A NOVEL

THE CITY'S OTHER FACE

a story of work, vanishing and the price of truth



GAJENDRA THAKUR

Translated from the original Maithili by the author himself

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PART ONE

THE SEARCH FOR WORK

Chapter 1: The Queue of Applicants

Early in the morning, Navgarh bus stand was so crowded that the moment a bus pulled up, people rushed towards its door. Naina Mishra stood clutching her file to her chest with both hands. Inside were copies of her certificates, two photographs, an identity card and a one-page résumé. She had put a thin plastic cover over it, yet after the night's rain she was more worried about keeping the file out of the water pooled on the road. Mud had stained the toes of her shoes. Her mother had told her to clean them before leaving, but she had been too afraid of missing the bus to stop.

As she was leaving the courtyard, Naina had noticed a woman spreading clothes to dry on a neighbour's roof. "Another job interview today?" the woman had asked. Naina had said "Yes" and walked on. Such questions had become difficult to answer in the lane. Some of the very people who had once taken pride in her education now asked, "What is the use of studying so much if you are only going to sit at home?" Naina knew that not everyone meant ill; some were genuinely concerned. But after eight months of unemployment, every question seemed like a fresh reckoning.

Today she had an interview for the post of office assistant at a private training institute in town. The advertisement asked for a graduate degree, computer knowledge and the ability to write clearly. Naina possessed all three. Even so, she was far from certain that she would get the job. In the past eight months she had applied at fourteen places. At some, the posts had already been filled; from others, there had been no reply. After interviews at two places, she had been told that the selected candidate would be informed. No information had ever come.

There was little room inside the bus. A young man sitting by the window put his bag on his knees, leaving Naina half a seat. He held a thick book of general-knowledge questions and answers. He turned a page, looked at something on his phone, then returned to the book. On the seat in front, two young women were comparing the admit cards for a competitive examination. "They changed the centre yesterday," one said. "The message came at night. Now we have to travel fifty kos." "Nothing can be done," said the other. "Keep studying, keep filling in

forms, keep paying fares." There was exhaustion in her voice; even the strength to complain seemed to have ebbed away.

Naina opened her phone and checked the confirmation of her application once more. She had to arrive by eleven. It was half past nine. Repair work was under way on the road through the centre of town, and the bus crawled forward. She remembered that, as she was leaving, her mother had asked just one thing: "Have you packed something to eat?" Laughing, Naina had replied, "Where will I find time to eat at an interview?" Her mother had packed two rotis and vegetables in an old tin decorated with an alpana design. The tin was now in her bag.

While packing the rotis, her mother had asked her to bring medicine from the market on her way back. Naina had said she would first check the strip of tablets they still had at home and buy more only afterwards. She remembered the medicine's name, but she remembered its price too. Once, having to think so hard about such small decisions had seemed unnatural to her. Now she understood that in a household with limited income, a silent question stands before every expense: Is this necessary at once, or can it wait another two days?

When she reached the institute gate, three queues stood outside. The first was for checking application forms, the second for fee receipts, the third for interview numbers. In large letters beside the entrance was written: "Merit Leads to Success." Beneath the sign, an employee was scolding people into straightening the lines. Naina asked for her number. Without looking up, he said, "Get another photocopy first. Then come here." Naina pointed out that the advertisement had asked for two copies, and she had brought exactly two. "Now we need three. There's a shop outside," he said.

A little way from the gate stood a photocopy shop. It too had a queue outside. A page that should have cost five rupees was being copied for ten. Naina considered protesting, but the young woman behind her said, "If you start arguing now, you'll miss your turn." Naina silently took out the money. It was the last week of the month. There were only two hundred and seventy-five rupees in the little purse inside her bag. The calculations of bus fare, photocopies and any extra expense for food were already arranging themselves in her mind.

Each of those certificate copies had its own history. To collect her original degree certificate, she had once spent three days making rounds of the university office. To correct a single vowel sign in her name on her birth-date certificate, she had had to submit two applications.

Saraswati Devi had paid the fee for her computer-training certificate by saving little by little from her sewing earnings. Whenever Naina remembered her education, she remembered those small sacrifices as well. Qualifications were not merely pieces of paper; behind each document lay the time, money and hopes of a family.

