just sit here and bleed money. We either launch a business of our own or move out of Kashmir entirely."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we should sell the house," Ahmed stated flatly.

The words hung in the air, heavy and poisonous. Afreen felt the blood rush to her face, a hot surge of disbelief burning through her veins. "Are you out of your mind? That is Papa's house!"

"It's your house now," Ahmed argued, his tone shifting into one of measured, pragmatic persuasion. "Look around us, Afreen! Property values are plunging every month because of this endless conflict. There is no future here for us, or for the kids. Education is disrupted half the year, no one is investing, and starting a new venture in Srinagar right now is financial suicide."

Seeing the dangerous fire flashing in her eyes, he immediately dialed back his intensity, softening his posture.

"Look... it's just a thought. It's your property, Afreen. I can't, and won't, force you. But if the house is off limits, there's another path. I could shift to Jammu for work."

"Jammu?" Her pulse spiked, a sudden, sharp alarm ringing in the back of her mind. "Do you have a contact there?"

"A friend from my college days is setting up a pharmaceutical manufacturing unit at an industrial center," Ahmed explained, his eyes brightening with enthusiasm. "He needs an operational partner. But he wants me to bring in fifty percent of the startup capital for an equal stake. If I can make it work in Jammu, I can set up a home there, and you and the kids can join me in a few months. That way... we never have to touch the house."

Afreen searched his eyes, searching for any flicker of deceit beneath the calm surface. "How much capital?"

"Around twenty five lakhs."

"Twenty five lakhs?" she whispered, stunned. "Where on earth would we get that kind of money?"

"If it's a no, it's a no," Ahmed said gently, sliding his hand across the table to cover hers. "But... if you were willing to lend it to me from Papa's fixed deposits, it could secure our family's future forever. I tried applying for a commercial loan, but the banks are asking for heavy collateral. And I know you'd never agree to mortgage the house."

A heavy, suffocating silence settled over the room.

Twenty five lakhs.

It was the entirety of her father's legacy. It was every rupee Mansoor had saved through decades of grueling labor, ill health, and sacrifice. If she signed over those FDs, she would be completely stripped, barefoot and defenseless, with the safety net her father had died protecting completely gone.

And then, a cold, sickening realization trickled into her mind like poison in a clear spring.

Jammu.

Sneha was from Jammu.

Afreen looked at the man sitting across from her, the husband who had wept on his knees begging for a second chance, the man who had been so impossibly gentle and attentive since her father passed, the man who was now asking her to hand over every single penny of her inheritance.

A sudden, terrifying wave of suspicion crested in her chest, stealing the air right out of her lungs. Was this a desperate father trying to save his family... or was she about to hand him the keys to walk straight back into the life that had almost destroyed her?



# Chapter 9

The heavy wooden latch of the back window yielded with a familiar, dull scraping sound two sharp shoves, just as it had been when he was a boy sneaking out to play cricket after curfew. Adil slipped through the narrow opening, his boots hitting the cold, uncarpeted floor of the kitchen with a muted thud.

Outside, the Srinagar night was suffocatingly quiet. The streets of the neighborhood, once vibrant, were now a dark, deserted maze under the iron grip of the midnight hours. The air carried the faint, bitter scent of rusted concertina wire and damp earth. Every corner of the district was mapped, patrolled, and watched by the heavy deployments of army regulars, paramilitary troops, and local police. To live here was to live under a microscope, where even a flicker of a candle at three in the morning could draw a search party.

Adil stood frozen in the shadows, listening to the labored breathing of the house. The two-storey structure, shared between his father, Rashid, and his unmarried uncle upstairs, was forty years old and crumbling at the seams. The walls seemed to groan under the weight of their own history.

Nine months. It had been nine months of hiding in the orchards, of sleeping in abandoned sheds, always one step ahead

of the intelligence agencies that kept a relentless watch on this very roof. He knew the cost of his return. He knew the local station had hauled Rashid in for interrogation multiple times, pressing the old man for coordinates, phone numbers, anything. Rashid had spoken the absolute truth when he told the officers he knew nothing, but the truth rarely bought peace here.

Despite the distance, Adil had kept his tabs. He knew about the quiet tragedies that had unfolded in his absence. He knew about the day the security forces clashed with the stone pelters down the main artery, and how a stray pellet cartridge had shattered the afternoon. He knew that his little sister, Humaira, had been caught in the crossfire, her world plunged into darkness by a freak accident that the authorities labeled collateral damage. Now, she spent her days at the Apollo Public School, enrolled in the specialized wing for visually impaired children, learning to navigate a world she could no longer see.

A floorboard creaked nearby.

From the darkness of the corridor, the silhouette of a man materialized. Rashid stood there, looking older, his shoulders hunched beneath a faded woollen shawl, his eyes wide with a mixture of terror and profound exhaustion as they landed on his son.

Adil didn't move. He didn't offer a greeting, nor did he attempt an explanation for the nine months of absolute silence that had stretched between them.

The urgency pounding in his chest overrode everything else, the threat of the patrols sweeping the streets outside, the betrayal of his own trembling limbs, and the suffocating weight of time lost.

Looking straight into his father's worn, tired eyes, Adil spoke. His voice tore through the heavy stillness of the room in a ragged, desperate whisper.

"Abbu... can you ask Afreen to meet me once? Just once, before she goes ahead with all this?"

Rashid looked at him, his gaze a mixture of sorrow and weary reality. "Why do you think she'll agree to meet you, Adil?"

"Just try, Abbu," Adil pleaded, stepping closer, his knuckles white. "There are things she needs to know. Things about her husband."

"She already knows everything about Ahmed, Adil."

"Then why did you send for me, Abbu?" Adil's voice cracked, a sudden flare of frustration breaking through his quiet demeanor. "Why did you want to meet me? You could have told her yourself that she shouldn't give the money to Ahmed! You could have told her that you overheard their conversation. Tell her that you don't trust him, this converted kafir husband of hers!"

Rashid's shoulders slumped, the lines on his face deepening under the dim light of the lantern.

"I asked for you because I wanted to see my son," Rashid said quietly, each word heavy with an old, dull ache. "My son, whom I miss. Whose sister misses him. I am old now, Adil. I need you beside me."

Adil's chest heaved. He swallowed hard, staring at the floor before forcing his eyes back to his father's.

"I am beside you, Abbu. Always. Whether you know it or not... but Kashmir needs me, too."

Silence settled over the room like dust.

They were sitting in Adil's old room, surrounded by the faint, familiar scents of aged wood and damp earth. Before coming here, Adil had slipped into Humaira's room first. His little sister had been sound asleep, her face peaceful in the shadow of the velvet

curtains. He had stood over her for a long time, watching the soft rise and fall of her shoulders, choking back a wave of tears that felt foreign and sharp in his throat.

Tears were not something Adil was used to.

Years on the run, constant exposure to violence, and the cold reality of survival had forced him to bury his emotions deep where no one could reach them. He had built a stone hearted persona, not out of cruelty, but as a crucial shield. To feel sadness was to invite weakness; to grieve was to risk breaking down entirely. His silence was the only armor he had left.

He cleared his throat, pushing the dark memories back into the shadows.

"I can give you money to pass on to Afreen," Adil said, his tone shifting back to stark pragmatism. "But will she accept it? I don't think she would." He paused, searching for his father's reaction. "Do you know this man, Ahmed... he has a woman? A Hindu woman he's been seeing in secret."

Rashid stiffened.

"Afreen knows about it," Adil continued, a bitter edge entering his voice. "But she chooses to look the other way. The money he is asking her for... it's not for a business or a future. It's going straight into that woman's purse. That's his plan."

"How do you know all this?" Rashid asked, genuinely bewildered.

"I have my sources," Adil replied flatly.

Rashid let out a long, shuddering sigh, shaking his head. "You should have told me earlier, Adil. I could have conveyed it to Sahib while he was still alive. He might have made some arrangements for Afreen... Before he passed, Sahib talked to me in private. He asked me to keep an eye on Ahmed. I asked him if

he sensed something was wrong, but he didn't elaborate. Only that... he felt everything was not right between Afreen and her husband."

Rashid leaned forward, his eyes narrowing slightly as a quiet realization washed over him.

"I must ask you one thing, though... Why are you having Afreen followed?"

Adil shifted his gaze, deliberately looking away toward the small wooden window, unable to meet his father's probing eyes.

"Just... out of concern," he muttered softly.

Rashid took a deep, shaky breath.

In that quiet fragment of time, a sudden, humbling realization struck the old man. All this time, he had believed Adil had abandoned them, consumed entirely by his cause. But looking at the exhaustion etched into his son's face, Rashid realized how wrong he had been.

Adil had been there. In his own silent, distant, and dangerous ways, he had been watching over them. He had been trying to protect Afreen, tethered by a fierce loyalty he couldn't openly express.

And deeper still, Rashid felt a sudden wave of shame, realizing the bitter truth of Adil's helpless position. Adil was the son of a domestic servant in Sahib's grand house. He had no official standing, no voice that society or Sahib's family would ever listen to directly. His vigilance from the shadows was the only power he possessed.

Rashid felt impossibly small sitting across from his son.

Neither of them spoke for a long time. The house around them was dead silent, save for the distant whistle of the night wind.

Words were no longer necessary; the unspoken understanding of their shared helplessness hung thick in the air between them.

Finally, Rashid pushed himself up slowly, his joints protesting.

"I'll talk to Afreen tomorrow whenever I get a chance," Rashid said softly, placing a heavy, trembling hand on Adil's shoulder. "I'll tell her you want to meet. Help her... in any way you can, my son."

Adil didn't speak. He simply nodded, absorbing the warmth of his father's hand, a brief, fleeting anchor in a life lived in the dark.

The drive twenty kilometers outside Srinagar had felt like entering a ghost world. Afreen had sat in the back of the car, holding a sleeping Zain against her chest, watching the grey outlines of Pampore pass by.

The house sat isolated in the middle of a dormant saffron field. It belonged to an admirer, one of many. In these parts, Adil was not just a man on the run; he was a phantom whom the locals sheltered, guarded, and revered. Dozens of eyes watched the approaching roads, shielding him from the security forces that breathed down his neck.

When Afreen stepped inside, the atmosphere changed instantly.

Adil sat in the middle of the room. He wore a black chequered phiran over army fatigue cargo pants. His hair now reached his shoulders, framing a dense, dark beard. He looked less like the boy she used to play with and more like a figure etched out of stone and iron.

"You have changed, Adil," Afreen said, the words slipping out awkwardly and heavy.

He looked up at her, his gaze unsettlingly direct. “You haven't!”

A faint, self-conscious smile touched her lips as she carefully navigated the room. “I have grown older. A mother of two kids now.”

Adil stood up slowly. He approached her with a quiet, deliberate grace that made her breath hitch. Reaching out, he laid a broad, calloused hand on Zain’s head.

“He looks a lot like Mansoor Sahib,” Adil said quietly, his voice a low, gravelly hum. He gestured toward the dastarkhan spread on the floor. “Sit.”

Afreen settled down, gathering the folds of her clothes, while Adil took a seat opposite her.

“Us, playing as kids together... it seems like some other life now,” she murmured, looking at the faded pattern of the carpet.

“Yes,” Adil agreed softly. “Time changes. We change.”

“You’ve become a sort of hero for the local population,” Afreen said, searching his face for a trace of the old Adil. “Lots of people admire you. In fact, wherever I go, people talk about you.” She paused, looking straight into his eyes. “I took a risk to come and meet you. You know that, don’t you?”

Adil tilted his head slightly, a slight, enigmatic curve at the corner of his mouth. “What sort of a hero am I if you are finding it risky to meet me?” He leaned back. “But I’m fine with it. I heard a saying once... ‘It’s safer to be feared than loved, when one cannot find both.’”

Afreen’s brows knit together. “You sought love? I thought you didn’t know what love is.”

“Just because I kill people now?”

The words were spoken flatly, devoid of anger, but Adil's dark eyes locked into hers with an intensity that felt like a physical weight.

Afreen's heart gave a violent, erratic thud. She looked away instantly, unable to hold his gaze. A sudden, terrifying warmth flooded her chest, making her skin prickle. Why am I feeling like this? her mind panicked. Why is my heart racing?

To cover her sudden disorientation, she stammered, "I'm... I'm impressed you know about Machiavelli. That was his quote. Do you read?"

"That's what I learned to do," Adil said, his eyes never leaving her face. "My life isn't normal like yours. I keep hiding for months sometimes. Books are what keep me company now."

Afreen swallowed hard, trying to regain her footing. "I couldn't refuse Rashid Chachu... so I came down to meet you."

The quiet hung fragile and razor-thin between them. Driven by the strange, chaotic energy churning in her blood, Afreen blurted out a question that had been haunting her.

"How do you feel when you kill people?"

The words shattered the quiet like glass. It was too raw, too invasive, but once spoken, it hung between them like a drawn blade.

Adil didn't flinch. He merely shifted his posture, his expression settling into a heavy, unreadable stillness.

"How does a soldier feel when he has to kill people?" he countered, his tone deceptively calm.

"But they are soldiers," Afreen argued, leaning forward, desperate to break his composure. "They kill people to protect their own."

"Exactly." A ghost of a smile touched his lips, entirely devoid of warmth. "So there's your answer."

"You are not a soldier," she retorted, her voice dropping into a register laced with a turbulent mix of judgment and fear.

Adil leaned back, radiating a quiet, dangerous authority. "Am I not? Ask eighty percent of the population of Kashmir. They might not agree with you." He held up a hand, waving the topic away before it could spiral. "Anyway, we are not here to talk about me. It's about you."

He adjusted his stance, his tone shifting abruptly to one of grounded, practical concern. "Abbu told me that you are having some financial issues and that you were contemplating selling off your house. Is it true?"

A sharp prickle of humiliation flared in Afreen's chest. "Why should Rashid Chachu tell you all this?" she demanded, her voice rising. She hated feeling exposed. She hated that her humiliating personal struggles were being discussed by men in the shadows.

"We are not strangers to you," Adil said firmly, though his eyes remained soft. "Abbu cares about you."

The words tumbled out of her before she could stop them, reckless, desperate, and stripped of all pride:

"And you? Do you care about me, too?"

The moment the question left her lips, Afreen wanted the floor beneath her to open up and swallow her whole.

What am I doing?

A wave of intense, scorching mortification washed over her. She felt absurd, foolish, and painfully transparent. Why was she ….., a married woman, a mother, begging for emotional validation from a man who lived with a gun in his hand?

Adil read her completely. He watched the sudden collapse of her posture, the panic in her eyes, and the rapid rise and fall of her chest.

“Of course all of us care about you,” Adil said softly, his voice impossibly steady. “After Sahib’s death, you are alone. And Sahib had taken a promise from Abbu that he’d take care of you. So yes, I do care about you, too.”

His words didn't comfort her; they felt like a cruel, polite rejection. He had neatly neatly wrapped his affection in the safe, sterile blanket of family duty and deathbed promises.

A sudden, terrifying clarity pierced through Afreen's humiliation. The surge of anger boiling inside her wasn't about her house, or her husband Ahmed's infidelity, or Rashid Chachu's meddling.

It was jealousy.

It was the agonizing realization that despite everything, despite the years, despite her marriage, despite the blood on his hands, she wanted Adil to look at her not as a childhood acquaintance or a master's daughter he was duty-bound to protect... but as a woman.

You fool, a vicious voice whispered in her head. You are standing here longing for a militant. A man who belongs to the grave.

Adil watched the dark crimson flush creep up her neck, staining her cheeks. Her large, dark eyes were brimming with a volatile mix of unshed tears and pure fury, a magnificent, silent storm brewing right in front of him.

She looks beautiful when she’s angry, Adil thought, a sudden, dangerous thrill cutting through his usual numbness. He

caught himself, pulling back emotionally. Am I becoming a monster? Enjoying her pain?

Regaining his composure, Adil sought refuge in the only thing that could ground them both: cold, hard reality.

"Listen, Afreen," he said quietly. "You don't need to sell your house, and you don't need to touch your bank savings. I can give you the money if your husband needs it. The kids need that house. It's their future."

That was the breaking point. The humiliation morphed into pure, burning defense.

"You'll help me with blood money?" she spat, her voice trembling with venom. "My husband and I don't need anyone's charity! Especially not yours. Ahmed can take care of everything. He's already planning a major project with his friend in Jammu!"

Adil raised a hand to calm her, his expression darkening. "Calm down, Afreen. I don't know why you're getting so defensive, but you need to hear me out." He took a slow breath. "Afreen... I know everything."

The room went dead silent.

"Know what?" she asked, her voice dropping into a shaky whisper. "What do you mean?"

"Everything," Adil repeated, heavy and absolute. "I know about that Hindu girl. And I know what your husband is planning."

Afreen froze. The anger evaporated, replaced by a cold, paralyzing dread that turned her blood to ice.

"How?" she breathed, horror choking her throat. "Who told you? Even Papa didn't know..."

"That's not important," Adil said flatly.

“It is important!” she cried out, the composure she had fought so hard to maintain shattering completely. “Are you having me tailed? Do you have your men shadowing my every move? Tell me the truth, Adil!”

Adil let out a short, tired sigh. “This is Kashmir, Afreen. Everyone is tailing everyone here. That’s hardly an issue.”

“It is an issue for me!” Tears of frustration finally spilled over her lashes. “I am an ordinary woman! Why am I being watched?”

“You’re getting it wrong,” Adil said softly, reaching out a hand as if to comfort her, though he stopped short of touching her. “It’s about your safety.”

“Stop it!” she snapped, pulling back. “Why are you so obsessed with my personal life?” She swallowed the bitter knot in her throat, forced to lay her deepest humiliation bare in front of him. “Yes... My marriage is failing. Yes, Ahmed betrayed me. But he repents! He’s trying to fix things!”

Adil stared at her for a long, heavy moment. The hardness left his features entirely, replaced by a profound, tragic pity that broke her heart even more.

“I am glad if you two are trying,” Adil said gently. “All I’m saying is, don’t ruin your life savings for him. Take the money from me. No strings attached. Consider it a loan.”

“I don’t want your money,” Afreen whispered, pulling a cold, impenetrable wall around herself. “And please... stop preying on my life.”

Adil stood up slowly, the invisible weight of his dangerous world settling back onto his shoulders.

“I am not trying to intrude,” he said, looking away toward the small window that overlooked the grey fields. “I just want you to know... if you ever need me, at any stage of your life, I’ll be

there." A faint, fatalistic smile touched his lips. "Though I don't know how long I have. I live by the gun, Afreen. I'll die by it, too."

A sharp, unbearable pang of sorrow pierced her chest. The anger vanished, leaving behind a hollow, agonizing ache. The thought of him dead, buried under the cold Kashmiri soil, felt like a physical blow.

She loved him. It was a terrifying, impossible truth, but in that quiet, shadowed room, she couldn't deny it to herself any longer.

"Allah will watch over you," she said, her voice barely audible, thick with suppressed emotion. "Nothing will happen to you."

Afreen gathered her sleeping child, wrapping her shawl tightly around herself to hide her shaking hands. She walked toward the door, unable to look at him any longer lest her eyes betray the secret tearing her apart.

At the threshold, she paused. She turned back one last time, taking in the sight of him standing alone in the dim light, a man damned by his own choices, yet holding her heart in his hands.

"Khuda Hafiz," she whispered.

Adil looked at her, his posture rigid, his dark eyes holding hers for one final, silent second.

"Khuda Hafiz, Afreen."

She stepped out into the biting cold of Pampore, the wind sweeping across the saffron fields. As she walked down the path toward the car where Rashid Chachu waited, Afreen pressed Zain close to her chest, crying quiet, bitter tears for a love that had bloomed too late, in a world where survival was the only thing left.



# Chapter 10

Thank you, Afreen," Ahmed said, taking the cheque from her hand. His voice held a carefully managed mix of gratitude and relief, but to Afreen, the piece of paper felt heavier than the house itself.

"I hope this works out for us," he added softly.

Afreen looked at him, her eyes burning with an intense, desperate seriousness. "You have to make every single penny count, Ahmed. This is all that is left of my father's lifetime of hard work. After this, we are left with nothing. Only this house."

She had spent ten agonizing days wrestling with the decision. Ten days of sleeplessness, counting the dwindling figures in her ledger, watching young Zain play on the rug and realizing school admissions were just around the corner. The reality was brutally simple: there were no income earners left in the house. Rasheed had already stopped accepting his meager salary weeks ago, working out of sheer loyalty and love for her late father. She was cornered by circumstance.

Two days later, Ahmed packed his bags and left for Jammu.

With him gone, the house fell into a heavy, suffocating silence. Afreen was left with a fragment of her father's savings, just enough to stretch across a few tight months until Ahmed's

business could yield a return. She knew she had no choice but to rely on him, yet her trust in him was like a cracked vase, held together by nothing more than necessity.

But it wasn't just financial anxiety that kept sleep from her eyes. It was Adil.

His presence in her mind had become an inescapable, haunting echo ever since their meeting. Then came the dream.

The darkness of the dream was not empty, it was thick, almost physical, wrapping around Afreen like a heavy velvet shroud.

In the dream's strange, fluid logic, she was lying in an immense, shadowy bed, stripped of every defense, skin exposed to the cool night air. Her body throbbed with a hollow, aching cold, the physical manifestation of every burden she carried by day. Beside her lay a figure, silent and still. In the blurred reality of sleep, her mind automatically filled the silhouette with Ahmed, clinging to the familiar, even if that familiarity was now poisoned by betrayal. She reached out instinctively, searching for some semblance of human warmth to quiet the storm inside her chest.

When her hand grazed the warm skin of his shoulder, an unexpected tremor surged down her spine. It wasn't the distant, cold touch she had grown accustomed to. This warmth was radiant, magnetic, drawing her closer into the shadows of the bed.

The figure turned slowly.

As the dim light caught the edge of his jaw, the illusion shattered. It wasn't Ahmed.

It was Adil.

A gasp caught in her throat, but she couldn't pull away. Adil's gaze was soft, burdened with an intensity that burned through the gloom. His hand moved slowly, almost reverently,

rising to cup the side of her face. His thumb traced the curve of her cheekbone, a gesture so impossibly tender that a quiet sob broke from her lips. It was a touch devoid of demand, filled entirely with the quiet promise of shelter, a feeling she hadn't known since her father's death.

In the dream's intoxicating haze, the line between memory and longing dissolved completely. As Adil leaned in, his breath warm against her lips, her body surrendered before her mind could construct a defense. The touch grew deeper, shifting from a tender sanctuary into an overwhelming, breathless heat. His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling her close until there was no space left between them. The sensation was intoxicating, a frantic, passionate collision of years of unspoken history, lingering childhood affection, and an incandescent physical fire she hadn't realized was smoldering within her.

For a few suspended, forbidden seconds, the overwhelming relief of being held, wanted, and protected washed over her, drowning out every trace of financial panic, grief, and heartbreak. She clung to him with a desperate, passionate fever, burying herself in the intoxicating comfort of his embrace, losing herself entirely to the phantom heat of a man who belonged to a time when she was whole.

And then, at the peak of that intoxicating warmth, the realization struck like a thunderclap, a sickening surge of conscious awareness slicing through the fever of sleep, shattering the vision and leaving her gasping in the dark.

Six months passed.

The seasonal turn brought no relief. The check-ins from Ahmed grew sparse, then vague, then stopped altogether.

“Ahmed has not been responding to my calls, Rashid Chacha,” Afreen said one afternoon, her fingers trembling as she set down her phone. “It’s been six months now.”

Rashid looked up from his work, his face weathered with concern. “Yes, beta, but he does come back every month, doesn't he?”

“He comes briefly!” Afreen’s voice broke, the strain finally leaking through. “We hardly interact. Whenever I ask him about the progress of the pharma unit, he dismisses me. He keeps saying these things take time. But now? Now he’s avoiding my calls entirely!”

Rashid offered a gentle, sympathetic sigh, trying hard to anchor her. “These things do take time, beta. Whether a new venture turns a profit, or even starts properly, is always uncertain in the beginning.”

“My financial situation is critical, Rashid Chacha,” she whispered, staring into space. “Whatever savings I had left are gone. If this continues for another month, I won't even be able to buy groceries. I have to go to Jammu. I have to see what is actually happening over there. I can't live in this suspense anymore.”

Rashid didn't argue. He saw the fire of quiet desperation in her eyes. “If you must go, then I will drive you and the children down. You can confront him and stay the night, and I’ll lodge with a relative of mine in the city. We can head back the next day. Should I prepare the car for tomorrow morning?”

Afreen closed her eyes, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes. We don't have a choice.”

The nine-hour journey from Srinagar to Jammu was a relentless stretch of dust, heat, and bone deep weariness.

As the rickety car wound its way down the mountains, the world transformed outside the windows. The lush green meadows, cool mountain air, and serene waters of the Kashmir Valley gave way to the rugged, sun-baked terrain of the Shivalik ranges. For Afreen, who had grown up largely outside the valley before her father brought her home, Srinagar had been her sanctuary. She had never imagined having to leave it again. But Jammu greeted her with a heavy, stifling humidity that felt like an omen.

By the time the car finally shuddered to a halt in a quiet neighborhood, the sun was dipping below the horizon, painting the dusty sky in bruised shades of purple and orange.

Ahmed had texted her this address months ago, a brief, casual update sent during his first week in the city, dripping with a shallow optimism that had long since curdled. She hadn't been able to warn him that she was coming. For four days, her calls had vanished into the hollow void of an unanswered tone.

Leaving Rashid and the sleepy children in the idling car, Afreen stepped out into the heavy air. Her knees felt weak, her stomach twisting into hard, anxious knots.

By the time they pulled up to the cramped, nondescript building housing Ahmed’s two-room accommodation, the sky had bruised into a late, suffocating evening.

A heavy iron padlock hung from the latch of the door. It was cold, metallic confirmation of his absence.

"Rashid Chacha, please try calling him again," Afreen said, her voice thin with exhaustion. She looked back at the rear seat, where the children lay in a tangle of limbs, their faces flushed and shiny with sweat. "The kids are too tired. They need to lie down."

Rashid sighed, the screen of his phone illuminating the deep, worried lines on his face. "He is not answering, beta. I tried twice just now."

Afreen gripped her own hands in her lap, her knuckles turning white. "I'll call his partner. I'll call Satnam Singh."

A brief, tense conversation later, Rashid lowered his phone and turned to her. "Ahmed is coming. He was at Satnam's place. He said we should wait in the car; it might take him some time to get here."

It took forty minutes. Forty minutes of sitting in the stagnant heat of the parked car, watching the shadows lengthen under the yellow glare of the streetlights, before Ahmed finally materialized.

He walked with his head down, a man carrying a weight he wasn't ready to share.

"What are you doing here?" were the first words out of his mouth. There was no warmth, no relief. Only the sharp edge of cornered pride.

"Hello, Ahmed," Afreen said quietly, stepping out of the car.

Ahmed didn't look her in the eye. Instead, he stepped forward, lifting little Sada into his arms. The child mumbled in her sleep, burying her face into his shoulder. Only then did Ahmed look up, his gaze shifting to the older man. "You shouldn't have brought them here, Chacha."

"We came because you weren't taking my calls," Afreen intervened, her voice carrying a quiet steel that cut through his defensiveness. "I had no other way to reach you."

Ahmed's jaw tightened. "Okay. Come on in," he muttered, turning to unlock the heavy padlock.

"I will take your leave now, Afreen beta," Rasheed said softly, reluctant to step into the domestic storm brewing just beyond the threshold. "I have relatives nearby. I will stay with them tonight and come back in the morning. Give me a call whenever you need me to pick you up."

"Take the car, Chacha," Afreen said, handing him the keys. "I won't be needing it tonight."

"Alright," Rashid murmured, giving her a reassuring, lingering look before departing into the dark.

Inside, the flat was suffocatingly small, smelling of dust and neglected bachelorhood. Ahmed shut the door behind them, his irritation finally bubbling over. "You shouldn't have come like this, Afreen. Look at the kids, they are damn tired."

"You left me with no choice," she said, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper so as not to wake the children. "I was worried sick. You vanished."

"Did you eat anything?" Ahmed asked, a sudden, clumsy attempt at hospitality.

"No, I'm not hungry. The kids ate on the way; we stopped at a roadside dhaba. I just need to tuck them in."

She followed Ahmed as he led her into the small bedroom. The mattress was thin, but the moment Afreen laid the children down, they sank into a deep, uninterrupted sleep, oblivious to the cracks widening in their parents' world.

When Afreen stepped back out into the cramped living space, the silence between her and Ahmed was suffocating.

"Why were you avoiding my calls, Ahmed?" she asked, standing her ground.

Ahmed stood by the window, looking out at the chaotic Jammu street below. "I knew what you were going to ask me. That's why."

"Ahmed!" Afreen's voice trembled with a mixture of anger and disbelief. "Are you trying to say I don't even have the right to ask you what is happening with our life? With our money?"

"You have every right," Ahmed said, turning around, his face etched with a bitter exhaustion. "But I don't have the answers. At least, not yet."

He ran a hand over his face, his voice dropping into a flat, defeated monotone. "Nothing is working out. The production hasn't even started. The pharma manufacturing license... it's a nightmare. The State Licensing Authority has been putting us off week after week. We've done everything. We fulfilled every specific requirement, submitted every document they asked for, paid the fees... but it's just red tape after red tape."

He paused, the confession tearing out of him like a physical pain. "I gave all the money to Satnam. But it's been six months, Afreen, and nothing has come of it. You keep asking me the same questions, and I am just plain tired of giving you the same empty answers. I can't send you the money I promised. I don't have it."

"Did you actually sit down and talk to Satnam?" she asked, her heart dropping.

"Yes! Many times," Ahmed snapped, defensively. "But he keeps saying the same thing: 'It's under process, Ahmed. These things take time.'"

"But Ahmed, that means this project hasn't even begun!" Afreen's voice rose, desperation clawing at her throat. "And who knows if it ever will? If it's not working out, why don't you just ask for the money back?"

She stepped closer to him, her eyes wide with a sudden, terrifying realization. "That is my father's hard-earned money, Ahmed. His entire life's savings. If we lose that, we are doomed. We have nothing else!" Her voice broke, bordering on hysterical.

"I know! I know, Afreen!" Ahmed took her by the shoulders, his own panic mirroring hers. "Just calm down. I am trying to get it back. Satnam promised me the unit would take off in a month, that he had everything in place. But it's been six months of empty promises."

"If you can't handle him, let me talk to Satnam," Afreen pleaded, her survival instincts kicking in.

"It's not that simple," Ahmed sighed, releasing her and slumping onto a chair. "He has already invested the money. He bought new machinery, and he spent a fortune securing the preliminary clearances from the government agencies. He says the machinery will be delivered soon, but we can't touch it, let alone go into production, until we get the final legal permits."

He looked up at her, the old resentment flickering back. "You shouldn't have come here."

"Then you should have answered your calls," Afreen shot back, her tears drying into a cold, hard anger. "I was worried. But don't worry, I am leaving tomorrow morning. I only wanted to see with my own eyes if you were alright."

Ahmed let out a cynical, quiet laugh. "You could have asked Satnam that. You have his number. Or... were you checking up on something else?"

Afreen froze. "Like what? What do you mean by that?"

"You know exactly what I mean," he murmured, looking away.

"No, I don't," Afreen insisted, her voice sharp as ice. "Tell me. What did you mean?"

Ahmed let out a sharp breath. "Alright, if you want me to say it out loud: I think you still don't trust me. I think you came down here because you thought I was seeing Sneha."

The accusation hung in the hot air, ridiculous and insulting.

"Listen to me, Ahmed," Afreen said, her voice deadly quiet. "You need to stop right there. I have no idea where you are getting this absurd brainwave from. That thought has not even crossed my mind. I came here because I am desperate. I am drowning. I gave you that money in the absolute trust that you would build a future for us, a new source of income. You asked for a couple of months. I gave you six.

"It is glaringly obvious to me now that things are failing. You don't even know how long this is going to take. So what is wrong with being honest about it? Does ignoring my calls make the problem go away? We are partners, Ahmed. We are supposed to talk. Is that really asking for too much?"

Ahmed's gaze fell to the floor. The fight drained out of him, leaving only a hollow, ashamed shell of a man. "No," he whispered. "It isn't."

He looked up, a faint glimmer of sincerity in his eyes. "I know it hasn't worked out the way I promised. I'll talk to Satnam tomorrow. If things don't show real, concrete improvement in a month's time, I will opt out. I promise you. I will ask for our money back."

Afreen looked at him, searching his face for a certainty she knew he didn't possess. "Yes. Please do that." She turned toward the bedroom. "It's late. I have to leave early. Let's just get some rest."

The first gray light of dawn had barely broken over the hills when Rashid Chacha's car pulled up to the curb. Afreen and the children slipped out of the flat, leaving Ahmed to his quiet, unfinished struggles.

As the car wound its way back up the mountains toward Srinagar, the cool breeze of the valleys offered no comfort. The trip had gone exactly as Afreen had feared. Ahmed's silence had been the ultimate tell, a shield to hide his own failure. He had avoided her because he had nothing to show for the ruin of her family's security.

She had needed to see it for herself. She needed to know the worst so she could begin to survive it.

"Rashid Chacha," Afreen said, her voice barely louder than the hum of the engine. She stared out at the passing pines, her face reflected pale against the glass. "The money I gave to Ahmed... it's as good as gone."

Rashid kept his eyes on the winding road, his hands steady on the wheel. "Don't worry, beta. Allah is there. He is testing us. You must remain strong."

"Allah has been testing me my entire life," Afreen said, a bitter tear escaping her eye. "I don't know when the test ends. My father made many mistakes in his life, Chacha, but he always made sure my mother and I never had to worry about a single rupee. We never knew what a financial crisis felt like. And now look where I have landed. I have dragged my children into this. Papa's entire savings... gone."

"Do not lose heart, Afreen," Rasheed said, his voice thick with emotion. "I am here. I have my savings. Your father was very kind to me. Everything I have belongs to you."

Afreen turned to him, her heart swelling with gratitude, but she shook her head firmly. "You know I can never accept that,

Chacha. You need that money for yourself and Humaira. That is her future. Her security. I won't touch it."

She looked back out at the mountains, her mind racing through desperate, dark corners.

"Should I sell the Srinagar house?" she asked suddenly, the weight of the question dropping like a stone in the quiet car. "Should we just relocate to Jammu?"

Rashid's hands tightened on the steering wheel. "That is not what your father would have wanted, beta. You know how strictly he was against that idea. He loved that house. He wanted you safe there."

"I know," Afreen whispered, closing her eyes as the car climbed higher into the misty hills. "I know he did. Let's wait a little longer then. Let's see what Ahmed does. I am just praying... hoping... that something changes. That we don't have to lose the last piece of my father we have left."



# Chapter 11

The silence in the room was heavy, punctured only by the rustle of cotton as Ahmed reached for his shirt. Sneha remained propped up against the pillows, her eyes tracking his every movement, a sharp contrast to the languid pose she tried to maintain. The phantom sound of the front door rattling was still echoing in her mind.

"How come she dropped in just like that?"

Ahmed didn't answer. He slipped his arms into the sleeves, his back a rigid wall of tense muscle.

"I am asking you something," Sneha said, her voice climbing a fraction louder, cutting through the quiet of the room. "How could she just barge in like that?"

Ahmed threw a curt, sideways glance over his shoulder. "I was avoiding her calls. I think I already told you that. Should I give it to you in writing now?"

His tone was sharp enough to draw blood, but Sneha wasn't easily deflected. She pulled the sheet tighter around herself, the reality of their situation pressing in. "What if we were in your apartment and Satnam hadn't warned you in time?" Her voice dropped, the sharp edge giving way to genuine worry. "Ahmed, think about it."

"I know it was a close call," he muttered, finally turning around as he began to button his shirt from the bottom up. His face was a mask of forced calm. "But nothing happened. So it's all fine."

"That Rashid is a snake," Spat Ahmed. The mere mention of the man brought a bitter taste to his mouth. "He is hovering around her all the time. I have a hunch he's feeding her all sorts of ideas, poisoning her mind against me. I wish to God I could get rid of him."

"Is it true?" Sneha asked, leaning forward, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "His son... is he really a militant?"

"So I have heard," Ahmed replied grimly. He tucked his shirt into his trousers, his movements methodical now. "The guy was supposed to be close to Afreen when they were kids.."

Sneha shuddered slightly, a cold chill running down her spine despite the warmth of the room. "Stay away from Rashid then, Ahmed. Men like him have nothing left to lose."

She watched him for a moment, letting the tension settle before pivoting back to the core of their gambit. "When are you going to talk to her about the house?"

Ahmed let out a short, humorless breath. "It's just a matter of time before she brings it up herself. If I initiate it, she'll become suspicious. She's fragile, not stupid. I have to let her feel like it's her own idea."

He walked over to the window, peering through a slit in the curtains before turning back to face her. "There's another thing that's more important than the house right now. I need a new passport if we are ever going to relocate to Dubai. With my Naval case still pending, the authorities will never give me clearance to

travel out of India. And with 'Rajiv' as my identity, I have absolutely no chance of clearing immigration legally."

Sneha's brow furrowed. "But how will you manage that? A clean passport under a burned name?"

"It can be easily managed if Afreen asks her DIG relative, this guy called Tabrez Malik," Ahmed explained, a hint of frustration leaking into his voice. "A word from a man of his stature, and the paperwork bypasses the usual scrutiny. But the problem is, she is digging her heels in. She refuses to have anything to do with him. I've asked her a few times, but she keeps shutting it down."

"So what do we do?"

"I'll have to convince her to talk to him," Ahmed said, his eyes narrowing as he mapped out the chess pieces in his mind. "Once she feels backed into a corner, once she believes we have absolutely no choice but to relocate out of Srinagar for our safety, she'll make the call."

Sneha studied him, evaluating the cold precision of his plan. "So what's the timeline? What's the actual plan?"

"You have your passport," Ahmed said, pointing a finger at her. "You'll travel out of Jammu to Dubai the moment I give you the word. I'll follow suit as soon as I get my hands on the new documents. Afreen will have to sell the house sooner or later; she won't have a choice. Rest, you leave it to me. I'll go down to Srinagar in fifteen days to set the wheels in motion."

A slow, cynical smile spread across Sneha's face. She leaned back against the headboard, her gaze turning mocking. "How do you know she'll actually give you the money after selling the house? Especially now, when she thinks her father's entire life savings went down the drain courtesy of your bad investments."

She paused, letting the silence stretch, her grin widening with wicked delight. "She has no idea that the money is perfectly safe... sitting right here in your pocket."

Rajiv froze. The teasing accusation hit a nerve, the irritation on his face palpable as his jaw tightened.

Sneha giggled, utterly delighted by his reaction. As he stepped closer to the bed, she playfully extended her legs, placing her bare feet flat against his chest to hold him at bay.

"You are trying to annoy me, huh?" Rajiv murmured, his voice dropping an octave. The tension in the room shifted instantly from financial conspiracy to something entirely volatile. "You know when you annoy me, it turns me on."

He captured her ankles in a firm grip, his eyes locked onto hers with a dark, smoldering heat. "Alright then. Time for you to pay for that little mouth of yours." He reached down, his fingers undoing the top button of his shirt with deliberate, torturous slowness, his gaze never leaving her face.

Sneha didn't back down. She pushed against his chest, resisting just enough to stoke the fire between them. "Not until you promise to buy me that ring I showed you that day."

Rajiv let out a low growl, pushing her legs aside as he crawled onto the mattress. His body pressed flush against hers, his breath coming heavier, hot against her skin. "You are such a bitch." He leaned over her, his broad shadow blocking out the rest of the room as he pinned her wrists above her head. "Of course it's yours."

Sneha wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him down until her lips brushed against his ear, her teeth lightly grazing his lobe. "Come on then, Doberman," she whispered huskily, her voice dripping with provocation. "Show me what you got."

What followed was a storm of raw, unbridled desire. Rajiv claimed her mouth in a deep, bruising kiss that left no room for breath, his hands dragging down the curve of her spine, pulling her impossibly close. Sneha arched into his touch, her nails digging into his shoulders, matching his fiery intensity movement for movement. Every touch was an unspoken challenge, a tangled blur of heat, slick skin, and heavy gasps that consumed them both until they collapsed together, completely spent.

Rajiv lay back against the damp sheets, his chest heaving as he stared up at the ceiling, still panting hard after the wild session.

"I'll be leaving for Srinagar next week..." he managed to say, his voice thick and raspy.

Sneha sat up, the sheet slipping down to her waist as she pushed her messy hair back. She looked down at him, her lips swollen. "Won't that be too early?"

Rajiv turned his head toward her, his hand reaching out to trace a lazy line up her thigh. "I'll have to stay with her for some time now, convince her to sell the house and arrange for a new passport through Tabraiz Malik." His expression darkened slightly. "With Rashid breathing down my neck all the time, I need to wean her away from him. Otherwise, this will all come to naught. We don't have enough to carve out a new life in Dubai as yet."

Sneha leaned down, her hair falling around them like a curtain as she planted a lingering, seductive kiss on his collarbone.

"Okay, as you wish..." she murmured against his skin, her fingers tracing the line of his jaw before pulling back to flash him a coy, dangerous smile. "...but only after you have given me the ring I asked for."

Rajiv chuckled, a low, rumbling sound in his chest as he pulled her back down on top of him. "You won't forget that, will you?"

For ten days, his phone calls had been a slow drip of poison, wrapped in soft, cushioning words. He had dropped hints, planted doubts, and gently steered her toward the edge of a cliff. Now, standing in her living room, he had finally pushed her over. The money, their life savings, the inheritance, everything she had trusted him with, was gone. Satnam had closed the door on them, citing fraudulent manufacturers and vanished paper trails.

"We are totally ruined, Ahmed," Afreen whispered, her voice cracking under the weight of the realization. She pressed her palms against her temples, trying to stop the room from spinning. "I don't know what to do now."

Ahmed stepped closer, his hands reaching out, though he didn't quite dare to touch her. His face was a mask of practiced, agonizing sincerity. "I am there, Afreen. I won't let anything happen to you and the kids. You know you are my world." He looked away, his jaw tightening as he played the part of the tragic hero. "I would have never imagined this would end up like this. My intention was to make us safe financially."

"Intentions don't pay the rent, Ahmed," she said, her voice dropping to a bitter undertone.

"I have decided that I'll shift to Dubai," he announced abruptly, shifting his weight. The declaration hung in the cool mountain air, absurd and desperate.

Afreen blinked, wondering if she had misheard him. "Dubai? Are you crazy?" A harsh, humorless laugh escaped her lips. "And what will you do there?"

"I have some contacts there. They'll find me a job," he said quickly, the words tumbling out as if he had rehearsed them on

the bus ride up from Jammu. "I'll work as a labourer, in a restaurant, wash utensils, anything. I'll earn and send money to you. And if and when I settle down, you and the kids can join me."

Afreen looked at him, the shock fading into a cold, sharp disdain. She looked at his soft hands, his neat clothes, and the sheer fantasy of his plan.

"Do you think it's that easy?" The scoff in her voice cut through his bravado. "How am I going to survive till you do all that in an alien land? It's all a hypothetical scenario that you are presenting to me, Ahmed. You are going to a new place to settle down. Do you actually believe that it's all going to happen in a blink of an eye?"

Ahmed's shoulders slumped, the slick confidence draining out of him, replaced by a pathetic, cowering vulnerability. "It's all I can offer, Afreen," he muttered, looking at the floor. Then, he raised his eyes, glinting with a dangerous new angle. "But even for that... you'll have to help me get a passport with this new name."

The room grew entirely still. The implications of his words settled like lead in her stomach.

"How can I do that?" Afreen asked, her voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. The realization hit her a second later, and her eyes widened with sudden horror. "Don't tell me you are again going to ask me to go to Tabrez Malik."

Ahmed remained silent, his eyes pleading.

"I am not going to do that," she said fiercely, backing away from him as if his very presence was infectious. "I have already told you that person is a leech. Do you actually want to send your wife to a person looking for a favor, when I am clearly telling you that I am not comfortable being around him?"

"If you don't go to him, we are doomed, Afreen!" Ahmed erupted, stepping toward her, his hands gripping her shoulders this time. His voice was frantic, trembling on the edge of a breakdown. "That's my only hope. I have thought long and hard about all the options, and nothing is going to come out of anything. I really tried hard to make it work in Jammu, Afreen, I swear. I really don't understand why Allah has been so cruel to me." He dropped his hands, his knees buckling slightly as he practically sank before her. "I am begging you. Help me with this passport problem."

Afreen looked down at him, feeling a sickening mixture of pity and revulsion. He was throwing himself at her feet, but he was using her body as the currency to buy his escape.

"All I know, Ahmed," she said, her voice trembling but resolute, "is that this pervert Tabrez has been eyeing me. Women have a sixth sense in these matters. If I go to him, and if he decides to help you, then he is surely going to show his true colors." She swallowed hard, the terrifying loneliness of her situation closing in. "With Papa gone, and you away in Dubai... he'll be no holds barred."

Ahmed dismissed her words with a hurried, frustrated wave of his hand, refusing to look at the reality of what he was asking. "You are unnecessarily being cynical about the whole scenario," he argued, his voice taking on a pleading, desperate edge. "This guy is nearing his retirement. He is an old fellow. I am sure nothing like this is going to happen. Please... just call him. Seek an appointment with him in his office."

Afreen stared at her husband, seeing him clearly perhaps for the first time. He was willing to throw her into the jaws of a predator just to secure his own flight. The activities of the last ten days, the weight of the lost money, and the sheer terror of their

future crashed down on her all at once. The fight drained out of her, leaving only a hollow, numb compliance.

"Alright," she whispered, looking past him at the darkening window. "I'll call him tomorrow morning."

Ahmed exhaled a massive sigh of relief, but Afreen felt only the cold, tightening noose of the trap they had built together.



# Chapter 12

The heavy oak door of the office clicked shut behind Afreen, cutting off the low hum of the Zonal Headquarters corridor. The silence inside DIG Tabrez Malik's office was heavy, thick with the stale scent of tobacco, cheap room freshener, and an underlying menace disguised as authority.

Afreen stood just inside the threshold, her eyes quickly taking in the room. Batmaloo's Headquarters was an old structure, but this room was designed to overpower. A massive, functional desk, a behemoth of polished dark wood, dominated the center, easily occupying a quarter of the entire floor space. It acted as both a fortress and a display of absolute dominion. On the far end, to the right of the main entrance, sat a worn leather sofa set, a spot that had undoubtedly been the backdrop to countless coercive, backroom negotiations.

Then there was the man himself.

Tabrez Malik pushed himself up from behind the desk, the wooden chair groaning under his weight. He did not possess the imposing, statuesque frame one might expect of a high ranking police commander. Standing at barely 5 feet 7 inches, he was roughly Afreen's height. Short, greying tufts of hair clung desperately to the sides of his balding head, and his uniform

strained against a prominent beer belly, a physical testament to years of heavy drinking and unbridled indulgence.

Yet, what he lacked in physical stature, he compensated for with a terrifying, entrenched impunity.

To the outside world, he was a decorated officer. To those who knew the underbelly of the department, he was "Loose Pajama."