When she returned to the queue, Savita Kumari was standing ahead of her. Naina had met Savita earlier in a library. Savita was preparing for competitive examinations, but was also looking for temporary work to meet the expenses at home. "You're here too?" Savita asked. Naina replied, "One can prepare for examinations while sitting at home, but household expenses don't look at the pages of books." Savita smiled, though the smile did not seem to come easily. "Five hundred applications have come in for this post," she said. "There are two vacancies."

Naina looked towards the gate. Many candidates were neatly dressed; some had ironed their old kurtas before coming. A young man carried an empty tin of infant milk powder and was telling a friend that he would buy milk after the interview. At the end of the queue a middle-aged man stood carefully holding his daughter's documents. Again and again he told her, "Don't be nervous. Just say what you know." Naina thought that every face in the queue was different, yet in every home there was something that a regular income might help put right.

Document verification began after eleven. Candidates were sent inside one by one. The sun climbed higher. There was a fan on the veranda, but its breeze reached only the first two lines. Some people sat down on the steps. An employee chewing betel leaf kept saying, "Don't crowd a public place like this." The crowd gave him no answer. Everyone was waiting for a turn.

In a low voice Savita asked, "How is your brother Chandan's preparation going?" "He studies," Naina said. "But he worries more about his own expenses." Savita said, "A boy at my coaching centre was saying that if you pay money, you can get the questions beforehand. Even hearing such things frightens me." Naina looked at her. "There are plenty of rumours too. Don't abandon your studies to go chasing after them." Savita agreed, but added, "Even rumours trouble honest students. Doubt settles in before the examination has even taken place." They both fell silent again.

From behind them in the same line, a young man asked, "Have you received your fee receipts?" Savita searched her bag. The young man said

that, over and above the application fee, he had been asked to pay for a fresh registration. Naina went to the verification window and asked to see the written notice. The employee showed her an old sheet and explained that the additional fee applied only to candidates whose documents were incomplete. The young man's documents were complete; he had become confused because he was in the wrong queue. Naina showed him the correct window. There was still no evidence of wrongdoing, but the arrangements were so disorderly that even an ordinary rule could become a trap for someone.

At one in the afternoon Naina's number was called. Inside stood a long table with three people sitting behind it and a plastic chair facing them. She was motioned to sit. The spectacles of the man in the middle had slipped down his nose. Looking at her résumé, he asked, "What have you been doing all this time since graduation?" Naina replied, "I have been preparing for competitive examinations at home. I have also been teaching a few children." He asked, "If you get a permanent job, will you give that up?" There was a snare in the question; no answer seemed safe. After a short pause, Naina said, "When I undertake a job, I shall discharge its responsibilities fully. I will not give a false assurance now about the future."

The woman sitting on the left asked her about working on a computer. Naina explained how to draft letters, prepare tables and maintain records. The woman handed her a page to type. On the old computer, some keys worked only after they had been pressed several times. Naina took a little longer, but completed the page. The woman examined it and nodded.

Finally the man in the middle told her, "There will be a six-month training period. The salary is five thousand. Working hours are nine in the morning to seven in the evening. You may have to work on holidays as well." Naina asked, "What will the salary be after the training period? And when will I receive an appointment letter?" They looked at one another. The reply came: "Those matters will be decided later. You ask too many questions." Calmly Naina said, "It is necessary to know these things before starting work." She felt that this answer had diminished her chances. But she did not withdraw her questions.

Before she left, the woman on the panel stopped her. "The page you typed was correct," she said quietly. "But the workload here is very heavy." "How many employees are there?" Naina asked. "Those who are here manage all the work," came the reply. The woman wrote down a

number where Naina could enquire about the result. Naina thanked her and came outside. She understood that not everyone seated on the interview panel thought alike; some were powerless to change the system yet understood its harshness. The thought softened her disappointment a little.

By the time she came out, the day had begun to decline. Savita had finished her interview and was waiting near the gate. "What happened?" she asked. Naina told her. "Ten hours for five thousand?" Savita exclaimed. "What will be left after paying for transport?" "Even five thousand means a great deal at home," Naina said. "But if I work so late, I'll have to give up tutoring the children. Then perhaps my total earnings will remain much the same." They walked together for a short distance. At a turning in the road, Savita took leave to catch the bus to her village.