As Tabrez rounded the desk and began walking toward her, Afreen kept her posture rigid, every sense on high alert. She knew the profile of the man stepping into her personal space. He was a master predator who had spent years turning the unrest in Kashmir into a personal goldmine. His infamous "terrorist watch list" wasn't a tool for national security; it was an extortion machine. Innocent families were systematically targeted, branded as terrorist sympathizers by Malik's personal squad of dirty cops, and then bled dry under the threat of relentless persecution.

Worse still was his cruelty toward women. Malik treated his office not as a place of law, but as a hunting ground. Women brought in for "enquiries" were routinely intimidated, cornered, and coerced into visiting his private farmhouse. Even within the force, no one was safe. Seven female police officers had recently risked everything to email joint complaints to the Chief Minister and top ADGPs, detailing a systemic sexual exploitation ring run by Malik, a female DSP, and the SHO of the Women's Police Station. Those who dared to speak up found their careers ruined, their Annual Confidential Reports maliciously tarnished.

He was also the architect of a ruthless honey trap operation, using women to snare wealthy local men before his uniformed thugs swooped in to extort fortunes through blackmail.

Twice divorced and recently married for a third time, Malik was proof that power in the wrong hands protects its own. Despite

the mountain of grievances, no charge had ever stuck. When public pressure flared, the Chief Minister would quietly shunt him off to inconsequential wings like the Home Guards or Headquarters. But Malik's web of political favors, fueled by the very dirt he gathered on powerful men, always ensured he maneuvered his way back to lucrative, plum postings.

Now, his bloodshot eyes locked onto Afreen, scanning her with a slow, predatory familiarity that made her skin crawl.

"Afreen," he said, his voice a low, raspy drawl conditioned by years of whiskey and cigarettes.

He closed the remaining distance between them, coming to a halt just a step too close, comfortably breaking the boundary of professional space as he waited for her to flinch.

What a pleasant surprise, Afreen…"

The voice dripped with a smooth, cloying warmth that made the tiny hairs on the back of Afreen's neck stand up.

It was always the eyes first. Tabrez Malik didn't look at a person's face to read their thoughts or forge a genuine connection. His gaze was a heavy, crawling instrument, a lecherous survey that dragged over every woman who crossed his path. Instead of holding normal, respectful eye contact, his focus wandered shameless and low, lingering everywhere it had no right to be.

It wasn't Afreen's first time on the receiving end of that look. Every single encounter with him throughout her life had been a masterclass in quiet torture, leaving her feeling deeply uncomfortable, violated, and repulsed. Even his polite conversation was a minefield; every word that slipped past his lips carried double meanings and transactional undertones disguised in flimsy ambiguity.

Okay! Her inner voice quavered, striking a sudden note of panic. Relax. Just breathe.

A nauseating flutter of anxiety, like trapped butterflies, took wing in the pit of her stomach. She forced a rigid pause, willing her erratic pulse to slow down, if only by a fraction.

Tabrez Malik rounded his heavy mahogany desk, his arms sweeping open in an invitation for a hug. It was the moment Afreen had dreaded the most on her journey here. In the past, she had found herself trapped in these forced embraces, held a second too long, feeling his palms wander past the boundary of propriety. Back then, it had felt as though a cold, scaled snake was slithering down her spine, forcing her to hold her breath until the ordeal passed.

She had no choice now; she needed his power too desperately to make a scene.

Stepping forward, Afreen leaned in just enough to rest her forehead lightly against his shoulder, her own arms carefully pinned at her sides to avoid making any bodily contact. The moment her head touched his suit jacket, she stepped back with clinical precision.

Tabrez blinked, a flash of genuine surprise crossing his features as the embrace ended before he could anchor it.

"Come, Afreen, sit here," he said, catching hold of her shoulder with a grip that was slightly too firm, subtly steering her toward the plush plush furniture in the center of the room.

Recognizing the maneuver, Afreen moved with swift agility. Before he could shepherd her toward the expansive double seater sofa, she slid neatly into an isolated single-seater armchair.

Tabrez stood hovering over the empty sofa for a fraction of a second, looking a wee bit disappointed at the missed proximity. "So, what will you have? Tea or coffee?"

"I'll have coffee," Afreen replied, her voice tightly controlled.

Tabrez pivoted toward the intercom on his desk. "Send two coffees. And bring some samosas, too." He glanced back at her over his shoulder, offering a rehearsed, predatory smile before returning to the seating area.

"So, Afreen," he began, settling into the sofa opposite her, his heavy gaze fixing on her face without a hint of subtlety, "you are looking as lovely as always."

"Thank you so much, Uncle," she offered smoothly, throwing up the familiar generational shield. "I'm a mother of two now, so I'm not too sure about that."

Tabrez clicked his tongue, shaking his head. "No, no, you look exactly the same… and Afreen, please, don't call me 'Uncle.' I am much younger than your father, and this whole 'uncle' business makes me feel old. Just call me Tabrez."

"That'll be difficult for me," she countered instantly. "I'll call you 'Sir' instead, if that's alright with you."

"Sir sounds far too formal," Tabrez pressed, leaning forward, his tone turning playfully insistent. "Call me Tabrez. Just try it… it's easy. Come on, just try it."

Afreen hesitated. The power dynamic in the room was suffocating, and she knew she couldn't afford to exhaust her political capital over a name. She just needed this meeting to end.

"Okay… Tabrez it is, then," she said, forcing a faint, hollow smile.

"There! You see?" Tabrez let out a hearty, booming laugh that rattled the fine china on his side table. "That was easy."

He crossed his legs, leaning back into the leather cushion. "So, dear Afreen, how are the kids? And your husband… Ahmed, right?"

"The kids are good," Afreen said, getting straight to the point. "Ahmed, on the other hand, is facing some severe issues."

Tabrez raised an eyebrow, shifting slightly. "Oh? How so? What happened?"

"He is planning to relocate to Dubai. The problem is that his passport has been seized by the naval authorities."

She paused, taking a quiet breath before diving into the dark history. "I'm not sure if Papa ever told you about Ahmed's past. You know about his religious conversion, but he had a life before that, too. He was working in the Indian Navy as a sailor. Due to some personal issues, he took leave and never reported back for duty. The Naval authorities court-martialed him in absentia, and there is a pending case of desertion against him. That's why his passport was confiscated."

A soft knock interrupted her. Tabrez raised a single hand, signaling her to hold her thought as the office peon stepped in carrying a polished brass tray. He quietly set down two steaming mugs and a plate of fresh samosas.

"Should I serve, sir?" the peon asked dutifully.

"No, it's alright. I'll do it myself," Tabrez dismissed him with a dismissive wave of his wrist. "You may go."

The peon bowed slightly, stepped back, and pulled the heavy door closed, the lock clicking into place with a definitive, heavy sound.

"Sugar and cream?" Tabrez asked, reaching for the silver spoons.

"No, just black," Afreen replied.

"Please, continue," Tabrez murmured, lifting his own cup.

"We are facing dire financial distress ever since Papa passed away," Afreen confessed, the raw humiliation of the admission stinging her throat. "Some of it, I admit, can be attributed to my own bad decisions. Ahmed took a large sum of money from me to start a business venture with a partner in Jammu, but unfortunately, nothing came of it. It vanished. So now, his only option is to shift to Dubai and relocate the family once he's settled. I need your help, Tabrez. I need you to procure a new passport for Ahmed."

"Hmm..." Tabrez muttered under his breath, taking a slow sip of his coffee. The gears behind his dark eyes were visibly turning.

"Do you want me to look into his financial dealings in Jammu?" he offered softly. Then, leaning in, his voice took on a conspiratorial, protective edge. "Listen, Afreen, let me be entirely honest with you here. I am not too sure about your husband's integrity. To be frank, Mansoor wasn't too sure about him either before he died."

"No, that won't be necessary," Afreen interrupted firmly, her posture straightening. "I trust Ahmed absolutely."

Tabrez's eyes narrowed slightly. "And what if he shifts to Dubai and simply disappears? What then?"

"He has children here," Afreen said, her voice laced with a desperate edge. "I don't think he would leave them just like that. Please… can you help me?"

Tabrez didn't answer immediately. He set his cup down, stood up slowly, and stretched his arms. Instead of walking back to his desk, he took slow, deliberate steps toward the back of the single-seater armchair where Afreen was sitting.

He stopped directly behind her. Then, heavy and warm, his hand came down to rest on her shoulder.

"Of course," he murmured, his voice hovering just above her head. "Anything for you, my dear."

Afreen stiffened instantly, holding her breath until her lungs burned. She stared rigidly at the wall straight ahead, refusing to turn around and meet his eyes.

"But you do know, dear… what you're asking for is completely illegal," Tabrez continued, his fingers giving her shoulder a slow, possessive squeeze. "I'll be putting my entire career at stake. And if by any chance this information ever gets leaked to the press or the Ministry, Ahmed will be in far bigger trouble than he is already in."

He paused, letting the silence and the weight of his touch settle over her.

"I'll do it only for you," he whispered. "But let me remind you again: it is illegal. I'll send you a list of the documents and details I require regarding Ahmed in a couple of days. Send them directly over to me, and I'll see what can be done."

Afreen immediately stood up, using the movement as a desperate pretext to break his physical contact and turn around.

"Thank you so much, Tabrez," she said, her voice tight but polite. "I knew I could count on you."

"Always," Tabrez said softly, stepping into her space and looking her straight in the eyes. "And I know I can count on you, too… when I need you."

Afreen immediately averted her eyes, feeling the heat of his gaze crawling over her figure. The underlying threat, the price tag attached to his favor, was crystal clear.

"Of course," she lied quietly, her eyes fixed on the patterned rug beneath his feet.

The moment Afreen stepped out of the high-security administrative complex and into the blinding afternoon sun, a cold realization settled into her bones: Nothing is going to be the same in my life ever again.

She had walked straight into a predator's trap, handing him the ultimate leverage over her family's future. And she knew, with fatalistic certainty, that Tabrez Malik was a man who collected every debt owed to him.

Yet, true to his immense bureaucratic reach, Tabrez moved with frightening efficiency. It took him less than a month to forge a completely clean identity for Ahmed.

The strategy was built on a legal loophole executed with surgical precision. First came the creation of a ghost narrative. ... a sworn statement drafted on official stamp paper, meticulously detailing Ahmed's old identity alongside his new name, his original faith, his converted religion, and a legal affirmation of the "voluntary nature" of his conversion. The affidavit was quietly notarized late at night by a compliant Public Notary deep within Tabrez's sphere of influence.

Next came the mandatory public notices. Standard law required a public declaration of a name and religion change to be printed in two major newspapers, one English daily and one local language paper. Tabrez ensured these legal advertisements were placed in obscure, low circulation regional editions, hidden in microscopic fonts beneath dense classifieds. To the Naval authorities searching for a court martialed deserter, Ahmed's

desertion record remained tied to a man who had effectively ceased to exist on paper.

The rest was merely administrative rubber stamping. Files moved between desks at record speed, bypassing background checks that would have otherwise triggered red flags in federal databases.

"I received my passport today! Thanks to you!"

Ahmed stepped into the kitchen, his face flushed with a triumphant, youthful energy that Afreen hadn't seen in years. He held the crisp, navy blue booklet in his hand like a golden ticket, gleaming with pure relief.

Afreen was perched on a low wooden stool, a rag in her hand, halfway through scrubbing down the plastic shelves of their refrigerator. She paused, looking up at his beaming expression.

"That's… that's great!" she said, forcing her voice to pitch upward into a semblance of genuine excitement.

"Told you Tabrez could get this done," Ahmed said proudly, flipping through the blank pages of the passport with visible awe. "The man has incredible reach."

"So… when are you planning to leave for Dubai?" she asked softly, turning her attention back to wiping a stubborn spot on the shelf to avoid his eyes.

"By the end of the month, I suppose," Ahmed said, pulling up a chair and sitting down, his voice rich with sudden optimism. "You know, Afreen… I have a feeling everything is finally going to turn out fine now. The worst is behind us."

He leaned forward, looking at her intently. "I'm going to land there, hit the ground running with this new job, and then call you and the kids over as soon as humanly possible."

"We'll see about that," she replied quietly, her hands moving in small, rhythmic circles with the rag. "I'm happy for you, Ahmed. Really."

Ahmed continued to talk, outlining his plans for their new life abroad, his voice fading into background noise as a cold, paralyzing clarity washed over Afreen.

Looking at her husband's untroubled, hopeful face, she knew the truth that he was entirely blind to. Ahmed was getting his freedom, but he was buying it with her invisible currency. It was only a matter of time before her phone would ring, Tabrez Malik's name would flash on the screen, and she would be forced to step into the dark to pay his price in full.



# Chapter 13

The steam in the bathroom was beginning to dissipate, clinging in thick, translucent beads to the cold tiles, when the faint, insistent chime of the doorbell cut through the hum of the geyser.

Afreen paused, her hand frozen on the brass shower tap. The water trickled down her back in cool, erratic rivulets. She glanced at the small frosted window above her shower stall. It was still far too early for visitors. The morning rush for school was over, she had heard the children's chaotic chatter and the heavy thud of their backpacks against the doorframe half an hour ago before they vanished down the lane.

Rashid Chacha will see to it, she thought, turning the tap completely until the silence of the house settled over her like a heavy blanket.

She took her time, wrapping herself in a plush, almond-colored phiran and drying her dark curls with a towel. Ten minutes passed before she stepped into the upper hallway. The timber floorboards of the old house groaned softly beneath her bare feet.

A timid knock sounded at her bedroom door.

"Yes, Rashid Chacha, I'm coming. Give me a minute," she called out, adjusting the silver ring on her thumb.

The door creaked open a few inches, revealing the weather-beaten, kindly face of their old domestic help. "Okay, beta," the old man whispered, his eyes darting briefly toward the stairs, a shadow of uneasiness in his gaze. "Someone is waiting for you in the drawing room."

"Coming," she replied, her brows knitting together.

Before heading downstairs, Afreen walked toward the large bay window at the front of her bedroom. It was her sanctuary, a private viewport overlooking the main road of Rajbagh. She felt deeply connected to its quiet rhythms, a silent observer of the countless daily stories unfolding on the road below.

By day, the road was a river of activity and color. But at night, it transformed into a quiet, inky expanse, a completely different world. Human life in Srinagar vanished with the sunset. The nocturnal darkness was broken only by the sporadic, heavy procession of armored security vehicles or the solitary, flashing red eye of an ambulance rushing into the night.

Because Rajbagh was an upscale area housing diplomats, politicians, and bureaucrats, security forces kept a low profile here compared to the rest of the valley. Patrols were rare, discreet, and fast.

Which was why the sight outside her gate made her heart violently leap into her throat.

Parked directly in front of her main entrance was a dark olive-green army Gypsy. Its engine idle hummed silently, exhaust curling into the crisp morning air. Just outside her boundary wall, two heavily armed soldiers clad in bulletproof vests and combat gear stood leaning against the gatepost, casually chatting with their assault rifles slung across their chests.

Afreen pulled back from the curtain, her pulse hammering in her ears like a war drum.

What is happening? Why is the army at my door?

Her mind spiraled, instantly flashing to her clandestine meeting with Adil just two nights ago. Did someone spot us? Did the intelligence wing track his movements? Have they come to search the house?

Cursing herself under her breath for her carelessness, she pressed her palm against her chest, forcing her lungs to expand. Breathe, she told herself. If they were here to raid, they wouldn't knock. They wouldn't sit in the drawing room.

She smoothed down her embroidered sleeves, straightened her posture, and began her descent down the wooden staircase.

Through the wooden balusters of the landing, she caught sight of him. A tall figure in a crisp, olive green service uniform stood in the center of the drawing room. His back was to her. He was standing perfectly still, his attention completely absorbed by the large framed canvas hanging on the far wall, a moody, abstract landscape of the Dal Lake in winter that her father had bought decades ago.

Even from behind, his presence was overwhelming. He possessed the broad-shouldered, athletic frame of a man whose body was an instrument forged by rigorous discipline.

As Afreen alighted from the final step of the staircase, her heels clicking softly against the marble floor, she broke the silence.

"The closer you are to the painting, the less you see," she said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. "The key is to watch it from a distance, so as not to miss out on any substance."

The army officer turned around.

The movement was neither sudden nor casual. It carried a deliberate, sharp precision, a powerful grace that instantly altered the energy of the entire room. He pivoted on his heel with military exactness, the tightly pressed wool of his uniform shifting tautly across his broad shoulders and back.

As he completed the rotation, his profile emerged into the morning light streaming through the drawn drapes: a jawline as sharp and uncompromising as chiseled granite, framing a face defined by hard, weather-tested lines. But it was his gaze that arrested her, steady, penetrating, and entirely devoid of hesitation.

Afreen felt a sudden, uncanny sensation: He didn't turn to look at me. He turned to be seen.

When his eyes met hers, she didn't just see a visitor in her home. She saw the quiet, fierce resolve of a commander accustomed to holding the line.

"Visual literacy is a skillset that's rarely taught," he said, his voice a deep, resonant baritone that filled the high-ceilinged room. "It begins with learning how to look at art. I have heard it doesn't matter whether you observe a work of art from close quarters or from a distance... what matters is knowing how to hold time still while watching it."

He paused, measuring her reaction with a slow, calculating look before speaking again with absolute conviction. "You must be Afreen."

Afreen offered a small, measured nod, refusing to let her eyes waver. "I am."

"I am Lieutenant Colonel Balraj Shergill." He gestured subtly toward himself, though his posture remained unyielding. "Although we haven't formally met, I have heard a great deal about you."

Afreen remained silent. She kept her hands folded neatly in front of her, letting the silence stretch between them, waiting for him to lay his cards on the table.

Recognizing her guarded posture, a faint, almost imperceptible softening flickered across Balraj's sharp features.

"I know this is sudden, and perhaps a bit awkward," he continued, taking a quarter-step forward. "But I met your father, Mansoor sir, a few times in Chandigarh."

Afreen's breath caught in her throat.

"Your father's close friend in Chandigarh, Sardar Harnam Singh, is my family's neighbor," Balraj explained, his tone dropping its hard military edge, shifting into something far more personal. "My parents' house is right next to his. It was over afternoon tea in their garden that I had the pleasure of meeting your father. When he had that heart attack and was admitted to the command hospital, I visited him there as well."

He looked directly into her eyes, his expression solemn. "Your father was a remarkably fine man, Afreen. Even in the few brief conversations we shared, it was impossible not to notice his warmth, his brilliance, and his deep affection for his family."

He bowed his head slightly. "I am here to offer my deepest condolences on his passing."

At the mention of her father, the icy wall of anxiety Afreen had built around herself shattered. A sudden, sharp lump formed in her throat, and her eyes welled with unbidden tears. Over the past few weeks, surrounded by chaos, family duties, and the constant shadow of fear, she had been forced to move forward without pause. She had never truly had a moment to grieve. Hearing a complete stranger speak of her father with such genuine reverence struck a raw, unhealed nerve.

Balraj noticed the sudden glimmer of pain in her eyes and adjusted his posture instantly, giving her a quiet moment to regain her composure without making a spectacle of it.

"When he was in Chandigarh," Balraj offered quietly, turning his gaze slightly toward the window to give her space, "we used to hold long chats about the history and the situation here in Kashmir. I was posted at the tactical command in my hometown at the time. I kept his phone number and called to check on his recovery after he returned to Srinagar..."

He turned back to her, his sharp eyes filled with a quiet, heavy sincerity. "It was deeply saddening when I learned he was gone."

The subtle clatter of porcelain on the tray broke the lingering silence as Rasheed Chacha shuffled into the drawing room. He carried a heavy brass tray laden with steaming cups of kahwa, a plate of almond-dusted biscuits, and hot, fried shami kebabs. The old man set the tray down on the low mahogany coffee table with practiced, silent grace, his hands trembling slightly, a subtle tremor that Balraj's trained eyes caught instantly.

"Thank you, Chacha," Balraj said, his tone warm and disarmingly respectful.

Rashid gave a curt, deferential bow before retreating toward the kitchen, his slippers dragging softly on the carpeted corridor.

Balraj leaned forward, adjusting the crisp crease of his trousers as he took a cup. He glanced up at Afreen, his expression casual, almost offhandedly curious. "Your husband... Ahmed, if I am not wrong?"

Afreen took a slow breath, steadying herself before taking a seat on the opposite sofa. "Yes. Ahmed. He is in Dubai presently."

"Work?" Balraj asked, taking a measured sip of the tea, his eyes fixed on her over the rim of the cup.

"Sort of..." she replied, keeping her answer opaque, her tone even.

She wasn't about to elaborate on Ahmed's vague business ventures or the growing, cold distance that had settled between them long before he boarded the flight to the Gulf. Instead, she shifted the spotlight back onto him.

"So... are you now posted in Kashmir?"

"Yes," Balraj replied smoothly. "Just ten days back."

He offered no further details, no unit designations, no base location, no operational scope. And Afreen, bound by the unwritten rules of living in the Valley, did not press. In Srinagar, asking too many questions of a man in uniform was an invitation for trouble.

What Afreen did not know was that Lieutenant Colonel Balraj Shergill was not merely another officer assigned to the local garrison. He belonged to the elite core of the XV Corps, the famed Chinar Corps, and was a high value asset within its specialized counter-insurgency division, Victor Force.

Formed in the mid nineties under the umbrella of the Rashtriya Rifles, Victor Force was the hammer of the Indian Army in the volatile, heavily forested southern districts of Jammu and Kashmir. Balraj came with an impeccable, lethal track record in counter-terror operations. This was his second tenure in the Valley, a special deputation drawn from regular forces specifically because of his surgical, intelligence-driven approach to high-stakes warfare.

This time, he had been summoned back under absolute secrecy.

Military intelligence had confirmed a disturbing shift in the Valley's subterranean network: the subtle, shadowy infiltration of an Al Qaeda-inspired doctrine. While initial reports suggested their operational numbers were still small compared to the long-standing indigenous and cross border militant factions, the threat was far more dangerous. They were utilizing encrypted digital networks for radicalization and recruitment, spawning dormant, unpredictable "lone wolf" cells across the districts.

For the intelligence apparatus in New Delhi, the entry of a well-organized, ideologically extreme, and internationally networked apparatus into Kashmir was a nightmare scenario. If left unchecked, it could burn the Valley into an uncontainable inferno. Balraj's mandate was clear: locate the nexus and sever it at the root before it could sprout.

At the epicenter of this new threat was a name that had begun echoing through encrypted radio chatter and high-level briefing rooms alike: Adil, alias 'The Lone Wolf'.

Intelligence dossiers firmly linked Adil to the regional spearhead of this new network. Before leaving the tactical headquarters for Srinagar, Balraj had spent hours memorizing Adil's thick classified file. Page by page, he had analyzed the target's history, until one detail stopped him cold, a cross-reference connecting Adil's father, Rasheed, directly to the household of the late Mansoor Sahib.

Balraj had stared at the document in disbelieving silence. It was a staggering coincidence, that the key to the most sensitive counter-terror operation in the sector was tied directly to the family of a man he had shared tea with in a peaceful Chandigarh garden.

Visiting Mansoor's house was a calculated risk. Balraj knew he had to tread with extreme delicacy; one wrong move could tip off the household or burn a potential lead. Classified field reports

had hinted at unconfirmed contacts between old Rasheed and his fugitive son. More alarmingly, a vague, unverified intelligence note suggested that Adil might have reached out to Afreen herself.

Yet, Balraj was too seasoned to rely blindly on raw local intelligence. Field informants in Kashmir were notoriously mercenary, often inventing sensational leads to keep their monthly retainers flowing. Surveillance on Rasheed and Afreen had produced nothing conclusive, no intercepted calls, no suspicious drop-offs, no digital footprints.

Balraj was split between his military duty and his personal ethics. Using his connection with her late father felt uncomfortably close to deception, but in the gray, ruthlessly pragmatic world of counter-intelligence, every avenue had to be explored.

"So," Afreen asked, breaking into his thoughts as she rested her hands in her lap, "is your family here with you as well?"

"My parents reside in Chandigarh," Balraj replied, leaning back slightly. He paused, a faint, wry smile touching his lips. "Oh... perhaps you were asking about my spouse and kids?"

Afreen offered a small, polite smile in acknowledgment.

"Well, I am divorced," Balraj said, his tone matter of fact, completely devoid of self-pity. "My ex-wife couldn't cope with the constant uncertainty, the sudden deployments, the living on tethers. It’s one of the professional hazards of wearing this uniform. I have a daughter, though, she stays with her mother."

"I am sorry to hear that," Afreen said quietly, her empathy genuine. "It must be very tough for you."

"I’m not so sure about 'tough', Afreen..." Balraj paused, looking at her intently. "...if it’s alright with you that I call you by your name?"

"Of course you can," she murmured, nodding.

"Divorce isn't always a tragedy," Balraj continued, his voice dropping into a reflective, smooth register. "Sometimes it's beneficial, if it removes people from high conflict, stagnant, or unhealthy situations. It gives a person the chance to pursue their own goals, their own dreams, things that were put on hold for far too long. What do you think?"

He was watching her face with razor sharp precision, looking for the tiny, subconscious shifts, a tight jaw, a guarded look, a flicker of recognition. He wanted to build an effortless rapport, using an open ended philosophical prompt to gauge the reality of her marriage to Ahmed. His strategy was to appear informal, observant, and subtly confident, lowering her defenses step by step.

Afreen glanced down at her cup before meeting his eye. "I am probably no one to give an opinion on divorce," she said softly, choosing her words with care. "But... I do know what it feels like to stay alone, to manage everything by yourself because of a husband's work. First Ahmed was away in Jammu for long stretches, and now Dubai. So, for me at least... Yes, being alone is tough."

"Everyone walks their own path and finds their own ways to survive the distance," Balraj said smoothly, placing his empty cup onto the saucer with a soft, definitive click.

He stood up from the sofa, his tall frame once again filling the room. "Thank you for your time today, Afreen."

He reached into his breast pocket, drew out a crisp, heavy stock white visiting card, and laid it delicately on the glass table beside her cup.

"This has my direct number," he said, looking straight into her eyes. "If you ever need anything, any assistance at all, please don't hesitate to call me. Day or night."

"Thank you for visiting, Colonel Sahab," Afreen said, rising to escort him. "It was truly a pleasure meeting you."

"Please... call me Balraj," he said with a warm, disarming smile. "And the pleasure was entirely mine."

Afreen offered a soft, genuine smile in return. "Balraj... it is then."

She led him to the front door and pulled it open, stepping back to let him pass. Balraj walked down the porch steps and strolled casually toward his green Gypsy waiting by the gate. The two armed soldiers standing guard instantly snapped to attention, hurrying to hold the heavy door open for him before scrambling back into their escort vehicle behind.

Balraj climbed into the front passenger seat. Captain Amit Shetty, sitting in the driver's side with a secure radio set rested against his thigh, turned to him eagerly.

"So, how was it, Sir?" Shetty asked under his breath.

"Cordial," Balraj muttered, staring straight ahead through the windshield, his face turning into a mask of cold operational focus. "Let's go."

He signaled the driver, and the engine roared to life, the tires crunching over the gravel as they pulled out onto the main road.

"Amit," Balraj said, his voice dropping an octave into a firm command. "I want that house under twenty four hour electronic and physical surveillance. Every person who comes in, every person who leaves, everyone they interact with. I want a complete log."

"Roger, Sir!" Shetty replied instantly, making a quick note on his pad.

As the army convoy sped away down the quiet, tree lined avenue of Rajbagh, neither Balraj nor his team noticed the silver sedan idling discreetly eighty meters down the street, parked in the shadow of a local handloom showroom.

Inside the sedan, a man sat in the driver's seat with a long digital telephoto lens pressed against the cracked window. His finger tapped the shutter button rapidly, capturing high-resolution frames of the Lieutenant Colonel stepping out of Afreen's house, the escort troops, and the precise timestamp of the visit.

Balraj believed he was setting a trap. He had no idea that the house was already under round the clock watch, not by the military, nor by the state police, but on the explicit orders of the newly emerged chief of the Valley's Al Qaeda network.

The Lone Wolf was already watching.



# Chapter 14

The bitter, freezing bite of the Chattru forest seemed to stop dead at the trench's mouth. But inside the belly of the earth, the silence carried its own suffocating weight.

Adil lay motionless on the makeshift timber cot, staring up into the dark. To an untrained eye, the roof above him was nothing more than packed turf and rough-hewn mountain logs. But beneath that deceptive crust of dirt lay a brutal skeleton of reinforced concrete and structural steel, a subterranean shield engineered to swallow the kinetic fury of a high altitude mortar. It had taken twenty agonizing days of bone breaking, silent labor to carve this tomb out of the steep, timbered ridges of Kishtwar. Hidden under a dense canopy of pine and jagged granite, Adil considered the bunker a masterpiece of tactical survival.

They were rats in the root systems now. The golden era, when they could simply melt into the warm, cluttered attics of friendly villagers, was dead. Human intelligence networks were fracturing. Local support, ground down by the relentless, grinding pressure of the Indian Security Forces, was evaporating into fear and silence. The old playbooks were useless.

Down here, suspended in the dark, life was maintained by an invisible thread: a network of overground operatives who hauled month-long lifelines, heavy sacks of flour, rice, instant

noodles, and steel gas cylinders, up vertical, treacherous mountain tracks. Their subterranean kitchen was a bunker within a bunker, constructed behind stacked granite and heavy, light-proof tarpaulin. It ran off a three burner stove, flanked by narrow, phantom exit cuts carved directly into the cliffside, passages designed for ghosts to slip into the fog when the end came.

They were ghost soldiers, hidden in plain sight, breathing the subterranean chill. Yet, as Adil closed his eyes, he knew the greatest danger wasn't the frostbite waiting outside, nor was it the patrolling columns searching the ridge above.

It was the quiet, venomous paranoia slowly rotting them from the inside out.

I have some doubts about Afreen," Azhar said. His voice was a flat, low rasp, refusing to meet Adil's eyes.

Adil didn't move. His gaze remained locked on the concrete seam overhead, refusing to grant Azhar the satisfaction of a flinch.

"Did you hear me, Adil?" Azhar's tone sharpened, brittle with sudden irritation.

"Hmm…" Adil murmured, the sound barely floating out of his chest.

"Do you know that Afreen has been frequently visiting Tabrez Malik? That bastard DIG?"

"She is related to Tabrez," Adil replied, his tone chillingly nonchalant.

"There is something going on," Azhar pressed, leaning forward, his posture stiffening as the shadows stretched around him. "Trust me on this, Adil. She isn't visiting him at his office. She isn't going to his home. They've been frequenting a quiet hotel off the bypass."

Adil's chest remained steady, but beneath his ribs, a dark gear shifted into place.

"Listen," Azhar continued, the words tumbling out faster now, laced with urgency. "You know I couldn't care less about your feelings for her. I never approved of you meeting her in the first place. But a woman visiting a Deputy Inspector General on a regular basis in a hotel room? That isn't a family visit, Adil, it means we are being sold out. Her husband is in Dubai, and the streets are saying he's abandoned her completely. She's broke. And Colonel Shergil, the man the Army assigned specifically to put a bullet in your head, has been spotted near her house. You know this. You need to handle it."

Slowly, agonizingly so, Adil swung his legs over the edge of the cot. The movement was like a predator uncoiling in the dark. He stood, towering in the dim, lantern lit vault, stretching his arms until his knuckles cracked, a sharp, metallic snap that echoed off the damp subterranean walls like the cocking of a pistol.

He stepped toward Azhar, his boots crushing the dirt floor with deliberate weight. Reaching down, he placed a single, heavy hand on Azhar's shoulder.

"You didn't mention any of this before, did you?" Adil asked softly.

Azhar kept his eyes glued to the earth. He didn't have the stomach to face the terrifying, blade-like stare fixed upon him, a gaze that felt capable of stripping away bone to expose the raw truth underneath. Under the sudden weight of Adil's grip, Azhar froze.

"How was I supposed to know, Azhar bhai?" Adil's voice dropped lower, laced with a dangerous, quiet restraint. "Or did you just presume that I already knew?"

“But… you had her house under surveillance,” Azhar stammered, his earlier confidence evaporating into a cold sweat. “I thought… I assumed you knew.”

“Well, I didn't,” Adil said. His fingers tightened on Azhar’s shoulder, just enough to register the malice beneath the touch. “I have been sitting in this grave, cut off from Srinagar, precisely as you advised me to do. It was you, Azhar bhai, who was supposed to keep me informed.”

Azhar swallowed hard, his throat dry. “Adil… Shergill was brought in specifically for you. I know what Afreen means to you, but any misstep right now puts us all in a mass grave. It puts your neck in the noose. I was only trying to safeguard you.”

Adil’s heart hardened into granite. He pulled his hand away and turned his back.

Safeguard me, he thought bitterly.

It was obvious Afreen was being squeezed, caught in the relentless vice of the state’s security apparatus simply because of her connection to him. He could understand Shergill’s shadow over her house, a cold, textbook intelligence operation using a vulnerable woman as live bait to draw out a high-value target. But Tabrez Malik? The DIG was a ruthless opportunist who served only his own violent ambition. Why a hotel room off the bypass? The image burned in Adil's mind, a jagged piece of a puzzle that refused to fit.

In the heavy silence of the bunker, the full weight of his double life pressed down on him.

He had started this movement envisioning a clean political struggle, a fierce, uncompromising fight for the liberation of Kashmir. He had even openly advocated for the safe return of the Kashmiri Pandits, promising them protection in a free state. But political ideals didn't buy assault rifles, cold weather gear, or

military grade explosives. When he approached them, the central command of Al-Qaeda had made the terms of their patronage brutally simple: No ideology, no money.

To survive, to stay operational, and, above all, to permanently sever Pakistan's cynical, puppeteering grip on the Kashmiri cause, Adil had signed a Faustian bargain. Accepting the title of "Emir" of Ansar Ghazwat-ul-Hind through the Global Islamic Media Front, he had knowingly painted a massive target on his own back and slapped a one million rupee bounty on his head. He had broadcast recorded rants demanding an Islamic revolution under Sharia law, even issuing a stark, public threat to the Pakistani ISI that if Islamabad betrayed Kashmir, the fire would spill across their own borders.

It was a calculated, deadly theater. In his soul, martyrdom held no romantic light, nor did fundamentalism. The radical dogma was merely an engine, a volatile, toxic fuel he burned to drive his true objective, a Kashmir free from both Indian boots and Pakistani control. He had watched older separatist factions rot through compromise and incompetence. He would not play the victim. He was willing to poison his own name, so long as the ultimate end remained untainted.

Even now, the phantom memory of his father and sister tugged at him. The rare, heavily sanitized notes he managed to leak to them cost him dearly. His father, exhausted and endlessly tormented by security forces to make his son surrender, wept every time they made contact. And every time, Adil had to armor his heart and recite his script, telling the old man that surrender was dishonor, that martyrdom was his only path.

He didn't care if his own life ended in a blood soaked ditch. But he would not let Afreen be torn apart in the crossfire of his war. She was being stalked by vultures, Shergill tightening the dragnet, Malik hovering the dark

Afreen had remained silent so far; he was certain of it. If she had broken, the army would have breached this bunker weeks ago. But this hotel detail was an anomaly he couldn't ignore.

Adil turned back to Azhar, his resolve settling into something cold and razor sharp.

“Azhar bhai,” Adil said, his quiet voice cutting through the damp air like a blade. “I need to know everything about those hotel visits. Every entrance, every car, every second she spends inside.”

Azhar nodded rapidly, visibly relieved the barrel of Adil's attention had shifted away from him. “Alright. I’ll gather what I can. But stay on the earth, Adil. She is radioactive right now. I’m telling you, Shergill is practically begging you to make a move.”

Adil offered no reply. He simply looked around the reinforced walls of his subterranean fortress.

Azhar was right about one thing, it was a trap. But as Adil’s mind mapped out the battlefield, he realized that hiding in the dirt was no longer survival, it was slow execution. If they were using Afreen as the wire to trip him, he would hit it head on. On his own terms.

It was time to leave the tomb. It was time to go back to Srinagar.



# Chapter 15

The air in the room was thick, heavy with the suffocating residue of Tabrez Malik's presence and the faint, chemical tang of hotel-grade lavender spray. For Afreen, time had stretched into an agonizing crawl. Over an hour had passed since Tabrez's polished shoes had clicked down the hallway, yet she remained bound to the space by his strict instructions. Leaving together was a risk he wouldn't take; leaving too soon was a rule she didn't dare break. It had become a grim, fifteen day ritual, a calculated timetable of her own degradation.

As was her habit, Afreen had spent the first thirty minutes in the bathroom, huddled beneath the relentless spray of the shower. She had let herself cry until her throat burned and her chest heaved, letting the water wash away the physical trace even as the psychological stain remained untouched. It was an intentional, agonizing purge. She had learned that letting herself feel the full weight of the horror was the only way to dry up the intense, wild emotions, allowing her to function once the tears stopped. To suppress it would mean imploding entirely.

Because this wasn't merely about the physical exploitation she had been forced to endure over the past nine grueling months. It was a relentless assault of moral injury, a deep-seated psychological resentment, and a calculated humiliation. Every

meeting with Tabrez left her with a sickening realization: her soul had been violated. It wasn't just trauma; it was a profound, soul-shattering disruption to her very sense of self, leaving her moral core fractured and her identity stripped away bit by bit.

Her mind had traversed a dark, erratic spectrum of coping mechanisms over the months. In the beginning, there was raw anger, terrifying confusion, and the sharp sting of betrayal. She had tried denial, fiercely shoving the thoughts into the darkest corners of her mind, only for her trauma to bleed out during the most mundane tasks, a sudden, uncontrollable burst of sobbing while folding her children's laundry, or a wave of blinding rage while brushing her teeth. In her lowest moments, she had even tried to rationalize the horrific arrangement, convincing herself it was a twisted form of revenge against Ahmed, who had abandoned her and left her completely in the lurch.

Lately, though, Tabrez's cruelty had escalated. The physical assaults were growing more brutal, the psychological games more sadistic. Suicide had crossed her mind more times than she dared to admit, whispering promises of peace. But every time she stood on the precipice of ending it all, the faces of her children anchored her back to the earth. She couldn't leave them alone in a world this cruel.

So, she prayed. In the quiet desperation of her heart, she begged Allah for a miracle, not for escape, which felt impossible, but for a mechanism. She desperately wanted to learn how to sever her mind from her body for those agonizing two hours, to split her dual entities so that Tabrez only ever touched a hollow shell. But the human spirit doesn't fracture on command, and her prayers for dissociation remained unanswered.

Knock. Knock.

The gentle, rhythmic sound against the heavy wooden door shattered her spiraling thoughts.

Afreen flinched, pulling herself up from the plush lounge chair where she had been staring blankly at the wall. She smoothed down her clothes with trembling hands, swallowing the lump in her throat.

Must be the bellboy coming for the luggage before my checkout, she reasoned, attempting to steady her frantic heartbeat.

She walked to the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open.

The world seemed to stop. The air rushed out of her lungs as her brain flatlined, utterly unable to process the figure standing before her. Her pulse spiked into a terrifying crescendo, an intense, chaotic surge of shock, speechlessness, and a sickening, suffocating wave of guilt.

"Adil...!" she stammered, the name tearing from her throat as a breathless gasp.

Adil stood in the doorway, his posture stiff, his face an unreadable mask. He looked at her blankly, his eyes dark hollows of unreadable emotion.

"Salaam alaikum, Afreen," he said, his voice terrifyingly calm, carrying a weight that made the floor feel unstable beneath her feet.

"What... what are you doing here?" she blurted out, her hands instinctively clutching the edge of the doorframe for support.

"Can I come in?" Adil asked softly, entirely ignoring her frantic question.

Before she could answer, his eyes shifted slightly, settling on the young bellboy standing discreetly a few paces behind him in the hallway. Sensing the suffocating tension, the bellboy offered a

brief, nervous nod, turned on his heel, and walked away down the carpeted corridor, his footsteps fading into nothingness.

Adil turned his gaze back to her, his expression unwavering. "Can I come in?" he repeated, the words measured and quiet.

"Yes..." she whispered, her voice laced with a nervous, trembling reluctance. She stepped backward, opening the door wider to carve out a path for him.

Adil stepped into the room, but he didn't look at her, nor did he look at the unmade bed or the discarded lingering evidence of the afternoon. Instead, he walked straight past her toward the heavy, floor-to-ceiling drapes. With a slow, deliberate movement, he pulled them wide open, flooding the dim room with harsh, unfiltered sunlight.

He needed light. He needed air. His spirit felt as though it were drowning in the shallow, filthy waters of this day, and he desperately needed to rise to the surface of the silence, to open his lungs and inhale the sky.

Without a word, Adil reached for the heavy ergonomic chair positioned beside the hotel room's study table. He pulled it out, the legs scraping softly against the carpet, and sat down, placing a physical and metaphorical distance between them as he waited for the truth to unravel.

Afreen stood frozen near the closed door, the wood against her back offering the only shred of support to a body that felt entirely hollowed out. Her legs had turned to jelly, her limbs loosening like water flowing downward, defying the basic laws of gravity that were supposed to keep her upright. Every breath felt like a triumph over air that refused to enter her lungs.

"Can I have a cup of tea?" Adil asked.

His voice was terrifyingly calm, devoid of the harsh edge she had bracingly anticipated. He wasn't looking at her. Instead, his gaze remained fixed on the sky beyond the glass, a stark, moon-blanched landscape that transformed the hotel room window into a silent, glowing screen.

Her body had met its absolute limits, yet her legs carried her forward on pure, mechanical instinct. She moved toward the kitchenette shelf, picked up a bottle of mineral water, and poured it into the electric kettle. The appliance hummed to life with a low, metallic melody, and within moments, steam rose from its spout like a gentle ghost. Neither of them spoke. The silence between them was deafening, filling every corner of the room until it pressed painfully against Afreen's temples.

"You know, Afreen..." Adil's voice cut through the hum of the kettle. "When I was a kid, my father told me a little story. It was about a young boy who was handicapped and orphaned, living on the streets with his little sister. People gave them food out of pity, and that was how they survived. But one day, no one came. Though the boy could endure his own hunger, his younger sister couldn't, and she began to cry."

Afreen listened in total silence, her fingers trembling as she stirred a spoonful of sugar into the steaming cup. She walked over with slow, deliberate steps and handed it to him.

Adil took a sip, still looking away, before continuing. "The poor boy begged, but everyone turned their backs. Suddenly, he saw a man passing by with a wallet hanging halfway out of his back pocket. The boy crept up behind him, slipped the wallet out unnoticed, and ran straight to a grocery shop to buy food for his dying sister."

He finally turned his head, his eyes locking onto hers. "At the end of the story, my father asked me: 'So tell me, Adil, did the poor boy do the right thing by committing theft, or was he wrong?'

And I told him, 'He did the right thing, Abbu.' I was completely convinced. He had to feed his sister; otherwise, she would have died."

Adil paused, his gaze darkening slightly. "Then my father continued the story. He told me, 'Adil, the man the boy stole from, was on his way to a chemist to buy life-saving medicine for his own daughter, who was suffering from a deadly disease. That stolen money was all he had.' Then my father asked me again: 'Now tell me, did the poor boy do the right thing or not?'"

A heavy breath escaped Adil's lips. "I fell silent, Afreen. That was the day I realized that right and wrong are rarely absolute. They are relative, shaped by situational context, circumstance, and perspective. Moral relativism. My father taught me that we shouldn't judge the actions of others, because universal moral principles rarely survive the reality of human suffering. And I tell you this now because when I offered you financial assistance, you rejected it and called it 'blood money.'"

"Money?!"

The word ripped through Afreen like a lightning strike.

She had been silently evaluating the situation, trying to process the overwhelming emotional weight of his presence. But the word money ignited something dark and dormant within her. It wasn't just an insult; it got under her skin, setting her blood ablaze with an instant, insane rage.

She took two violent steps forward and brought her palm across his face with a sickening crack.

"You think I am a whore, you bastard?!" she shrieked, her voice cracking with fury. "You think I am doing this for money?! How dare you!"

Adil did not flinch. He didn't even recoil.

He slowly, methodically placed his teacup onto the table. His total lack of reaction denied Afreen the satisfaction she so desperately craved. The physical violence was rendered completely meaningless, leaving her feeling utterly helpless, exposed, and stripped naked in her own despair.

And in that sudden, profound void where her rage died, a different truth surged forward.

Afreen realized what she truly wanted, what she had always wanted. She had known in her heart that her life would eventually lead to this single, intimate moment. The fiery rage she held for him was never hate; it was the raw, disguised agony of starved love. The same volatile energy that had fueled her violence redirected itself in a heartbeat, igniting an unquenchable, desperate desire.

What followed wasn't soft. It was raw, unfiltered, intense, and terrifyingly honest, a desperate collision carrying the lingering energy of the anger that had just consumed them. The transition from fury to surrender felt like a volatile journey from fire to tenderness, a chaotic metamorphosis where destruction yielded to overwhelming passion.

It was explosive, an insatiable dance born of shared pain and lingering attachment. They clawed at each other as if trying to tear away the trauma, the distance, and the months of grief, until the fiery storm slowly faded into a quiet, smoldering heat. The act ended not with a victory, but with a silent battle cry of complete surrender.

Afterward, they lay entangled in the quiet shadows of the room, lost in a hazy, golden afterglow. Their breathing was a unison of heavy sighs, their hearts beating in a synchronized, fragile rhythm against the quiet darkness.

"Thank you," Afreen whispered softly into the quiet.

Adil lay on his back, staring up at the white plaster of the ceiling. "For what?"

"For being there for me... for keeping me in your thoughts. For trying to protect me."

Adil sluggishly rolled out of the bed, sitting on the edge before turning to look down at her. His shadow fell across her pale skin.

"Was I really able to protect you?" he asked, his voice laced with a bitter, heavy truth.

The question shattered whatever thin composure she had left. Afreen's eyes welled up, and hot, uncontrollable tears spilled down her cheeks. Her chin trembled violently, her breathing ragged as the emotional overload built up over months of silence finally broke its dams. She was screaming inside, drowning in the agony of everything she had endured.

Adil leaned back toward her and took her trembling hand. He rubbed his thumb gently over her knuckles, feeling the delicate pulse beneath her skin. Then, with agonizing tenderness, he traced the curve of her jaw and lifted her chin, anchoring her wet gaze directly to his own, an unshakeable promise forged in a fleeting, fragile moment.

"I'm right here with you," he murmured softly against her ear, his breath warm against her cold skin. "You're not alone in this. I'm not going anywhere."

He looked deeply into her eyes. "Disclosing this will only make us stronger. I want you to tell me everything, Afreen. Trust me."

Afreen buried her face slightly into his palm, fresh tears soaking his skin. "I completely trust you, Adil," she wept, the last of her fear and embarrassment melting into the warm sanctuary

of his presence. "I have been such a fool... instead of coming to you with my problems, I went to all the wrong places."

Prompted by the overwhelming safety of his touch, the wall she had built over nine torturous months finally collapsed. The truth, ugly, brutal, and raw, was ready to come out.