Naina sat down on the footpath and opened her lunch tin. The rotis had gone cold. Oil from the vegetables had collected along one side of the tin. She ate slowly. On the other side of the road a new building was under construction. Women labourers carrying bricks on their heads climbed up and down. Watching them, Naina thought: There are so many kinds of toil. No one lacks the capacity for hard work, yet receiving a fair price for it is another matter.

Just then a young man came by distributing thin leaflets. "Looking for a job? Private companies, opportunities outside town, office work, computer work!" At first Naina did not put out her hand, but the young man left a leaflet beside her. At the top was printed "Nai Disha Employment Centre". Below were promises of attractive salaries and immediate appointments. The contact address named a familiar road in Navgarh. Naina folded the paper and put it in her bag. She did not immediately believe its claims, but neither did she throw it away.

On the bus home she had to stand. Through the window she could see the lights of the market. Beneath the electric wires, shops were closing one after another. She sent her mother a message on her phone: "I'm on my way back." Her mother replied: "Come home. The food is warm." Reading those few words, Naina felt her eyes grow moist. She recalled the questions she had been asked at the interview. She did not regret her answers, but the worry of household expenses kept rising in her mind.

She got off at the bus stand and walked towards home. At the final turning into her lane, she took the Nai Disha leaflet from her bag. In

the dim light she read it again. A corner of the paper had softened in the rainwater. She could not decide whether to apply there. One thing, however, was clear: tomorrow she would have to look for work again. The day had ended; the search for a job had not.

She turned the advertisement over. Office hours were printed on the back, but there was no clear mention of fees. Naina decided that, if she went there, this would be her first question. A piece of paper was no guarantee of trustworthiness; nor was the absence of paperwork always a sign of fraud. To understand the truth, one had to ask questions and examine the answers. The faint light of her home showed from within the lane. She put the leaflet away carefully and walked towards the door.

Chapter 2: The Household Accounts

When Naina reached home, smoke was rising from the earthen stove in the courtyard. There was a gas stove as well, but ever since the price of a cylinder had gone up, Saraswati Devi had used it sparingly. The firewood, damp from the rains, would not catch easily. She sat on her heels, fanning the flames. At the sight of Naina she asked, "You're very late. You did eat something, didn't you?" Setting down her bag, Naina replied, "I ate what you packed for me. First, come away from this smoke." Her mother laughed. "My days pass in the company of smoke. Now tell me what happened."

Naina began to describe the interview, but hesitated when she came to the salary. Five thousand rupees, ten hours a day, and no clear written assurance during the training period. Saraswati Devi was silent at first. Then she said, "There is no such thing as small or great work, but the body of the person doing it has a value too. If they let you go at seven in the evening, it will be eight before you reach home. How will you come back so late?" Naina understood that her mother was less troubled by the work waiting at home than by her daughter's safety.

The house had three rooms: an old sewing machine and a table in the front room, a bedstead in the middle one, and cooking utensils in the back. Chandan's books lay scattered across the veranda. Some pages were marked in red ink. Naina had just picked up a book when Chandan came in, a bag on his shoulder and the marks of the sun upon his forehead. "How did the interview go?" he asked. "They'll tell us about the appointment later," Naina said. Chandan immediately asked, "The salary?" "Five thousand." Chandan did not laugh. He merely said, "People here know how desperate others are."

Saraswati Devi kept an old exercise book in which she recorded the household expenses. Rice, lentils, oil, vegetables, electricity, medicines, travel, examination applications, mobile-phone top-ups—each had its own line. Some figures were written in pencil so that they could be changed later. Naina opened the book. A question mark stood beside the electricity bill. The amount for medicines was entered in full. Next to the cost of cooking, her mother had drawn a short line. "We'll use less oil this month," she said. "If we cut back, what shall we eat?" Naina

asked. Her mother answered matter-of-factly, "We'll manage with what we have."