# Chapter 16

"Sir! The information is confirmed! He was here in Srinagar." Captain Amit Shetty hadn't bothered to knock. He stepped into the office, his combat fatigues damp at the shoulders, breathing with the shallow, rapid cadence of a man carrying hot news.

Balraj didn't lift his head immediately. He let the silence stretch just long enough to anchor the room. "Where?"

"He was at Hotel Blue Residency three days back, Sir. Stayed the night over," Amit said, stepping closer to the perimeter of the desk. "We looked into the hotel records, but it's a dead end. Entries in the register for all seven rooms, but one turned out to be completely fake, false name, fabricated local address. I'm certain it's the one he used."

Balraj's eyes narrowed slightly. "How about the CCTV?"

"Non functional, Sir."

"Hmm." Balraj finally straightened up, rolling his shoulders back. A faint, bitter smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "It's obvious the hotel staff is in cahoots. I don't think it's just a coincidence that a fake entry and a blind camera happened simultaneously. That kind of synchronization isn't bad luck, Amit. It's a deliberate circuit."

"You're right, Sir! It smells," Amit agreed, leaning forward. "So... Do we bag the staff? Pull them in for interrogation?"

"We need to be careful here," Balraj cautioned, lifting a hand to slow him down. "We aren't in a vacuum. Security forces have been called out before for heavy-handedness during these sweeps, complaints from local unions, staff claiming harassment while just trying to make a living. This is Kashmir, remember? One wrong move, one video on social media, and the whole valley erupts like a volcano."

He walked over to the rain-streaked window, looking out into the darkening courtyard.

"Rather than picking up the whole house and causing a scene, I want you to zero down on a weak link. Find a bellboy, someone who served that specific room. The Blue Residency isn't a starred property; the staff roster will be thin. You build rapport. Offer sympathy, use alternative questioning to trap him into an admission. Offer him cash, promise him protection, whatever it takes. But bring him in quietly. If we raise an alarm, Adil gets wind of it. If he's using that joint as a regular transit house, he'll vanish into thin air again."

Balraj turned back, his tone dropping an octave. "This man, Adil, is a ghost, Amit. He's been lying low for a couple of months, and that isn't like him. I have a hunch he's preparing to strike big. It's the lull before the storm. There has to be a local contact, someone he was visiting in that room. Find the local wire, and we find Adil."

"I'll get on it straight away, Sir," Amit said crisping up, his body snapping into a sharp salute before he turned on his heel.

Amit was a product of tactical interrogation training, a discipline built less on bruised knuckles and more on psychological sleight of hand. He knew the art of conversational trickery,

lowering a target's guard through a casual demeanor, dropping soft sympathetic ploys, and setting quiet verbal traps. His objective was simple, isolate the room service kid who carried the tea tray to room number four. In his mind, he was looking for a scared, underpaid local teenager who had simply been paid a few extra hundred rupees to look the other way.

He was dead wrong.

The boy who had served room four was named Mustafa Zaidi. And Mustafa was no innocent bystander caught in the crossfire of a shadow war.

Mustafa was an Overground Worker, an OGW, a thread in the invisible, quiet web that sustained the insurgency. Recruited months ago by Azhar Hajini, he wasn't just clearing tea cups; he was an active eye on the street, specifically tasked with tracking the movements of DIG Tabrez Alam and Afreen. He was the infrastructure the military couldn't see.

Two hours later, Amit's voice came crackling through Balraj's encrypted cell line. The calm, tactical tone was gone, replaced by a tense, razor-sharp edge.

"Sir! Our man isn't an innocent room service boy."

Balraj, already reaching for his shoulder holster, paused. "Talk to me."

"I leaned on the hotel manager. After two hours of sweating him out, he finally broke. He was forced into employing this guy five months ago on explicit orders from the outside."

"Who is he? Do you have him?"

"Mustafa Zaidi, Sir," Amit reported, the sound of rain tapping against his vehicle's roof audible in the background. "He's an active OGW. Already listed in our database as a person of interest. His direct handler is Azhar Hajini, Adil's right hand. I

managed to pull a grainy frame from a nearby bakery's private camera street side. Zaidi was using a proxy name at the hotel, but it's him."

Balraj's jaw tightened. The ghost suddenly had a physical shadow. "I want this man, Amit. At all costs. Where is he?"

"We just hit a credible lead, Sir. He panicked and holed up in his sister's house on the outskirts of Badgam. I need your green signal to move in and scoop him up before he flushes his comms."

"Hold your horses," Balraj commanded, slipping his arms into his heavy tactical jacket. "I'm coming along, Amit. I'll join the operation personally. Get the assault team prepped, but do not breach until I'm on site. Meet me on the southern bypass of Badgam in one hour."

He snapped his radio harness shut. "In the meantime... put eyes on that house. Don't let that rat breathe."

"Roger, Sir! We're on it."

Balraj cut the line, grabbed his sidearm from the desk, and pulled the door open. Outside, the Srinagar rain was turning into a downpour, but for the first time in months, the air felt charged. The ghost had left a footprint.

The rusted Iron-framed clock on the dash of the Mahindra Marksman armored vehicle clicked rhythmically, marking the passage of minutes as Srinagar's suburban sprawl gave way to the tight, suffocating alleyways of Badgam. Historically known to scholars and poets as Deedarmarg, the place of sight, the town now sat under the grey, brooding Kashmiri sky, heavy with rain that refused to fall.

In the back of the lead vehicle, Balraj adjusted the tactical sling of his Tavor TAR-21. The suppressed short-barrel rifle felt light, engineered for the claustrophobic brutality of close quarters

room clearing. Across from him sat three men from his assault team, their faces partially obscured by balaclavas, their eyes cold and focused. The cabin smelled of diesel fumes, damp Cordura nylon, and weapon oil.

"One hour," Balraj muttered, checking his watch. "The window is closing."

"Lance Naik Harpal has eyes on the target, sir," Amit said from the co-driver's seat, holding a radio handset to his ear over the engine's roar. "Target hasn't moved. The house sits at the end of a dead-end lane near the old brick kiln. Dense housing. Tight corners."

"Good," Balraj said, leaning forward. "We hit them hard and fast. Three teams of seven. Block every egress. If Zaidi wakes up before we get hands on him, he'll try to melt into the neighborhood."

Balraj knew Badgam better than most. It was a pressure cooker, a high-density urban labyrinth just twenty kilometers from the state capital, housing the valley's sole airport and a population whose grievances simmered just beneath the surface. In operations like this, the enemy wasn't just the man hiding in the attic, it was the element of time itself.

The armored convoy screeched to a halt at the edge of the neighborhood, the heavy rubber tires grinding against the crushed gravel of the lane. Harpal stepped out from the shadows of a half demolished boundary wall, gesturing silently toward a two-story structure built of unplastered red brick and wooden lattice window frames.

"Teams two and three, move to the flanks," Balraj ordered in a quiet, firm tone to his communicator. "Keep the perimeter tight. No one steps out, no one looks out."

Within seconds, twenty-one heavily armed soldiers spread across the alleys like grease on water. Balraj's assault group moved in single file, their boots making negligible sound against the damp earth. They bypassed the standard-issue AK-47s favored by local insurgents, carrying instead MP5 submachine guns and Tavors, weapons built for fast, surgical precision where collateral damage was a career-ending liability.

Balraj reached the main door. He gave a brief nod to his breach operator, who slammed a heavy steel pry bar into the seam beside the lock mechanism.

CRACK.

The wood splintered violently under the concentrated hydraulic like force. The door flew inward.

"Go! Go! Clear!"

Balraj stormed through the doorway first, weapon raised, taking the narrow stairwell three steps at a time while his men swept the ground floor. Shouts rang out, women's voices shrieking in high-pitched terror, children weeping, mixed with the harsh, guttural commands of the assault squad.

In the corner bedroom upstairs, the door was kicked off its hinges. Mustafa Zaidi was still tangled in a heavy cotton quilt, his eyes wide, bloodshot, and dazed. Before his mind could fully grasp the sudden intrusion, two soldiers had pinned him against the floorboard, securing his wrists in heavy-duty plastic zip-ties.

"In and cleared!" a soldier called out.

"Search the floorboards," Balraj commanded, keeping his weapon aimed at the ceiling, his eyes scanning the room. "Check the wooden panels under the rugs."

Two minutes later, an operator lifted a loose floorboard near the structural beam. He pulled out an oil greased rag containing an AK-47 rifle, followed by two Russian-made F1 hand grenades.

"We have ordnance, Major," the soldier reported.

Outside, the first whistles began to blow.

It was an ominous, familiar sound in the valley. A lone youth shouted from a nearby balcony, another answered from a roof two streets away. Within minutes, the alley would transform into an impassable sea of flying stones and angry crowds.

Balraj checked his watch. Four minutes since breach.

"The neighborhood is waking up," Amit warned, peeking through a shattered window pane as small rocks began to hit the outer wall of the compound. "They're gathering near the main road."

Balraj knew the lethal arithmetic of Kashmiri mob dynamics. Months prior, during an encounter in a neighboring district, a stone-pelting crowd had isolated a Junior Commissioned Officer, beating him until the unit was forced to fire live rounds into the throng to save his life. The resulting civilian casualty had launched a months-long Court of Inquiry, tying down officers in endless legal paperwork and public outrage.

"We don't have time to argue with a crowd," Balraj said coolly. "Bring the Marksman right up to the porch. We load Zaidi directly into the cabin."

The heavy armored vehicle reversed up the narrow lane, its steel plating scraping the sides of the brick walls. Zaidi was dragged out, thrown into the dark rear compartment, and the heavy doors slammed shut with a deafening metallic clatter. The driver stomped on the accelerator, plowing through the assembling crowd before the stone-pelting could solidify into a

barricade. By the time the local youths had gathered their rocks, the convoy was already a cloud of dust disappearing down the highway toward Srinagar.

The destination was a place that existed in whispers across the valley: PAPA II.

Originally built during the colonial era as an opulent guest house on Srinagar's prestigious Gupkar Road, the complex sat surrounded by weeping willows and the mirror-like waters of Dal Lake. When the insurgency erupted, the state apparatus had repurposed the serene villa into an interrogation facility, bestowing upon it the military code name "Papa II" to maintain an aura of bureaucratic ambiguity.

Inside, the grand architecture gave way to cold, clinical functionality.

Mustafa Zaidi sat on the bare concrete floor of Interrogation Room 3. He had been left there alone for over two hours, a classic psychological tactic designed to break a subject's internal clock and amplify isolation. The room contained no windows, no artwork, and no personal clutter. Just a heavy wooden table and three chairs, all bolted firmly into the concrete floor with thick iron brackets.

The door handle turned, and Balraj walked in carrying a thin manila folder.

He didn't look like a monster. He looked tired, his military fatigue jacket unbuttoned at the collar. He smiled faintly at Zaidi, pulling out one of the heavy chairs on his side of the table and sitting down.

"Mustafa Zaidi," Balraj said, his voice soft, almost conversational. He looked down at the subject still huddled on the cold floor. "Why are you down there? Come, sit. We have chairs."

Zaidi didn't move. He kept his chin tucked into his chest, staring fixedly at the dust motes on the floorboards.

"We can play dumb charades if you want," Balraj mused, tapping his pen against the wooden table. "Just for your information, I speak Hindi, English, Kashmiri, Farsi, and Arabic. But I know you understand me. So let's not waste time."

Slowly, painfully, Zaidi dragged himself up from the floor. His legs were stiff, his joints aching from the tension. He shuffled over to the chair opposite Balraj and sank into it, refusing to make eye contact.

"Will you have tea?" Balraj asked, rifling through the papers in his folder.

"No," Zaidi whispered, his voice hoarse. "Water….. Please."

"Sure."

Balraj stood up and walked to the corner of the room, where a traditional earthen pot sat on a small wooden stool. A brass tap was fitted near its base. Balraj picked up a stainless steel glass and opened the valve, the clear sound of running water echoing loudly in the sterile room.

"How long have you known Azhar Hajini?" Balraj asked casually, his back still turned as the glass filled.

Zaidi's jaw clamped shut. He remained silent.

Balraj turned around, walked back to the table, and placed the dripping glass directly in front of Zaidi.

Zaidi's lips were cracked, his throat dry as ash, but he stared at the glass as if it were laced with poison. He flicked his eyes up toward Balraj, trying to read the soldier's impassive expression.

"Go on," Balraj gestured gently with his hand. "Drink it."

Zaidi snatched the glass and downed the water in a single, desperate gulp, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "May Allah bless you," he muttered under his breath.

Balraj let out a quiet sigh and sat back down.

"I don't enjoy this, Mustafa," Balraj said softly, looking into the young man's eyes. "I hate to hurt people unless it is absolutely necessary."

He leaned forward, placing his elbows on the bolted table, lowering his voice into a conspiratorial register.

"You know where you are. The methods used in this building... They are not pleasant. Over two hundred men have died in this complex from acute renal failure after heavy rollers were used on their muscles. Others... their hearts gave out when we used live currents in water tanks. And the ones who survive the electrodes attached to their bodies? They go home unable to look at their wives. They live out their lives as hollow men." No sexual activity.

Zaidi shuddered, a cold drop of sweat tracing a line down his temple.

"I wonder sometimes why Allah puts me in this position," Balraj continued calmly, his voice devoid of anger or malice. "But then I think of the innocent people killed in bazaar blasts, the families destroyed by men who carry AK-47s into residential homes. I view this as my duty, a heavy task given to me. I won't lose sleep over it."

Balraj leaned back, extending two fingers.

"So, two choices, Mustafa. The easy way: I ask, you answer truthfully. You will go to prison, yes, but you will go intact. Your sister and her family will remain safe, untouched by the army."

He paused, letting the silence stretch.

"Or the hard way. Innovative, exceedingly painful methods. You will give me the information anyway, everyone does eventually. But you will go to prison broken, and I will personally ensure your family is treated as active accomplices to terrorism. Which way do you want to play it?"

Zaidi's chest rose and fell rapidly. He tried to cling to his resolve, to the ideological promises he had been fed in dark rooms, but the sheer physical reality of the room, the bolted furniture, the cold air, the soldier's calm, unblinking eyes, was suffocating him.

Balraj waited for two full minutes. Then, with an air of mild disappointment, he began to stand up. "Alright then, Mustafa. Suit yourself."

He turned his back and walked toward the heavy steel door.

"Three years!"

The words burst out of Zaidi like a panicked whisper, echoing off the bare walls.

Balraj stopped. He didn't smile. He turned slowly, walked back to his chair, and sat down.

"Did Adil visit Hotel Blue Residency?" Balraj asked.

"Yes," Zaidi gasped, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"What was he doing there?"

"I don't know! I swear by Allah, I have only seen Adil once before that night! I was just told to be there!"

Balraj watched the muscle twitching under Zaidi's left eye. He changed tactics, breaking the pressure slightly. "Why were you working at the hotel in the first place? Azhar Hajini planted you there, didn't he? Who were you told to watch?"

"DIG Tabrez Malik," Zaidi confessed, his hands trembling against his thighs. "I was told to monitor his visits."

Balraj's eyebrows raised slightly. The Deputy Inspector General of Police.

"Why was the DIG visiting a middle-tier hotel like Blue Residency?"

"A woman," Zaidi said, a faint, bitter smirk touching his lips despite his fear. "He was meeting a woman."

"Who was she?"

"I don't know her name! She looked like a local Kashmiri. The DIG would check in quietly, without any register entry. Half an hour later, the woman would arrive. They'd spend two hours together, the DIG would leave first, and then she would leave."

"And Adil?" Balraj leaned closer over the bolted table. "Where does Adil fit into a senior police officer's affair?"

Zaidi began to breathe heavily again, the sweat pooling on his collarbones. "He... Adil arrived at the hotel after the DIG had already left."

"And?"

"He went into the room. Where the woman was still waiting."

"How long was Adil in that room with her?"

"He stayed the entire night," Zaidi blurted out, shaking his head rapidly. "He left early in the morning through the rear service exit."

Balraj sat motionless, his mind racing through the tactical implications. Adil was a high value operative, a cold blooded strategist who didn't engage in petty blackmail or personal indulgences. If Adil spent a night in a room with a woman used by a DIG, it wasn't a honeypot trap. It was something far more dangerous.

"Where is Azhar Hajini now?" Balraj demanded.

"I don't know! I am just a local courier!" Zaidi pleaded. "He calls me from public booths or burner lines. I can't contact him! I was just told to be at my sister's house on the 15th of every month. He would show up at random times, day or night, to pick up my notes."

"What did he ask you about?" Balraj pressed. "Did he want details on DIG Malik's movements?"

"No!" Zaidi shook his head violently. "That's what I didn't understand! Hajini didn't care about the DIG. He only asked about her. What time she arrived, what she wore, who brought her to the hotel, where she went afterward!"

Balraj stood up slowly, the silence in the room suddenly feeling heavy with revelation.

He stared down at Zaidi, whose spirit was now completely broken, slump shouldered and shivering on the bolted chair.

Was the DIG merely a screen?, a piece of heavy cover used to move a sensitive asset in and out of secured locations without raising suspicion. The woman, the DIG, Adil. What does this mean ?

Who's the woman?

Balraj tapped his folder shut. If I find the woman, he thought, turning toward the door, I find Adil.



# Chapter 17

"I am not too sure about this Adil, it seems unnecessary at this juncture. Al Qaeda will see this as an uncalled for provocation, which can jeopardize our main goal. We can't go ahead with this till we receive a green signal from them" "..Azhar was frantically pacing from one end to another end of the room in their hideout while speaking.

"Tabrez Malik must die ". Adil hissed, the words came out through his clenched teeth.

But !!! Azhar started then stopped when he looked into Adil's eyes.

"He has to die "Adil's face seemed nearly paralyzed and expressionless punctuated only by a sharp stare, slow breathing, and a flat, unapologetic tone.

He is a Kashmiri Muslim police officer Adil.

Wasn't it your plan not to target Kashmiri Muslim Police Officers?

Azhar looked at him questioningly.

Adil slowly got up from the chair he was sitting on and walked towards Azhar.

Azhar watched him come over and held his breath.

Which part of this vermin seems like a Kashmiri Muslim to you Azhar bhai ?

You still have told me what happened, remember ? Said Azhar.

“I still don't know what has transpired between you and Afreen or this DIG

And trust me I don't want to know either.

It's your personal matter and I respect that.”

“All I am trying to say here is that whatever you'll decide, I am with you. But it's my duty to pre warn you that things can spiral out of control after this “.

Azhar signed deeply, a lingering pause.

“Anyway, what is your plan ? How do you plan to do this “?

Adil smiled. He actually smiled. A slow, one-sided curl of the lip that didn't reach his cold, calculating eyes.

Azhar felt a chill run down his spine. He shuddered. He hadn't seen Adil smile ever, except for the Monalisa smile he was famous for.

The crisp morning air of Srinagar carried the faint, sweet scent of Chashme Shahi’s natural springs, but inside the dining hall of the Royal Springs Golf Course, it was the aroma of freshly brewed Kahwa and warm bakakhani that dominated the senses.

Tabrez Malik took his time, savoring the final sip of his tea. From his vantage point, a plushly upholstered corner table permanently reserved for him, he commanded a perfect view of the restaurant's entrance. It was a strategic choice. In a place like Kashmir, survival was dictated by who you saw before they saw you.

Today, however, the view was exceptionally pleasant. Royal Springs was the undisputed playground of Kashmir's elite. While the top brass of the J&K Police sweated out their politics at the Police Golf Course on Boulevard Road, Tabrez preferred the company here. The club was a sanctuary of old money and high society. As he watched the elegantly dressed wives of Srinagar's premier industrialists glide past the buffet, chatting in hushed, refined tones, Tabrez smiled to himself. This was exactly why he endured the drive every Sunday.

Outside, past the manicured lawns and the heavy glass doors, his personal gunmen stood vigil near his official car. They were a stark, armed contrast to the tranquil paradise of the club, but Tabrez rarely gave them a second thought. Security at the main gates was deliberately light, almost polite. The club catered to businessmen who paid handsomely for discretion and a lack of uniforms, making it a rare haven largely unbothered by the heavy-handed bureaucracy of the J&K government.

Setting his empty cup down with a soft clink, Tabrez wiped his mouth with a linen napkin and stood up. The indulgence of the buffet breakfast was over; now it was time for the ritual.

He stepped out of the dining hall and walked toward the pro shop. As he neared the staging area, the starter, a local man who had memorized Tabrez's preferences years ago, was already waiting. He offered a respectful, practiced nod, immediately stepping forward with Tabrez's custom golf kit slung over his shoulder.

"Good morning, Malik Sahib. Beautiful day for a round," the starter murmured, guiding him toward the first tee.

Tabrez didn't answer with words, merely offering a curt nod of approval. They stepped out onto the pristine, dew-kissed grass of the 18-hole, par-72 championship course. Designed by a

legendary American architect, the course felt less like a sports facility and more like a living painting.

To his left, the colossal Zabarwan Mountains loomed like ancient guardians, their rugged foothills cradling the emerald fairways. To his right, just beyond the eastern boundary of the course, the mirror like surface of Dal Lake stretched out, catching the morning sun. It was so close that if Tabrez chose to walk just a few minutes toward the edge, he could feel the cool mist rising from the water. Natural marshes broke up the terrain, and the surrounding wooded hills whispered with the morning breeze.

The starter handed him his favorite putter. Tabrez took a deep breath, dropping a couple of balls onto the immaculate green.

He lined up his shot, the weight of the club familiar and grounding in his hands. With a clean, practiced stroke, he sent the ball rolling across the dew. He didn't wait to watch it drop. Instead, he began a slow, leisurely stroll down the fairway to follow its path, soaking in the panoramic grandeur of the lake, completely at ease in the exclusive world he had carved out for himself.

The eastern edge of Dal Lake, flanked by the sprawling, manicured greens of the Royal Springs Golf Course, existed in a state of perpetual isolation. It was a mirror of still, dark water, largely forgotten by the colorful fleet of tourist shikaras that choked the lake's main channels.

Today, that stillness was broken.

A fiberglass motorboat slithered through the shallows, its hull carving a razor-thin wake across the glossy surface. The engine had been modified or muffled; it emitted nothing more than a low, visceral hum that was easily swallowed by the rustling reeds. As the craft neared the shoreline where the golf course met the water,

the pilot cut the engine entirely. The boat drifted the final few yards in absolute, menacing silence.

There were five men aboard.

The moment the hull scraped the soft mud of the bank, four of them moved. They didn't speak. Equipped with specialized, matte-black gear that caught no reflection, they moved with the synchronized precision of predators. They knew the terrain, they knew the timing, and they knew their quarry.

The target was barely two hundred meters from the water's edge.

Tabrez Malik never saw them coming. The extraction was flawless, executed with terrifying efficiency, not a single shot was fired. Before Tabrez could even register the shadows closing in, the cold, unforgiving steel of a pistol barrel was pressed firmly against his temple.

"Comply," a voice hissed, low and laced with lethal promise.

Beside Tabrez, his assistant froze. The man looked as if he had been nailed to the earth, his eyes wide, breath trapped in his throat, completely incapacitated by sheer terror.

Tabrez didn't fare much better. A wave of profound psychological shock crashed over him, paralyzing his limbs and rendering him a passenger in his own body. He was practically dragged across the turf, his boots scraping uselessly against the grass as they hauled him back toward the waiting boat.

The fifth man was waiting at the bow. The moment Tabrez was shoved over the gunwale, the team went to work. With practiced, brutal speed, they bound his wrists and ankles with heavy nylon rope, snapped a blindfold over his eyes, and stuffed a gag into his mouth. The world vanished into darkness, tastes of canvas, and the sharp scent of lake water.

The roar of the engine returned, louder now as they sped away. The distance from the Royal Springs to the base of the dense Zabarwan forest was short, a matter of minutes, but to Tabrez, trapped in the dark, every second stretched into an eternity.

The boat slammed against a hidden bank near the Mamneth Top Trek trail. Here, the geography favored the wicked. The trail wound steeply upward through towering pine forests, hugging the rushing waters of the Dara River, offering a labyrinth of mountain pathways that bled deep into the wilderness.

Waiting in the dappled shade of the pines were three quad bikes, their engines idling hot.

Tabrez was hoisted like a sack of dead weight and thrown onto the back of one of the ATVs. The tires tore into the dirt, throwing up mud and pine needles as they roared up the mountain tracks. It took a grueling, bone-jarring ten minutes to navigate the rough terrain down to the main road at the Dara Harwan Base.

The operational clock was ticking in the leader's head. They had given themselves a strict twenty-minute window, and they were hitting every mark.

The strategy was brilliant in its cruelty. By using the lake for the initial abduction, they had effectively neutralized the authorities' most immediate asset: the dog squad. Scent dogs would lose the trail entirely at the water's edge. Furthermore, by abandoning the boat near the Mamneth trail, they had created a tactical nightmare for the police. Investigators would be forced to split their forces across at least three distinct mountain routes, all while dealing with the lingering probability that the kidnappers hadn't gone up the Zabarwan mountains at all, but had instead doubled back across the vast waters of Dal Lake to hit land miles away.

Chaos and misdirection were their greatest shields.

At the main road of Dara Harwan, two nondescript sedans sat idling. The quad bikes slid to a halt, kicking up dust. The men shoved a bruised and trembling Tabrez into the backseat of the lead car, piled in through the opposite doors, and slammed them shut.

The coordination remained flawless until the very end. Only one man peeled away from the main group. He climbed into the second car alongside its driver, threw the vehicle into reverse, and sped back in the direction of Royal Springs, a decoy or a cleanup crew meant to muddy the waters further.

The primary car, carrying Tabrez Malik into a terrifyingly uncertain future, tore away in the opposite direction, disappearing into the winding Kashmiri roads.

Who are you ? Why are you doing this? I am a police officer. You are making a grave mistake. The entire police force of the state along with the Army will come after you if you harm me. This was probably the twentieth time that Tabrez Malik had repeated these statements since his abduction 4 hours back.

His veiled threats were the direct outcome of fear and vulnerability. For the first time in his life Tabrez Malik felt threatened and powerless. He could make out the men who had abducted him were not petty criminals. They were trained professionals who had carried out this job with precision. It wasn't long before he realised that his intimidation tactics won't work here and might even worsen the situation he was in.

Tabrez Malik could not make out where he was. He had been blindfolded all the time and the little conversation that his abductors had amongst themselves, wasn't enough for him to make any sense of what was happening to him.

He was bound on the chair he was sitting on with a rope. The room was dimly lit. He could notice a bed at the other corner.

Another chair was placed just in front of him. The windows of the room were covered by a dark sheet, so he wasn't sure about what time of the day it was. The location was totally unfamiliar to him. He could hear the hum of the ventilation fan, but could not see it.

"Maybe it's behind me ". He thought.

The rain was lashing against a sealed window.

He heard the floorboard creak outside the door and the knob turned. The terror stricken silence of the room abruptly ended with a stifled gasp that came from Tabrez Malik's throat.

The man he saw didn't simply walk into the room, he bled into it like a stain on reality. The heavy door had groaned open, but his entry was unnaturally silent, a predatory, gliding stride that instantly stole the oxygen from the room. For a moment Tabrez Malik forgot to breathe.

The man at the door wore no theatrical disguise, just cold, unblinking eyes that fixed onto him with the dull focus of a shark. He had a hulking presence. Tabrez Malik felt as if the God of Death was looming over him.

The man didn't rush, taking his time to lock the door behind him.

Tabrez Malik recognised him the moment he entered the room.

He had heard about him. He had seen him in photos. He knew he was Rashid's son, Mansoor's man Friday. He had never seen him as a child. But he knew about him. He was the most wanted man of Kashmir. "The Lone Wolf "

Adil!! Tabrez Malik stammered." I know who you are ".

"I know who you are too, DIG Tabrez Malik"

When Adil finally spoke, his voice was a chillingly calm, raspy whisper that sounded like sandpaper scraping across wood.

I know your father Rashid … Tabrez Malik's mouth had gaped open and he sounded as if he was gasping for breath. Cold sweat had broken over his skin. He could feel his limbs locking up.

Adil moved with slow, measured steps. He smoothed his clothing and sat down slowly on the chair placed opposite to Tabrez Malik, meeting his gaze. The sound of the chair pulled across the floor punctuated the quiet room. Adil maintained a steady unblinking gaze.

Tabrez Malik was finding the silence and Adil's gaze intimately unsettling.

“You are like my son “

The psychological pressure of the silence and the gaze forced Tabrez Malik to blurt out.

The sudden slap landed like a gunshot, a sharp, stinging strike that instantly eclipsed sound. The sheer force of the slap forced Tabrez Malik's head violently aside and numbed everything else. The heavy strike caused his skull to snap to the side, blinding white-hot pain, and a metallic tang on his tongue. A hot, stinging welt bloomed on his cheek,there was ringing in the ear. He could feel a paralyzing rush of confusion and humiliation.

It took a while for Tabrez Malik to regain his senses. When he did, he met Adil's gaze again.

Is Afreen like your daughter too ?

Asked Adil, his breathing remained even, his expression hardened, and his jaw was locked in cold satisfaction.

Tabrez Malik suddenly knew what it was all about. He turned pale. His knees buckled as the terror struck, a sudden, icy

knot formed in his gut that forced him to double over and retch violently onto the floor.

Adil got up from his chair, smoothed his clothes and casually turned away.

“Malik Sahab! Do you realise that you have made her undergo terrible mental and physical agony ? You took advantage of her helplessness, a single mother whose husband has deserted her. You subjected her to sadistic physical torture to satisfy your sick needs, so much so that when she narrated her ordeal to me she kept scratching her nails on her other hand till they bled. I didn't stop her. I watched her do it. She needed that. I knew she wasn't experiencing any pain when doing that, it was in fact like an automatic soothing mechanism for her “.

“She told me every gory detail”. “Everything “.

After a while I stopped listening to her. My mind suddenly drifted off. It went blank.

Killing is nothing new to me. But then I thought, will killing you be enough. Can I discover some innovative way to kill you ? Can I kill you a hundred times over ? I kept thinking and thinking.

“I can kill you only once, but I'll make it epic”..said Adil with an unreadable gaze that revealed no internal emotion which perhaps symbolized the cold impartiality of the justice system which he believed in.

The thunder, lightning and torrential rain had intensified outside

Tabrez Malik's widened, unblinking eyes were locked onto the Adil. To him, he seemed like the executioner's weapon which would fall on him anytime. His breath was shaky and hyperventilating, his nostrils flared, and lips were dry and parted.



# Chapter 18

I need closure, Rashid Chacha !!...said Afreen looking at Rashid with a calm, steady face.

It's not about confrontation at all. I need to go to Dubai and talk to Rajiv. My decision to confront the situation is not driven by anger or a desire for conflict, but by a need for absolute finality.

My ultimate practical goal is to meet Rajiv face to face and demand an official divorce so I can move forward. I am fully aware that I was manipulated, and I know that Rajiv and the girl orchestrated a larger, deliberate plan to drain my financial resources to fund their new life together. It is obvious that he is with this girl.

Despite the financial and emotional betrayal, I am choosing clarity over confrontation.

I understand Beta !!! I'll take care of the kids. You don't need to worry about them. But I would have wanted you to travel with someone and not go there alone. It's a foreign land and we don't know anyone there.

I'll manage !!. Please take care of Sara and Zain, in my absence. That's the only thing that worries me.

Don't worry about them, it's you I am worried about. But if you have made up your mind, promise me you'll take care of yourself …said Rashid with a worried look on his face.

I will !! Afreen gave Rashid a reassuring smile.

Dubai didn't just welcome Afreen a week later, it swallowed her whole. Stepping out of the airport, the June heat hit her like a physical blow, a sweltering, oppressive wall of air that instantly plastered her shirt to her back.

She bypassed the glittering glass high-rises of the modern city, heading straight for the pulsing, chaotic heart of Deira. As Dubai's oldest district, it was a labyrinth of tangled streets, spice-scented alleys, and glowing neon storefronts. For the Indian diaspora, it was a lifeline, a vibrant, affordable pocket of the city kept alive by the constant rumble of the Metro.

Afreen checked into a modest hotel, dropping her bags on the floor without bothering to unpack. There was no time.

Months ago, before their conversations had dwindled into a strained silence, Rajiv had casually dropped an address. He had mentioned managing a bustling Indian restaurant tucked somewhere in this very district. Afreen glanced out the window, the sky was already bruising into a dusky, smoggy purple. It was evening. Adrenaline overriding her exhaustion, she grabbed her bag and headed right back out into the sweltering twilight. She had a meeting with Rajiv, and there was absolutely no way she was letting it wait until tomorrow.

The Royal Desi Kitchen was situated at

Al Muraqabat road in Deira. There was nothing Royal about the restaurant. It was a small eatery mostly catering to labour from India and Pakistan. The owner was a chubby Sardar named Gurdev Singh. Gurdev Singh informed Afreen that Rajiv

used to work for him six months back. He told her that he had fired him because of his excessive drinking habit.

He told her that Rajiv had gotten into a drunken altercation with customers a few times and complaints had piled up against him.

He had no idea where he lived.

Afreen was crestfallen.

“But there must be someone who knows where he lives and works presently. Some colleague or friend. There was a woman with him, maybe you know about her.

Afreen was now desperate for information.

Yes, I know about that woman, Sneha. She used to visit here sometimes. But she had stopped visiting suddenly. People here in the restaurant used to say that she has left him and is living with some Sheikh. I think it was after this that he got into this drinking habit … said Gurdev Singh.

It's common here Madam. Many girls come to Dubai to work and settle down. But it's difficult here due to the high cost of living. If they are good-looking and catch the eye of a wealthy Sheikh, they usually end up in their “Harem”.

I hope you don't mind me asking, but how are the two known to you ?

Afreen hesitated and then replied

They are old friends. .

Sardar Sahab !! he must have been close to some colleague of his in your restaurant.

Oh yes ! He was close to Harnek Singh. He is the head cook here in my restaurant. I should have thought about this. I'll call him over. I am sure he must be in touch.

Oye Harnekeya !! Gurdev Singh shouted.

A middle aged turbaned man walked in towards the counter where Gurdev Singh was sitting.

Madam has come from Kashmir and is looking for Rajiv Singh, who used to work here. Are you in touch with him ?

Harnek Singh looked at Afreen hesitatingly.

Are you Afreen ? He asked her.

Afreen was surprised at this man actually knowing about her. She wasn't expecting it.

Yes ! She replied. Where is Rajiv ?

He works for Bolt Taxi Company as a driver Madam. He lives here in Deira. Around ten minutes walk from here.

Does he live alone or is there someone with him ? Asked Afreen.

He lives alone as far as I know. I have not been in touch with him lately on a regular basis. We live in the same area and buy stuff from the same grocery store, so that's where I have met him a few times.

There used to be a lady with him ….asked Afreen

Yes I know !!! But she left him a few months back, Sneha, if I am not mistaken.

I did ask him once about her but he was not very forthcoming.

Can you give me his address? Asked Afreen

Yes ! Sure. Drivers here usually have a twelve hour duty. So I am not too sure he'll be in his room. He resides in Labour quarters.

But you can take a chance. If he is not there, then he'll probably be back in a couple of hours in any case.

Harnek took a small piece of paper from the counter, jotted down an address and handed it over to Afreen.

Is this place walking distance from here or do I need to take a cab? Asked Afreen.

It's walking distance from here but it'll be better if you take a cab. It's hot and you'll also have to ask for directions to reach the place. .said Gurdev Singh.

Here please take this. It's hot outside..said Gurdev Singh, handing over a bottle of mineral water to her.

Thank you so much Sardar ji !!

I prefer to walk.

Afreen needed to ask only a couple of passerbys before she reached her destination.

The hidden quarters of Deira were in complete contrast with the city's glamorous skyline. These heavily congested, isolated zones were characterized by rows of utilitarian, yellow concrete buildings, and unpaved, dusty roads. The air was thick with the smell of unwashed work clothes, trapped sweat, and heavy humidity.

The outdoor spaces between the pre fabricated blocks were unpaved dust bowls or mud patches. They were heavily littered with broken discarded furniture, overflowing trash, and clusters of tired men cooking meals on improvised gas stoves.

Afreen entered the building through a stairway which opened up into a dank hallway. There were rows of rooms on both sides. The two storey structure resembled a school hostel with rooms lining a dank and poorly lit corridor.

Afreen finally reached the door. She traced the edge of the doorframe, her knuckles pale against the wood. A whirlwind of "what-ifs" raced through her mind, and every second in the hallway felt like a lifetime. She was paralyzed by the choice between stepping forward into the unknown or turning back entirely. The usually mundane sound of a closed door was amplified, and the silence around her became deafening. She smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle on her clothes, shifting her weight between her feet. She knocked thrice.

The door opened almost immediately as if someone was expecting her

It took a couple of seconds for Afreen to make out that the man who had opened the door, the man in front of her, was indeed Rajiv.

His once bright, clear eyes were now sunken, red rimmed, and constantly darting. His skin had a sallow, jaundice-like pallor. Dark, heavy shadows dominate under his eyes. His hair was greasy and matted. He had a sunken, hunched posture, with shoulders rolling forward as if carrying a heavy burden. His once muscular or toned physique had given way to dramatic weight loss.

One look at him and Afreen could make out that Rajiv's life was now being dictated by negative and self destructive habits.

Hello Afreen ! I was expecting you, …Said Rajiv.. mumbling through his clenched teeth, his once confident, articulate voice now seemed replaced by a hollow, monotonous drone.

Hello Rajiv ! Harnek Singh informed you ? That was quick. Afreen faked a smile while speaking.

Come on in ! Rajiv stepped back a little from the doorway, just about enough to let her in.

“Harnek called the grocery store and they sent over a boy who works there to inform me of your visit “

“Sorry it's not much here as you can see “ Rajiv carelessly waved his hand towards his room.

The dingy room was characterized by a cramped, makeshift plywood partition. The ventilation was non existent. The room's paint was peeling off from the walls. Poor air circulation had led to mold. Afreen could see a makeshift gas cylinder kitchen on the other side of the plywood partition. Dust and dirt accumulated just about everywhere. Empty bottles of alcohol were lined up against a wall. The room smelled of alcohol, sweat, unwashed clothes and cigarettes.

Rajiv dragged a chair and placed it for Afreen to sit.

Sit!!! He said scratching his stubble.

No, it's ok. I am fine..she said

She left me, in case you didn't already know. She left me after she drained me of everything. She came here for a better life and I couldn't provide her that. She found a rich person for herself

“You must be happy to see me like this, " Rajiv spat, the words catching in his dry throat. His voice was barely a ragged whisper, but it cracked due to the guilt of betrayal he had done.

Afreen's jaw tightened. She took a heavy step forward, the shadows of the doorway swallowing the sharp angles of her face. "You think this brings me joy?" She asked, her voice low, vibrating with a tense, terrifying emotion she couldn’t quite decipher.

She took a deep breath, unclenched her tight jaw and relaxed just a wee bit to stop herself from over reacting to the situation. His words were perhaps intentionally used to push buttons, rather than react, she chose to self soothe.

I am beyond the stage where you were able to incite me or soothe me, Rajiv."

She delivered the words not with spite, but with a terrifying, flat calm. For years, he had been the maestro of her moods, pulling the strings of her temper or offering just enough tenderness to put her back together again. He had built an empire out of her reactions. But looking at him now, she felt a profound, hollow stillness. Her pulse didn't quicken. Her throat didn't tighten. The emotional strings hadn't just gone slack they had dissolved entirely. He was a stranger holding a baton, waving it at an orchestra that had already packed up and gone home.

I have learned to live without you. I have learned to manage on my own.

I am not here to get a smug thrill out of your misfortune.

I am not here to seek any sort of explanation or apology from you.

I am not expecting you to show any regret for your actions. There are no memories of ours which can make me vulnerable or fill me with inner turmoil. I have successfully closed that.

You made your decisions based on whatever you wanted at that point of time. All of us make our decisions, right or wrong, positive or negative, and we have to then live with the ripple effect. Every choice brings an inevitable outcome.

I made mine when I decided to marry you, and I have to live with the repercussions of my decision.

I came here to inform you that I am filing for decree of divorce in the family court. Our marriage was contracted under Islamic personal law and I possess an absolute right to initiate a divorce through Khula, which does not explicitly require your consent. The children shall stay with me as they already are and I

don't need any sort of financial maintenance from your side. I could have done this without even visiting you here on account of desertion.

But I wanted to meet you once.

By the way there is another thing I needed to tell you, though it doesn't matter anymore.

Tabrez Malik forced himself on me !" Afreen's voice broke, tearing through the quiet room, her eyes remained locked on his. "He didn't just 'make a pass.' He humiliated me. He forced me into unnatural, painful acts while reminding me every single second that your freedom was in his pen. He raped me again and again and again ".

Silence crashed into the room.

Rajiv stared at her, the color draining slowly from his face. "Afreen..."

"He made sure I understood," she continued, her chest heaving as months of buried trauma spilled over. "He told me that every time I submitted to him, every degrading thing he made me do, was paying off a piece of your debt.

Rajiv stayed silent, frozen.

You are a chronic deserter," she said, her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. "Look at your life. Look at the trail of wreckage you've left behind. You deserted your parents when they were too old to fend for themselves. You deserted a career. You deserted me. You even deserted your religion when it became inconvenient for your clean new identity. And then, the ultimate betrayal... you walked away from your own blood. Your children."

He looked away, staring down at the polished marble floor, unable to meet her gaze.

A hollow, mirthless laugh escaped her lips. "And after all that, what did you honestly expect? Did you really believe you were special? Did you think Sneha would be different? That a woman who watched you abandon an entire life wouldn't eventually turn around and abandon you?"

She paused, letting the bitter reality of his current isolation settle in the air.

"You Hindus believe in the theory of Karma, don't you?" she asked softly, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, not for him, but for the innocent lives he had ruined along the way. " Well, look around you. This isn't bad luck. This isn't a tragic twist of fate. This is just the bill coming due."

.. Allah Hafiz, Rajiv Singh.

Rajiv remained silent. He had nothing to say. He was at a loss for words. He knew there was no justification for what he had done.

He watched her glide out of the door, shutting it softly behind her. The click of the latch was entirely too quiet for how violently it shattered his world. Then came the silence heavy, suffocating, and louder than any scream. It rushed into the vacuum she left behind, filling the room until his ears literally rang with the lack of her. The ambient sounds of the house returned in mocking slow motion, the low hum of the refrigerator, the distant, indifferent hiss of traffic outside. Everything was exactly as it had been five minutes ago, except that the air felt thinner, colder, and entirely empty.



# Chapter 19

It was a grotesque geometry. The torso was splayed face down, the clothing torn and saturated with dark, drying blood that had pooled into the ground. What remained of Tabrez Malik's body, told a story of psychological warfare.

But it was the space between the ankles that drew the eye to a horrific punctuation mark. The head rested there, turned to the side, staring blindly back at the ruin of its own body.

"He appears to have been tortured immediately before he was decapitated or maybe he was mutilated afterwards." said the forensic expert kneeling down over the body.

How long do you think he has been dead? Asked Balraj.

The body seems to be just a couple of days old….replied the forensic expert.

Rest of the information can only be discovered after the autopsy.

It'll take a few days for the detailed report.

Balraj had received information through the local police about the discovery of the dead body of Tabrez Malik in the Shopian forest area.

Shopian was just one and a half hour from Srinagar, around fifty kilometers

He along with his team had departed almost immediately on receiving the information and arrived at the site.

The "Shopian jungle" and its surrounding dense orchards was strategically crucial, heavily forested, and mountainous transit corridor in South Kashmir.

Flanked by the Pir Panjal range, the thick terrain historically served as a logistical base and crossing point for militants infiltrating the region.

The remote geography was characterized by rugged, sprawling apple orchards and deep forests creating ideal hideouts for local and foreign insurgents. Consequently, the area was the frequent site of major counter insurgency operations led by the Indian Army, Jammu and Kashmir Police, and the CRPF. Security forces routinely tracked suspected militants through these zones to prevent them from moving between South Kashmir, Central Kashmir, and the higher peaks.

The zones featured a mix of dense timber woods and occasional residential structures, where militants have been known to entrench themselves or attempt breakouts under the cover of darkness. The topography of the area included deep ravines and hilly stretches.

It was obvious that whoever had abducted Tabrez Malik had used one of these deserted residential structures temporarily. He was kept there for a day or two, was tortured and then killed in captivity

The immediate area where the body was discovered had been cordoned off by the police to protect forensic evidence from being contaminated or destroyed. The remains were to be sent for a detailed autopsy later.

“Forensic experts will examine the severed edges of the neck to determine whether decapitation occurred before or after death, and what type of weapon was used. We'll also be able to tell you a bit more about time …said the forensics expert, scratching his forehead.

I must say though I have yet to see such a brutal case. His body has been mutilated by stab wounds and burnings. His finger nails have been removed.

Whoever did this to him was motivated by extreme hatred towards him.

Col. Balraj Shergill looked at Capt. Amit Shetty. Both exchanged a glance but said nothing.

He then patted the forensic expert on the back. “”. Please forward the detailed report to me as soon as your job is done.”. .

Don't worry about the formalities of seeking permission from the police. My office will formally ask the SSP and request for permission for sharing all the information.

Balraj turned and started moving towards his vehicle.

No one has claimed responsibility Sir. .said Amit trying to keep pace with Balraj.

It doesn't matter Amit. We both know who did it. Why did he do it..is the question ?

This was personal. The Al Qaida has categorically stated long back that their operatives will not target Kashmiri Muslim Police officers, in the hope that the local police will be sympathetic towards their cause.

Adil obviously cannot use Al Qaeda's name in this killing. He'll have to face backlash. So the reason, whatever it is, is highly personal.

The state police will go hard after him now …said Amit.

I am not too sure about that, this guy Tabrez Malik wasn't very popular in his department. He had a reputation of being corrupt, an extortionist and a womanizer.

Many in his Department are going to say “Good Riddance “

I have no love lost, personally too, as far as this man is concerned. I am just interested in Adil. It's the Adil connection here that is of interest. The police don't know about this angle. Tabrez Malik had destroyed too many families, extra judicial killings, disappearances, extortions were a norm. According to the police, this man had so many enemies that any disgruntled family member of one of his victims could have done a number on him.

But as far as our job is concerned, it's been made easier.

How so, Sir ? Asked Amit, sounding a bit bewildered.

“A professional hitman operates as a stranger, Amit, leaving a "cold trail" with no obvious connection to the victim. Personal killings almost always involve someone the victim knows intimately. In professional hits, motives can be deeply hidden.

In personal enmity, we have a scope to look at the victim's existing grievances, such as property disputes, illicit relationships, or old grudges between the parties.

We should see this as a break. It's my gut feeling, there's a woman involved here.

All we need to do now is look for that missing link. The woman, Adil, was with. It's a crime of passion, Amit.

But Sir the woman that you are talking about …it's a dead end there …said Amit.

That's our job, to look for a new opening in case of a dead end, or to carve out one …Balraj's eyes crinkled and he smiled.