A few days earlier, Saraswati Devi had gone to the market for lentils. A shopkeeper, recognising an old customer, had offered her a little on credit; she had folded her hands and said, "Give me only as much as this money will buy." Borrowing was not in itself a disgrace. But she feared debt because she could not tell what the household would earn the following month. Greens had been planted on a small patch of land behind the house. Not much grew there, yet whenever her mother looked at it, she would say that some things were still in their own hands.

Naina's father, Ashok Mishra, had died unexpectedly three years earlier. The household income had not been large while he lived, but some money had arrived on a fixed date every month. That dependable day had vanished. Saraswati Devi taught sewing to neighbourhood children and sometimes mended clothes. Naina tutored two children in the evenings. Chandan prepared for competitive examinations, looking for occasional small jobs on the side. The household kept going, but at the end of every month, worry about the next was already standing at the door.

While Ashok Mishra lived, the house had followed one rule: necessities first, desires afterwards. Since his death, the rule had grown sterner. New clothes for Diwali had been postponed again and again; when a relative married, Naina had to set aside the money for a gift with care. Many relatives offered sympathy; some gave help. But there was no arrangement for regular assistance with regular expenses. That was why Naina wanted to depend upon her own earnings. She did not wish to have to look towards someone else's door whenever a crisis came.

A voice sounded at the doorway. "Sister, have you any old utensils?" It was Madhavi Devi. She swept floors, mopped and washed dishes in four households in Navgarh. She had known Saraswati Devi for years and came by now and then for leftover vegetables, sewing work or a book for one of her children. Today she carried a cloth bag containing rice from the ration shop and a small bar of soap. "Come and sit," Saraswati Devi said. When Madhavi sat down, she asked Naina, "What happened about the job, child?" "Nothing is certain yet," Naina replied.

Madhavi's husband, Raghunath, had once worked as a daily-wage labourer. On his way home with his earnings, he would drink. Sometimes half his wages, sometimes the whole of them, disappeared

into liquor. Madhavi used what she earned to educate their children and put food on the table. Even now her face changed when she spoke of the first days of prohibition. "At first I thought God had heard us," she said. "Raghunath began coming home in the evening with vegetables instead of empty hands. There was less swearing and abuse in the house. I bought new sandals for our younger boy. For the first time I felt that his father, too, could earn money and keep some of it for his family."

"I remember," Saraswati Devi said. "The women in this lane had a brightness in their faces in those days." Madhavi nodded. "We thought life would change now. One day an old friend of Raghunath's asked him, 'How are you?' Raghunath said, 'I don't feel quite myself, but there's money in my pocket now.' I was standing beside him. You cannot imagine how happy I was to hear it." Madhavi laughed as she repeated the exchange, but her laughter quickly faded.

In those days Madhavi had begun putting money into a small savings group with other women in the neighbourhood. For the first time, money was saved regularly for six months. Raghunath had paid their son's school fees on time, and Madhavi had treasured the receipt in a box for days. When evening fell, she no longer felt afraid at the sight of her own doorway. Children started playing outside the houses again. Even when arguments arose, they could be settled through conversation. Madhavi did not call that time a great miracle. To her, it had simply been a chance to live like an ordinary family.

"And then?" Naina asked. Madhavi's gaze went towards the door. "Then, before even a year had passed, liquor began to appear in secret. New people replaced the men who used to sell it openly. Higher prices, greater fear. Raghunath found company again. Now he lies at home as well. Ask him where his wages went and there's a quarrel. He says he got less work. But I can smell it on him."

Naina listened in silence. She knew the change in Madhavi's life was not merely a matter of expenditure. One day Madhavi's younger daughter had come home from school in tears: her classmates had been discussing the commotion at her house caused by her father's drunkenness. The next day Madhavi reached work late, and her employer deducted money from her wages. There are wounds for which no receipt is issued. Who in society will enter them in the accounts?

Madhavi never dismissed her husband Raghunath's illness or the weariness of his labour. When he found no work all day he grew irritable, and when work was available, the failure to pay wages on time

was another ordeal. But none of this meant that a family should endure beatings and humiliation. Madhavi would say again and again, "A way can be found to deal with hunger; the curses spoken in drink and the wounds left by blows are another matter." Her daughter was growing up. Madhavi did not want the girl to be afraid to speak about her own home.