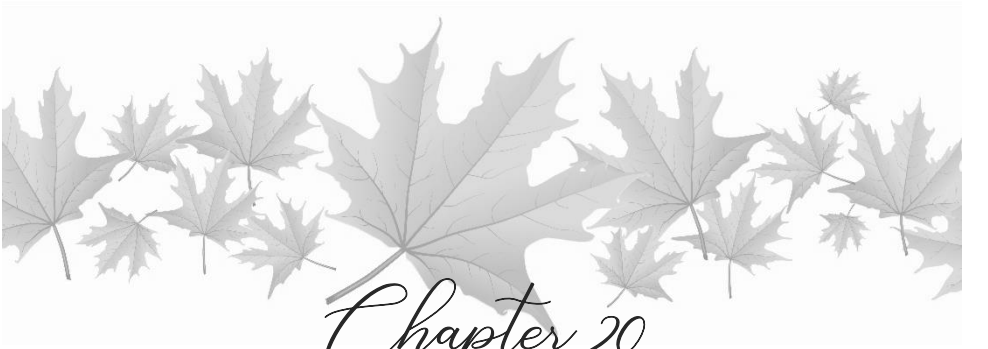
I have a hunch, who the woman is Amit.

All we need to do now is keep our eyes and ears open. All the pieces are falling into place. Just a few moves more and it'll be " Checkmate," he whispered, the word tasting like copper and adrenaline.

A grandmaster doesn't win by lunging for the king, they win by suffocating the opponent's options. .Amit …

We need her like bait, squeeze Adil's lanes of escape, and let him walk into the trap entirely, convinced he is still winning.

Amit smiled back at him. He could see through the confidence in his seniors' tone. The words "Checkmate" still hung in the air, heavy and triumphant, but Amit's gaze drifted to his senior's hand. His hands clinched fingers so hard the knuckles were white.. He saw the slight tremor in the man's jaw, the way his eyes remained hyper focused, refusing to blink.



# Chapter 20

Why did you do it, Adil ? She whispered. The question broke through her weeping, a fragile, hollow plea that hung heavy in the suffocating silence.

Adil rested a calming hand on her hair, wrapping a protective arm around her trembling shoulders and drew her close to him.

"In my fifteen years of fighting for the cause of Kashmir, there have been moments where I have questioned myself.

Many times lying alone on my bed I have talked to myself and to Allah. Is whatever I am doing right or is it wrong ?

The moral justification of my acts is that this is a legitimate, last resort remedy against severe oppression, systemic discrimination, or violation of basic human rights by the security forces.

I have killed people for the cause and I have lost many people who were close to me.

"Humaira…"

The moment the name left Adil's lips, he froze. Afreen watched as his breath caught in his throat and a sudden, glassy emptiness overtook his eyes.

“She’ll be like this forever,” he whispered.

Afreen placed a hand on his chest, feeling the violent tremor of distress surging through him.

“The tightness in my heart… this heavy ache… it’s never going away,” Adil continued, his voice cracking. “Whenever I look at her, I’m crying on the inside. But then I think… Maybe it’s a mercy that she’s blind now. At least she doesn't have to see the evil surrounding us. As for me? My soul was rendered blind years ago.”

He paused, his chest heaving under Afreen’s palm before his tone hardened into something darker.

“Trust me, Tabrez Malik deserved what he got. When an individual actively threatens innocent lives, society considers neutralizing that threat, even lethally, to be a proportional and necessary action. The law hangs people who are a menace to the public. If a man's death prevents the slaughter of innocent people, it is the lesser evil. Tabrez was just a psychopathic criminal hiding behind a police uniform. He thought he was the law, that he was above it.”

Adil looked down, his posture slumping under the weight of his own rationalizations. “My primary goal was minimizing overall suffering and protecting the greater good of Kashmir. It wasn't just about you, Afreen.”

“It was about me,” Afreen said softly, her eyes fixed on the floor, refusing to meet his gaze. “We both know that.”

I am equally compliant to what happened …

No you were not. .said Adil quietly..

Exploitation relies on unequal power, manipulation, threats, or the abuse of a vulnerable situation.

You, as a person, were exploited and lacked free consent.

The responsibility for any abusive or exploitative act lies entirely with the person who uses his power or leverage to exploit the other person.

It wasn't just you that he was doing that with, he had a history of being a serial offender.

What is our future together Adil? Afreen asked nervously.

Adil's lips parted, but paused just enough to choose the right words. His eyes glazed slightly as he mentally sifted through his thoughts.

" I have thought about it often. I am still not sure if I have a clear answer to that "

Slowly peeling her cheek away from his chest, she hesitated before looking up. Her eyes darted to his, searching for answers, her expression tight with a mixture of apprehension and quiet anticipation.

You did not ask me about my trip to Dubai? Asked Afreen

Adil kept silent.

I went to meet him and convey to him that it is over.

I wanted to bring a sense of finality to unanswered questions. I thought I would stop ruminating, get out of the discomfort of ambiguity, and healthily move forward with my life.

My heart belongs to you now Adil ! Only you. You have the key to my soul.

Take me anywhere, I am yours forever.

Adil reached up to lightly touch her face. His touch was so light it felt like a memory. He traced the shape of her lips, his gaze

searching her face as if trying to memorize every contour before the moment slipped away.

I'm not asking you to drop your weapons. I know who you are. But give me something to hold onto. A month from now, a year from now, where do we meet? Where do we go when you finally get to stop running?" asked Afreen.

It was like she was split into two, one part ready to accept the reality of being with him, the other part desperate for a normal life.

"I don't care about the cause, or who wins, or what they promise you. I care about you. Just tell me there's an end to this. Tell me that when the smoke clears, there's a version of us that gets to grow old together. "

I want us to build a house together, not a grave.

Adil gently took her face in her hand.

"The cause is the only reason I can imagine a future at all. A future where we don't have to whisper in the dark. I love you enough to fight for a Kashmir where we can actually live, not just survive. Please, understand that."

"Change isn't peaceful, Afreen. The oppressors don't give up power because we ask nicely. Every day we do nothing, more of our people die in silence.

Everything I endure, the hiding, the hunger, the blood on my hands, I do it so that children of Kashmir won't have to live under their boots.

I have no intention to drag you into this mess Afreen. I live on a knife's edge.

I have no idea what will happen next.

A small, sad smile touched Afreen's lips. She looked at him silently. She wanted to protest, she wanted to argue. But she knew it wouldn't change anything.

It's dangerous for you to be with me.

They are watching you Afreen,he said. "My life isn't a political debate anymore, it's a body count. Every time you try to meet me, you are handing them the rope to hang you and me with."

"So what am I supposed to do? Pretend you're dead?"

"Yes," he said, his voice cracking before he hardened it. "Because if you don't, the next time we meet, it won't be a choice. They will use your life to end mine.

“I want you to promise me “ he murmured his voice dropping to a whisper that vibrated against her skin. “If something happens to me you'll take care of yourself” “Don't trust anyone, Afreen. No one “

Except Abbu and Azhar Bhai

"You'll get to know how to contact him when the time comes," Adil continued, his eyes urgent, pleading.

Before the words could fully settle between them, Afreen reacted. Panic, sharp and instinctual, flared in her chest. She couldn't let him finish that thought. If he spoke the tragedy aloud, it might make it real.

Pressing the palm of her hand gently but firmly against his mouth, she cut him off. Her skin felt cool against the heat of his lips. With her other hand, she raised a single, trembling finger to her own lips.

"Shhh," she whispered. The sound was barely a sigh, a fragile barrier against the chaos waiting outside their door. "Enough of this. You are going nowhere."

Adil didn't pull back. Instead, he let his eyes hold hers, conveying a quiet, painful acceptance that broke her heart just a little more. Slowly, deliberately, he reached up and wrapped his fingers around her wrist. His touch was warm, his grip gentle but unyielding.

He lowered her hand from his lips, but he didn't let go. Holding her gaze, he leaned down and pressed a soft, lingering kiss into the center of her palm. The warmth of his breath lingered on her skin like a brand, a silent, desperate promise of his own.



# Chapter 21

In a secure briefing room at a forward operating base in Kupwara, Jammu & Kashmir. Maps, surveillance feeds, and intercept transcripts were spread across the table. Colonel Balraj, stood by the window.

Amit, give it to me straight. How deep are we into Adil's network?

Sir, physically? He's a ghost. He hasn't used a satellite phone in three weeks, and he's switching safehouses in the Lolab Valley every forty eight hours. But digitally and emotionally? We've found his anchor.

Afreen….said Balraj with a faint smile on his face ….so it is confirmed.

Sir!! Our signals intelligence picked up an encrypted chat on a secondary device three nights ago. The IP address bounced, but the syntax, the personal references, it's him. He's risking contact. We don't know why, but we have an inkling that he knows that Afreen is under surveillance.

Balraj walked over to the table, leaning in…. Adil is ruthless, but he's romanticizing his own narrative. That's his blind spot. And that blind spot has a name "Afreen "

Sir!! We're keeping a soft perimeter around her house. No uniform presence. If Adil smells a trap, he'll vanish back into the ridges, and we lose the window. My team is ready to pick her up quietly, bring her in, and pressure her to set up a meeting.

Balraj shook his head slowly. .No, Amit. You don't pressure a girl like Afreen. If you threaten her or corner her, the survival instinct kicks in, not for herself, but for him. She'll either clam up or find a way to tip him off. We don't break her. We enlist her.

With respect, sir, her lover is responsible for Tabrez Malik's killing. And we both know, it was for her. Why would she help us?

Because she wants him alive, Amit. Look at her profile. She's educated, she's trying to build a future in this valley. Her husband has left her, her father is gone, she has two young children. She knows how this ends for Adil, either a bullet in an encounter or a cold grave. We present ourselves as his only chance of survival.

You want to offer a surrender through her? asked Amit.

Exactly !! We just need her to visit me on the pretext of her father knowing me personally. No interrogation rooms.. Let's sit down with her over a cup of tea. We will talk about Adil's blind sister, his father. We will talk about her children. We will talk to her about Adil, before he took up the gun. We show her the person she loves, not just the militant we're hunting.

And then we lay down the reality….said Amit.

Yes. We tell her: "The grid is closing in. If our boys find him in the woods, it's a firefight. But if she calls him, if she tells him to meet us we can pull him out of the ecosystem alive. He spends time in a judicial facility, yes, but he breathes. He lives."

What if she agrees to the meeting but tells him it's a setup? asked Amit.

We control the environment. When she makes the call, she does it from your phone, in your presence. We script the conversation loosely, keep it emotional, keep it urgent.

Adil alive is a treasure trove of intelligence on the cross border infiltration routes. Adil dead is just another martyr poster on a wall.

Understood, Sir, What's the timeline?

We need to bring her in at 11.00 hours today. Give her two hours to process, digest, and make the choice.

I'll brief the Quick Reaction Team and the surveillance unit now. Soft pickup on the girl, maximum security at the perimeter.. .Said Amit

Balraj placed a hand on Amit's shoulder. Be empathetic, Amit. To catch a man driven by passion, you must use the weight of that passion against him. Go get her.

Jai Hind, Sir !!!l. Amit Saluted Balraj and made an exit.

The afternoon sun beat down relentlessly on the bustling streets of Srinagar as Captain Amit's military jeep pulled up outside the Afreen's house Rajbagh. Amit, dressed in crisp fatigues, checked his watch before stepping out. He knew the sensitivity of this mission; they weren't dealing with a hardened asset, but a woman caught in the crossfire of history and emotion.

Amit rapped firmly on the heavy wooden door. A moment later, it swung open. Afreen stood there, her dark eyes guarded, a traditional pashmina shawl pulled tight around her shoulders.

"Afreen ji?" Amit asked, his tone deliberately polite, devoid of the usual military grit.

"Yes," she replied softly, her posture rigid. "Can I help you ?"

"I'm Captain Amit. I've been sent by Colonel Balraj. He requests your presence at the cantonment."

Afreen's breath caught slightly at the name, but she masked it quickly. "Colonel Balraj? I haven't seen him for quite a while now. Why does he want to see me? He could have come himself.

Amit offered a reassuring, yet unyielding smile. " It's an informal meeting, Afreen ji, you have nothing to worry about. A conversation between old family friends, you could say. But it is urgent. Please, lock up and come with me."

Afreen hesitated, looking back into the empty hallway of her home, then back at the waiting jeep. She knew exactly what this was about, even if Amit hadn't breathed his name yet. Adil.

"Give me a minute," she whispered

I need to inform Rashid Chacha. The kids are in school.

Don't worry you'll be back by the time they are back. .said Amit.

A few minutes later, she was sitting in the front passenger seat of the bumpy jeep, the wind whipping her hair. The silence between them grew heavy, punctuated only by the roar of the engine.

"You don't look like a man who brings people in for social calls, Captain," Afreen said, breaking the ice, her voice tight.

Amit kept his eyes on the road. "We live in complicated times, Afreen ji. Sometimes the most important battles aren't fought with rifles, but with the right words spoken by the right person."

"And you think I have those words?"

Amit glanced at her briefly. "Colonel Balraj thinks you do.

Afreen looked out the window as the checkpoint gates approached, her stomach knotting. They knew.

The Colonel's office did not look like a typical interrogation room. There were no harsh lights or bare walls; instead, it was lined with bookshelves, Kashmiri carpets, and a steaming pot of Kehwa on the side table. Colonel Balraj, deeply etched lines of experience on his face, stood up from his desk as Afreen entered.

"Afreen,, " Balraj said warmly, stepping forward to clasp her hands. "Look at you. The last time I saw you, it was brief. How are the kids ?

"They are fine, Colonel Sahab, "said Afreen, feeling the subtle weight of the environment.

We decided on "Balraj "the last time we met, said Balraj with a smile on his face. .Sit, please,", gesturing to a leather armchair. Amit stood quietly by the door, a silent observer. Balraj poured a cup of the fragrant tea and handed it to her. "Your father was a good man, Afreen. A man of honor. He always chose the path of peace, even when the valley was burning." He had extremely liberal views.

"My father taught me to value life above all else," Afreen said, holding the warm cup but not drinking. "But I don't think you brought me here to talk about my father, Colonel.". .I mean Balraj.

I wasn't given a choice of refusing your invitation by Captain Amit.

Your annoyance is justified Afreen. Trust me, if I had the option of doing this any other way, I would have done it …

Balraj sighed, the warmth fading slightly from his eyes, replaced by the heavy gravity of his rank. He leaned against the edge of his desk, looking down at her.

"We need to talk about Adil."

Afreen's hand trembled slightly, a few drops of tea spilling over the rim… What about him ? I don't know where he is.

"I didn't ask you where he is, Afreen," Balraj said gently, his voice dropping an octave. "We know he is active in the south sector. And we know that the intelligence we have puts a target on his back. It is only a matter of time before my boys cross paths with him in the forests."

"He's not a terrorist," Afreen said, her voice rising, laced with sudden emotion. "He's angry, Colonel... he's heartbroken over what happened to his sister, but he is not a killer!"

"The gun in his hand doesn't care about his reasons, Afreen," Balraj countered, his tone deceptively smooth, almost clinical. "To the state, to the law, and to the boys I send out on patrol, he is a militant. And in our line of work, a militant has two destinies: a surrender, or a body bag. I am giving him the first option, only because I still respect your father's memory, and because I'd hate to see your young children left without a mother."

Tears pricked Afreen's eyes, a chill running down her spine. "What do you want from me?"

"Reach out to him. You are the only one he trusts. He will listen to you," Balraj leaned closer, his shadow falling over her like a shroud. "Tell him the game is up. Tell him that if he walks out of that forest with his hands up, I give you my word as an officer, he will live. He will be treated fairly."

He paused, letting the silence stretch before lowering his voice to a razor-thin whisper.

"I know about the two of you, Afreen. We've known that for a while. And more importantly, he knows we know. Yet he keeps pulling you into his web, using you as his shield. He's already put

a target on your back. If the intelligence bureau decides to class you as an active accomplice rather than a witness... Think about what that means for your kids. Who raises them when you're taken into custody?"

Afreen looked down at her lap, her hands trembling as the sheer weight of his leverage pressed into her chest. "And if he refuses? What if he thinks you are using me to draw him into an ambush?"

Balraj stood up straight, his warmth evaporating entirely, his face hardening into the unyielding mask of a commander.

"If he refuses, then the next time I see his name on an operational report, I won't be inviting you to my office for tea. I will be sending a military escort to bring you and his father, Rashid, to the mortuary to identify what's left of him," Balraj said, his eyes locking onto hers. "Do not confuse my patience for mercy, Afreen. Bring him in, or you can watch both his life and your family's future burn together. Save him."

Afreen looked up at the Colonel, her breathing shallow, then turned her head toward Captain Amit. The young officer gave her a solemn, encouraging nod, though his eyes remained entirely detached.

The silence in the room was deafening as she realized the fate of the man she loved, and her own freedom, rested entirely on her next breath.

Balraj took out a phone from his desk and placed it in her hand.

Afreen stared at the burner phone in her damp palm, its dark screen a heavy, mocking weight.

Colonel Balraj's voice still echoed in her ears, crisp, authoritative, and terrifyingly calm. He knew about hers and

Adil's meeting. By all accounts of the rules of engagement, Balraj should have arrested her. He had the evidence to lock her away for treason, to break her down in an interrogation room.

Yet, he had let her walk. “Give him the choice, Afreen,” the Colonel had said, his eyes drilling into hers. “Tell him to lay down his arms. If he walks out with his hands up, he lives.”

But mercy from a man like Balraj felt like a beautifully wrapped trap.

Afreen paced the narrow length of the room, the floorboards groaning underfoot. An agonizing knot tightened in her chest, pulling her between two impossible choices.

What if the offer was nothing more than a tactical ruse? If she called Adil, if she convinced him to step out of the shadows and into the glaring headlights of the military cordon, what guarantee did she have? Balraj was a man driven by results, by the erasure of threats. It would be so easy for a sniper to pull the trigger and claim Adil had reached for a weapon. By asking Adil to surrender, she might just be guiding him directly to a firing squad, acting as the unwitting executioner of the man she loved.

And then there was Adil. Adil, whose pride was forged in the rugged crucible of the valley's mountains. He wore his defiance like armor. If she dialed his number and pleaded for him to give up, how would he see her? To Adil, a request to surrender wouldn't sound like a desperate attempt to save his life; it would sound like a betrayal. He would think she had broken, that she had traded his cause, and his life, to save her own skin. The thought of the betrayal in his eyes, even across a crackling phone line, was a phantom blade in her heart.

She stopped by the window, looking out. Balraj had spared her, yes, but in doing so, he had handed her a weapon of psychological warfare. By refusing to call, she sentenced Adil to a

violent end in a dynamic firefight. By making the call, she risked handing him over to his killers while stripping away the only thing he had left, his dignity.

Her finger hovered over the keypad. In the cruel math of the valley, she had to decide what was worse, an Adil who died fighting but hated her memory, or an Adil who trusted her, only to be cut down in the open air.



# Chapter 22

The rain hit the corrugated tin roof of the abandoned timber storehouse with the relentless cadence of a drumbeat, reverberating through the valley like a warning. Twenty-five kilometers outside Srinagar, nestled in the damp gloom of the treeline, the air smelled of rotting pine, wet rust, and sawdust that had settled years ago. Cold water seeped through the cracks in the ceiling, dripping steadily into the dark puddles forming on the uneven floorboards.

Azhar stared at Adil in disbelief, his eyes wide with a dangerous mix of fury and terror. The dim orange light of a single kerosene lamp flickered between them, casting long, frantic shadows across the walls.

"You are walking into an iron jaw, Adil," Azhar's voice was low, strained, raspy from days of breathing in damp air and desperation. "And you are doing it with your eyes wide open."

Adil didn't answer right away. He sat on an upturned wooden crate, his fingers moving with practiced, mechanical precision as he checked the magazine of his AK-47. The cold click of metal engaging metal echoed sharply against the rhythmic thrum of the rain. He kept his head down, refusing to meet Azhar's piercing gaze.

"She wants to meet Azhar bhai," Adil murmured, his voice frighteningly calm. "She called me herself."

Azhar stepped forward, the floorboards groaning beneath his weight. He slammed his palm down on the wooden crate between them, the sudden crack of timber making the kerosene flame jump.

"Her voice wasn't hers, Adil!" Azhar hissed, leaning in, his knuckles white against the dark wood. "Can't you hear the boots standing behind her through the receiver? The sharp intake of breath? The pause before every sentence? The security forces have had her since yesterday. The moment you step into that glade, you aren't meeting a woman. You are stepping straight into a kill-zone."

Adil quietly pulled the slide back, chambering a round, and set the weapon down beside him. He slowly leaned back against the damp, sweat-stained wall, staring into the flickering flame.

"I know," he said softly.

The simple admission hung in the cold air like smoke. Azhar froze, his jaw tightening until the muscles in his face quivered.

"Then you've lost your mind!" Azhar threw his hands up, taking a pacing step back, his boots splashing into a puddle. "You are the commander of this entire sector! The boys depend on you. I have bled beside you for three years in these mountains, through snow and mortar fire, and you want to throw it all away for a phone call that reeks of a trap?"

Adil looked up. His face was weathered beyond his years, etched with the weight of lost sleep, paranoia, and the constant burden of leadership. But for the first time in years, the hardness in his eyes had melted, replaced by a faint, melancholic smile that looked almost like peace.

"If I don't go, Azhar bhai," Adil said, his voice dropping into a tender, heartbreaking register, "I will spend the rest of my life, however short it may be, knowing I was too cowardly to look her in the eye one last time. If they have her, she's terrified. She's sitting in some dark interrogation room right now, holding her breath, praying I come. And if she's playing along... if she sold me out... she's doing it to survive. How can I blame her for wanting to live?" She has children.

Azhar shook his head, his voice cracked with a raw, agonizing frustration. "They won't take you alive, Adil. You know how this ends. A volley of bullets through the chest, or a steel cage in a dark basement where they'll break whatever is left of you. Is she worth the end of everything? Is one woman worth the whole cause?"

Adil stood up slowly. He walked over to Azhar, the distance between them shrinking to nothing, and placed a heavy, grounded hand on his brother in arms' shoulder. The warmth of his hand was a stark contrast to the freezing draft blowing through the cracks.

"She isn't just a woman, Azhar bhai. She is my soul," Adil whispered, his voice unwavering even as his chest burned with a quiet, agonizing ache. "Afreen is the only thing left in this dying world that reminds me I was once human before I became a ghost in these woods."

He tightened his grip on Azhar's shoulder, pulling his friend's gaze upward, letting him see the fierce, desperate love shining through the dark. "Take the squad and head south across the ridge by midnight. Use the stream to cover your tracks. If I don't return by dawn, the command is yours. Don't come looking for me. Don't waste a single man's blood on my grave. Every breath I have left belongs to her now."

Azhar stared at him for a long, agonizing moment. He searched Adil's eyes for a sliver of hesitation, a single crack in his resolve, anything he could grab onto to pull his brother back from the edge. But there was nothing. No fear, no regret. Only a devastating, heartbreaking certainty.

Azhar's chest heaved, a stifled sob catching in his throat. He stepped back slowly, his shoulders slumping as the fight drained out of him, leaving only a bitter, hollow sorrow. He gave a sharp, painful nod, the weight of Adil's final goodbye crushing him.

"You are a fool, Adil," Azhar breathed, his voice breaking over the roar of the downpour outside. "A madman. You are throwing away your life, your legacy, the squad... you're dying for a shadow, Adil. For a miracle that won't save you."

Adil picked up his rifle, the cold metal feeling heavy, yet strangely comforting. He pulled his wet shawl tightly around his shoulders, wrapping himself in the memory of her touch, and walked toward the heavy wooden door of the storehouse. He paused at the threshold, the dark, icy rain waiting for him just beyond the frame. He didn't look back, he couldn't, or the grief in Azhar's eyes would shatter him.

"Perhaps," Adil said softly, a tiny, fragile smile touching his lips as he pictured Afreen's face one last time. "But tonight, Azhar Bhai. . tonight, I am not a commander. Tonight, I am just a man who loves her."

Adil leaned back, his eyes softened, staring into the distance for a moment. A quiet, bittersweet smile touched his lips as he turned back to Azhar.

"Like you said... Aashiqui is beyond logic, Azhar Bhai..."

isn't it?"

He exhaled a soft laugh, his gaze searching Azhar's face

He stepped out into the pouring rain, and the shadows of the valley swallowed him whole, taking with them a man already dead, dying happily for the woman who gave him life.

As Adil's words drift into the silence, the teasing air vanishes.

Azhar's eyes glazed over, catching the faint glow of the ambient light. The moisture made them shine with an intense, raw honesty. He didn't let the tears fall, but his slow blink betrayed him, heavy with memories, longing, and the silent acknowledgment that logic lost the battle a long time ago.

He swallowed hard, his jaw setting tightly before he let out a quiet, breathy exhale, looking away from Adil into the dark.

The damp chill of the river valley clung to the twisted, lichen covered trunks of the overgrown apple orchard. The trees, unpruned for years, reached out like dark, clawed hands into the pale mist hanging thick between them. Falling leaves lay heavy and silent on the mud, muffling the roar of the nearby river as it churned over sharp, jagged stones.

Adil stepped out from the deep shadow of a hollowed trunk. He moved with a quiet, deliberate slowness, not like a soldier sweeping an ambush site, but like a man who had already made his peace with the end. His rifle was slung low across his chest, his hands kept loose and completely visible at his sides. Every instinct, honed over three ruthless years in the Kashmir mountains, screamed at him that the silence in the orchard was artificial. Behind that grey veil of fog, dozens of scopes were aligned, every crosshair trained squarely on his heart.

He stopped twenty paces away from a crumbling, moss-grown stone boundary wall.

Standing beside it was Afreen.

She was wrapped tightly in a dark woollen shawl, her posture rigid, her shoulders shivering, not just from the bite of the mountain air, but from the unbearable, crushing weight of what she had been forced to do. Her eyes darted frantically toward the treeline before finally landing on Adil.

When she saw him step through the mist, her breath hitched sharply in her throat.

"Adil..." Her voice broke, a fragile whisper that barely carried over the roar of the water. "You... you actually came."

Adil took three slow steps toward her, stopping just out of arm's reach. His face, usually hardened by winter frost and the relentless cruelty of warfare, softened instantly as he looked at her. He studied every line of her face, her pale cheeks, the faint tremble of her lips, the tear tracks catching the dim light.

"You asked me to, Afreen," he said softly, his voice grounded and steady against the silent, suffocating terror surrounding them. "I always come when you call." He paused, his gaze softening further with an old, quiet ache. "And even when you don't."

Afreen pressed a trembling hand against her mouth, a desperate sob threatening to burst from her chest. Tears streaked through the dirt and damp chill on her face as she glanced back into the fog, where the dark, looming silhouettes of armed men waited in the brush. She knew they were there. She had brought them. But in her soul, this betrayal had been her only desperate gamble to keep him breathing.

"You shouldn't have," she whispered, her chest heaving violently. "Allah !! help me, Adil, you shouldn't have..."

"They promised you your family's safety if you brought me here, didn't they?" Adil asked quietly. There was no anger in his voice. No accusation, no bitterness, only a tragic, profound understanding.

Afreen gasped, stepping back as if physical force had struck her. "You knew? If you knew... Why didn't you stay away? Why are you standing here?!"

"Because I wanted to see you one last time," Adil said, taking another step forward until he could feel the frantic, shuddering heat of her breath. "Because if I had to die today, Afreen, I wanted it to be while looking at you. Not running through the dark like a hunted wolf."

"Then don't die!" Afreen suddenly lunged forward, grabbing the heavy wool of his jacket with both hands, her knuckles turning bone-white as she clung to him. "Please, Adil! Look around us! The perimeter is closing in! There are soldiers in the treeline right now! They don't want to kill you if you just give up! Colonel Balraj promised me... he promised me that if you surrender, you'll be safe!"

She pulled at him with all the strength left in her breaking body, trying desperately to anchor him to the earth, her tears spilling freely onto his chest.

"Put down the weapon! Surrender to them!" she begged, her voice rising into a raw, heartbreaking screech of pure desperation. "If you surrender, you live! A prison cell has a roof, Adil! It has daylight! In a grave, there is nothing! Choose life... please... do it for me!"

Adil looked down at her small, desperate hands clutching his coat. Slowly, gently, he placed his broad, warm palm over hers, wrapping his fingers around hers to steady their violent trembling.

"Afreen," he whispered, his thumb lightly tilting her chin up until she was forced to meet his calm, unblinking eyes. "A bird born in these mountains doesn't survive in an iron cage. They didn't come to take a living man tonight, and deep down, we both know it."

"Adil, please, he promised! He won't harm you, trust me!"

"Go back to the road, Afreen," he interrupted softly, his voice full of an agonizing tenderness. One by one, he gently peeled her freezing fingers away from his jacket, holding her hand for one last, fleeting second, feeling the pulse in her wrist, before letting go. "Don't look behind you. Run, and don't stop until you reach the village."

He took a slow step backward, his boots sinking silently into the damp leaves, slipping effortlessly into the shroud of grey mist behind him.

"Adil! No! Adil!" she cried out, reaching blindly into the fog, but her hands caught only empty air.

"Whatever happens next," his voice echoed from the depth of the white wall, fading away just as the sudden, terrifying chorus of metallic clicks, safety catches disengaging in unison, echoed through the dark trees around them. "I love you, Afreen... and forgive me."



# Chapter 23

The heavy silence of the orchard shattered instantly.

From the dense fog surrounding the stone wall, shadows materialized into men, tactical gear slick with rain, rifle barrels glinting through the grey drizzle. Colonel Balraj pushed through the frontline unit, his voice cutting sharp and authoritative over the dull roar of the river.

"Hold your fire! Hold fire!" Balraj barked into his shoulder mic, his eyes scanning the dense bank of mist into which Adil had faded. Balraj's teeth were gritted. He didn't want a corpse. Adil was a goldmine of intelligence, the key to dismantling the entire sector's network, the man who had orchestrated the daring plane hijacking years ago to free his comrades. A man like that was priceless alive.

"Adil!" Balraj shouted, stepping into the open, his hand raised to keep his men on hair-trigger readiness. "It's over! The orchard is sealed. There are fifty rifles trained on you right now. You've got nowhere to run!"

From deep within the swirling fog, Adil's voice returned, eerily calm, ringing through the trees.

"I was never running, Colonel."

Afreen, dragged back toward the perimeter line by two soldiers for her own safety, screamed against their grip, her eyes wide with terror. "Colonel, please! He's not attacking! Don't shoot him!"

Balraj ignored her, his focus laser-locked on the treeline. "You know how this works, Adil! Drop the weapon and step out with your hands up. You give us what we need, and you walk out of here alive. That's the deal!"

"We both know that's a lie, Balraj," Adil's voice drifted, closer now, coming from behind the dark trunk of a massive, hollowed apple tree. "If I surrender, I will go to a black site. And as long as I'm breathing, you'll keep Afreen in a cell, using her as leverage to break me. You'll bleed her dry just to squeeze a few words out of me."

Balraj's chest tightened. He couldn't deny it. As long as Adil lived, Afreen was a high value asset, a prisoner to be interrogated, broken, and held indefinitely.

"She has nothing to do with this!" Balraj yelled, though the conviction in his voice wavered slightly.

"She has everything to do with this," Adil replied softly. "She brought you here to save her family. And the only way she ever gets to go home, the only way you ever leave her alone... is if the file on me is closed for good."

Before Balraj could process the words, Adil stepped out from behind the tree.

He wasn't taking cover. He wasn't crouching. He stood tall in the middle of the open glade, his face illuminated by the harsh tactical flashlights cutting through the mist. Tears glistened on his cheeks, but his eyes were steady, filled with an agonizing, peaceful resolve.

Slowly, deliberately, Adil raised his rifle.

He didn't aim at Balraj. He didn't aim at the soldiers. He raised the barrel toward the sky, but to the anxious, adrenaline-fueled men surrounding him, the motion was an unmistakable threat.

"Adil, don't do it!" Balraj screamed, his own heart dropping into his stomach as he realized what was happening. "Hold your—!"

Click.

Adil racked the bolt of his rifle.

It was the final spark in a powder keg. A young soldier on the left flank snapped under the unbearable tension and pulled the trigger.

Crack!

The single rifle shot echoed through the valley, hitting Adil square in the shoulder. Adil stumbled back, his body jolting, but he forced himself to stay upright. He didn't drop the weapon. Instead, he forced his trembling arms to raise the rifle once more, deliberately giving them no choice.

"NO! STOP!" Balraj roared, reaching out to push his men's barrels down, but it was too late.

The perimeter erupted into a deafening, chaotic volley of gunfire. Muzzle flashes strobed through the fog like violent lightning. Bullets tore through the damp air, shredding the dark fabric of Adil's jacket, ripping into his chest and arms.

Time seemed to slow to an agonizing crawl.

Afreen's raw, blood curdling shriek echoed over the thunder of the rifles, a sound of pure devastation that pierced through the roar of the river.

Adil didn't fall right away. He stood amidst the storm of lead, accepting every bullet as a price paid for her freedom. With every strike, the weight of years of running, fighting, and hiding was lifted from his shoulders. With his final ounce of strength, as his knees gave out, his blood soaked gaze shifted past the gun barrels, past the Colonel, finding Afreen one last time.

His lips moved, forming silent words against the crash of gunfire: You are free.

Then, he collapsed onto the damp bed of fallen leaves.

"CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!" Balraj screamed, his voice raw, stepping forward and physically slamming his palm onto his soldiers' shoulders until the firing abruptly died down.

An awful, ringing silence settled over the orchard, broken only by the steady dripping of rain from the tin roof of the distant storehouse and the frantic, dry sobs of Afreen as she broke free from the soldiers' grip and fell to her knees in the mud.

Colonel Balraj walked slowly toward the fallen commander. He stood over Adil, looking down at the lifeless body of the man he had spent years hunting, the master strategist who had outsmarted agencies, hijacked planes, and led a sector.

There was no victory in Balraj's chest. Only a hollow, heavy defeat.

He looked at the empty magazine in Adil's rifle, lying inches from his bloodstained fingers. Adil had never intended to fire a single shot. He had maneuvered the Indian Army's top tactical team into executing a mercy kill.

Balraj holstered his sidearm, took off his wet tactical cap, and looked down at Adil with a tragic, profound respect.

"You arrogant, brilliant bastard," Balraj muttered quietly, his voice thick with uncharacteristic emotion. "You tricked us one last time."

Behind him, Afreen reached Adil's side, pulling his cold frame into her arms, weeping hysterically into the rain as the grey mountain mist slowly rolled in, swallowing the orchard, the soldiers, and the tragic end of a man who chose to die so the woman he loved could finally live.

The roar of the river was the only sound left in the heavy, suffocating silence of the orchard. Cold mountain rain washed over the fallen leaves, turning the soil into red mud around Adil's lifeless body.

Afreen was on her knees, clutching Adil's cold, wet jacket against her chest. Her body shuddered with dry, violent sobs, her head resting against his still heart. Rain poured down her face, mingling with her tears, pinning strands of dark hair to her hollow, blood-drained cheeks.

Colonel Balraj stood motionless a few feet away, his tactical gloves soaked, his eyes fixed on the empty, un-chambered magazine lying beside Adil's hand. The gunfire had stopped, but in Balraj's ears, the thunderous volley of forty rifles echoed with agonizing clarity.

Slowly, Balraj stepped forward, his heavy boots sinking into the mud. He reached down, intending to gently pull Afreen away from the body.

"Afreen... come away," Balraj said, his voice unusually low, stripped of its military authority. "The medics need to….."

Before his fingers could graze her shoulder, Afreen turned on him like a wounded animal.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, her voice cracking into a jagged, agonizing screech. She lunged backward against Adil's chest, shielding him with her own body. "Don't you dare put your hands on him! Haven't you done enough?!"

Balraj recoiled, his hand freezing in mid-air. He looked down at her, his jaw clenching as he tried to maintain his composure, but the tight line of his mouth betrayed him.

"Afreen, listen to me," Balraj started, his voice trembling slightly despite himself. "He raised his weapon. He racked the slide. My men were under orders to fire if threatened "

"You promised me!" Afreen interrupted, her voice rising into a raw, tear-choked accusation that cut through the foggy valley like a blade. She pointed a shaking, mud-stained finger at Balraj's chest. "You looked me in the eyes in that room! You gave me your word as an officer! You said if I brought him here, if I got him to step into the open, you would capture him! You said no one would shoot!"

"I intended to!" Balraj shot back, desperation leaking through his usual stoic armor. "I wanted him alive, Afreen! You think I wanted this?! He was the commander! He knew every route, every safehouse in this sector! A dead man gives us nothing!"

"Then why is he dead?!" Afreen wailed, her chest heaving as she pulled Adil closer, her tears dripping onto his pale, still forehead. "Look at him! Look at what you did to him! You lied to me! You used my fear, you used my family, you used my love for him to execute him in cold blood!"

"I didn't execute him!" Balraj roared, but the authority in his voice cracked, collapsing under the crushing weight of reality. He took a step back, staring at Adil's face, which seemed hauntingly peaceful amidst the bloody ruin of his coat.

"He played us," Balraj whispered, the awful truth finally spilling out of his throat, raw and bitter. "Don't you see it, Afreen? He knew... he knew the moment he stepped out that my boys were on a hair-trigger. He didn't raise that rifle to attack. He raised it so they would open fire."

Afreen's sobs halted for a fraction of a second, her dark eyes wide with horror as she looked down at Adil, then back up at Balraj.

"He chose this," Balraj continued softly, his chest tight, his posture slumping as the guilt finally hit him like a physical blow. "He gave up his life... to take away your value to us. He knew as long as he was alive, we'd keep pressurizing you, using you to force his hand. He forced my men to pull the trigger so you could walk away free."

Balraj removed his wet tactical cap, holding it tightly in his hands. The confident, ruthless commander who had hunted Adil across the mountains for more than a year was gone. In his place stood a man hollowed out by the realization that he had been manipulated into committing an execution he never wanted.

"I gave you my word," Balraj said, his voice barely audible over the dull hum of the rain, unable to meet her furious, heartbroken eyes. "And I broke it. I promised you his life, and instead, I became his executioner."

Afreen looked up at him, her hatred softening into something far worse, a quiet, devastating contempt.

"You didn't just break a promise, Colonel," she whispered, her voice trembling with a deadly, quiet clarity. "You proved to him that he was right about you all along. He died so I wouldn't have to live in your cages... and every time you look in the mirror, you will see his blood on your hands."

Balraj stood frozen in the cold rain as Afreen buried her face back into Adil's chest, her quiet, broken weeping filling the desolate orchard, leaving the Colonel alone with the heavy, unyielding ghost of the man he had failed to save.



# Chapter 24

The rain had ceased by the time the heavy axles of the military transport vehicles groaned to a halt, but the sky offered no relief. It hung low over the valley, a vast, bruised expanse of slate that seemed to absorb the twilight rather than reflect it.

Colonel Balraj stood by the decaying perimeter wall, the damp cold seeping through the leather of his boots. Five yards away, two soldiers pulled the thick, plastic zipper over Adil's face. The rasp of the teeth interlocking was the only sharp sound in the orchard, cutting through the heavy air. The atmosphere reeked of a brutal cocktail: wet earth, crushed apple blossoms, the sharp metallic tang of fresh blood, and the acrid fumes of idling diesel engines.

Around them, the men moved with a hushed, mechanical precision. There were no victory cries, no congratulatory glances between the operatives who had spent thirty sleepless hours to conduct the entire operation. They moved like men carrying an unexpected burial vault. They had achieved their objective, yet a suffocating, icy weight settled in every stomach, the quiet, instinctual realization of a victory so pyrrhic that it was entirely indistinguishable from a catastrophic defeat.

Afreen sat perched on a low, moss-slick stone wall nearby, her dark wool shawl wrapped so tightly around her narrow frame that she resembled a shroud left behind on the rocks.

An hour ago, her grief had been a violent, animalistic thing, a tearing, throat-shredding scream that had echoed off the granite ridges of the gorge. But that fire had burned through its fuel. What remained was a terrifying, crystal clear stillness. Her breathing was so shallow that the bitter mountain air barely fogged in front of her mouth.

Balraj approached her, his boots crunching methodically over the bed of sodden leaves. In his right hand, he held a scratched metal thermos cap filled with steaming tea, a silent, useless offering handed to him by a young lieutenant who hadn't known what else to do with his hands.

He stopped three feet away, holding it out. She did not reach for it. She did not blink. Her eyelids were raw, but her gaze was locked on a specific patch of mud near the roots of a wild plum tree. There, Adil's life had pooled into a dark, stagnant circle that refused to sink into the saturated earth.

"The transport to Srinagar is ready," Balraj said. His voice, usually ringing with the crisp, unforgiving edge of a decorated commander, sounded flat. Hollowed out. "My orders stand. You are free to go back to your family. An unmarked car will drop you directly to your uncle's house in the upper district."

Afreen's jaw tightened imperceptibly.

"Free," she whispered.

The word drifted into the freezing mist, stripped of any warmth. It was not a declaration of release; it was an insult, a cruel joke played by an empire on a woman whose entire sky had just collapsed.

"You don't have to understand the operational necessity now," Balraj said, turning his gaze toward the dark, rushing waters of the river below, unable to endure the silent accusation of her profile. "And I don't ask for your forgiveness. But Adil made his choice when he crossed the line. He chose to die so that you could live. Don't waste that life on hatred, Afreen. Hatred in these mountains is an endemic disease. It consumes the host long before it ever touches the enemy."

Afreen turned her head. Slowly. Unhurried.

For the first time since the final burst of automatic fire had ceased, her eyes locked directly onto his.

There was no wetness left in them. The tear tracks on her cheeks had dried into pale, dusty salt lines. In the center of her dark pupils burned a cold, steady, ancient flame, the chilling clarity of someone who had looked past the veil of human fear and found something far more potent on the other side.

"You think he died to give me a life, Colonel?"

Her voice was barely louder than the scrape of pine needles against the stone wall, yet it carried a razor sharp weight that made the guards at the truck turn their heads.

"You think he wanted me to return to the kitchen? To spend my days baking flatbread, raising my children, and bowing my head in gratitude to your soldiers at every checkpoint because I was spared?"

Balraj frowned, a tight, cold knot of instinctual unease twisting in his gut. "He died so you wouldn't be taken into custody. So you wouldn't spend the rest of your youth in a cell."

"No," Afreen whispered. A tiny, ghost-like shadow of a smile touched her pale, chapped lips, an expression so devoid of joy that a chill rippled straight down Balraj's spine. "He knew your system

better than you will ever comprehend. He knew that if he surrendered and lived, I would become your leverage. A permanent hostage to keep his remaining men quiet. But he also knew something else."

She leaned forward slightly, her dark eyes locking onto his with an unblinking intensity.

"He knew that if he died by your hands, here, in this mud, in front of my eyes, he would create something far more dangerous than a local commander."

She stood up. The movement was slow, deliberate, her posture rigid and unyielding against the biting wind whipping down from the snow capped peaks.

"A commander can be hunted, Colonel," she said, taking a step toward him. He instinctively shifted his weight back, though he hated himself for the micro-movement. "A commander has a face. He leaves footprints in the snow. He has a radio frequency you can intercept. You can track him. You can corner him in an apple orchard. You can pump forty rounds of lead into his lungs."

She paused, taking a long, deep breath of the freezing air, filling her lungs with the scent of pine, copper, and cordite.

"But a martyr? A martyr is no longer a man, Colonel. A martyr is an idea. And an idea doesn't bleed. It doesn't sleep in the rain. It doesn't rot in a ditch."

Balraj stared at her. The tin cup in his hand had grown cold, the steam vanishing into the gray dusk. The silence between them felt heavy, almost suffocating.

"What are you doing, Afreen?" he asked, his tone dropping into a guarded, defensive low.

“You used my most sacred bond, my children, to force me into betraying Adil. You and your system treated me and my children as disposable pieces on a chessboard

We live in a world where manipulation and deceit are used over the powerless. This is not a world where my children can ever be truly safe anyway.”

"You didn't end the war tonight, Balraj," she said, stepping so close he could smell the faint scent of crushed lavender water and dried sweat on her collar. Her voice dropped to a quiet, lethal whisper that was meant only for him, lost beneath the distant, rhythmic roar of the river. "You just passed the torch. You think you left me with grief. But grief is just love with nowhere to go. And when you force love to sit in the dark with nowhere to go... it mutates into a weapon."

She did not wait for a response. She didn't look back at Adil’s body, nor at the black plastic bag being hoisted onto the metal bed of the lead truck. She simply pulled her dark shawl tight around her head and turned away. Her boots made no sound on the slick pine needles as she walked past the idling armored vehicles, moving steadily toward the narrow dirt road that bled into the darkening valley.

Balraj stood frozen in the orchard. He watched her silhouette shrink against the wall of thick, rolling fog.

For two years, his life had been defined by a single objective, the elimination of Adil. He had drawn maps, studied night-vision photographs, burned through intelligence budgets, and sacrificed good men, convinced that severing the head of the network would bring quiet to the sector.

Now, looking down at his own combat gloves, damp with the rain that had washed over Adil's corpse, a sickening, visceral realization settled into his bones.

He hadn't stopped the fire. He had merely scattered the embers into the wind.

As Afreen's dark form vanished entirely into the shadows of the pine forest, Balraj knew with an absolute, terrifying certainty that one day, long after his service medals were boxed away and his hair had turned white, the mountains would come back to collect the balance on this night's debt.

The road shrank to a jagged, shale covered ledge, hanging over the roaring obscurity of the river gorge below. Fog snaked up from the abyss, wrapping around the trunks of the Chinar like white clothes

Azhar stood in the deep shadow of the rhododendron bushes, his body tense, trembling with an erratic, spent adrenaline. He looked less like a fighter and more like a ghost caught between realms, his face smeared with rain streaked greasepaint, a battered AK 47 slung heavily across his chest. His eyes, wide and wild, searched Afreen's face as she emerged from the mist, looking for a tremor, or a tear.

Afreen stopped two paces from him.

She lifted her head slowly. The biting wind whipped her dark shawl around her face, exposing the terrifying, unyielding calm settled in her features. The grief that had threatened to tear her apart hours ago was gone, utterly consumed by a cold, crystalline purpose.

"I am here, Azhar bhai," Afreen said.

Her voice was soft, devoid of tremor or theatrics, yet it possessed a dense, startling weight that cut clean through the howling mountain gale. She looked directly into Azhar's bloodshot eyes, her expression as smooth and unreadable as carved stone.

"I am here… if Adil is not."

There was no feverish madness in her eyes, no reckless desperation born of heartbreak. There was only an absolute, chilling clarity. In that quiet assertion, Azhar realized the horrifying truth that Colonel Balraj hadn't buried Adil's rebellion in the mud tonight. He had simply watched it migrate, cold and unbroken, into the heart of the woman standing before him.

Afreen turned her gaze back toward the vast, starless sky hanging over the sleeping valley. A faint, melancholic shadow of a smile touched her lips, pale, resolute, and completely stripped of fear.

You know how it ends Afreen…. Azhar said, his voice bitter and raw

"I know how it ends," she murmured softly, her voice drifting like smoke into the freezing night.

"Adil is waiting."