"Why don't you tell the police?" Chandan asked. Madhavi did not answer at once. "And what would happen if I did, son? Once the people in the lane made a complaint. There was peace for two days. After that, new people began bringing the stuff. I don't know whose reach extends how far. But I know this much: when trouble comes to a poor household, the poor have to bear the burden themselves." Taking a pot off the stove, Saraswati Devi said, "The woman who struggles day and night in that household is not the one to blame."

It was time for Madhavi to pick up her bag. Naina walked her to the door. There Madhavi said quietly, "Look for a job, child, but be careful if anyone asks you for a great deal of money in advance. Someone took money from my sister-in-law's daughter on the promise of a job. She got no work, and the money never came back." "Where was this?" Naina asked. "I don't know the exact name. Some office over by the market. I'll ask and tell you."

After Madhavi had gone, Saraswati Devi told Naina how regularly the savings group had once met its commitments. Savings begun with five and ten rupees at a time had once paid Madhavi's son's school fees. Now half the women could no longer make their deposits on time. One woman's husband had sold household possessions; another had to hide part of her wages. "When I see all this," Saraswati Devi said, "I understand that making a law is one thing, and ensuring that its benefits endure in people's lives is quite another." Naina agreed. It did not seem to her separate from the accounts of her own home.

For a while after Madhavi left, the house was quiet. Chandan settled among his books. Naina reflected that she might, after all, have to accept the offer of five thousand rupees. But then her income from tutoring would fall, her travel expenses would rise, and her mother would be alone all day. She worked out the figures in the exercise book. As she wrote each number, she realised that the difficulty was not only a shortage of money; it was also a shortage of time.

"Didi, isn't that computer certificate of yours any use?" Chandan asked. "I know the work," Naina replied. "But the people who need it

want someone for the entire day at a low wage." Chandan was about to say something, then stopped. Naina saw that a message from his coaching institute had arrived on his phone.

Chandan's studies had a set of accounts all their own: the application fee for one examination, travel for another, books for a third, and some new expense every time a new syllabus was announced. He exchanged old books with his friends. Often, after the lights went out at night, he studied by the glow of his mobile phone. Naina scolded him, saying he would damage his eyes. "It's only for a little while," Chandan would say. But that "little while" had stretched on for two years. Meanwhile, many of his friends had taken modest jobs in distant cities; some had come back to sit examinations again. A new examination date had been announced. "If the examination is conducted properly this time," Chandan said, "I might have a chance too." Looking at him, Naina said, "Keep preparing. But don't get mixed up with any middleman." Chandan got to his feet. "I'm not that stupid," he said, with a trace of bitterness.

After dinner Saraswati Devi sat down to enter fresh figures in the old exercise book. The roof leaked in several places. If the rains began again, repairs would be necessary. Naina opened her old umbrella and found that one of its ribs had come loose. She tried to sew the cloth back into place. Her mother laughed. "That umbrella has served you a long time. We'll buy a new one now." Naina laughed too. "First let me find a new job."

As she went to bed, Naina took the leaflet from her bag and read the advertisement for Nai Disha Employment Centre again. The posts sounded attractive: office assistant, data entry, customer service, placement in companies elsewhere. She looked at the number printed on the leaflet but did not call. The organisation claimed that appointments would be made according to qualifications. Naina knew that there could be a difference between words on paper and the work that actually awaited a person.

Her mother called from the courtyard, "Have you put out the lamp?" "Yes," Naina answered, although the small light on her table was still burning. In her notebook she wrote down the next day's tasks: teach the schoolchildren; ask Savita about an old advertisement; verify the address of the Nai Disha office. At the end she added a sentence in pencil: "No work without an appointment letter." Writing it gave her a little confidence.

The house was asleep. Outside, the rain had ceased, but she could still hear drops falling from the roof. Madhavi's words returned to Naina: at first the family had been able to save money; then lies and fear had come back. She thought how much a regular income and peace meant within a home, and how much hope people must attach to the very mention of a job. There were people in the world ready to take advantage of that hope. She slipped the leaflet between the pages of her notebook. Her decision to check the address in the morning was firm.

In the stillness of the night, Naina could hear three kinds of breathing within the house: her mother's occasional cough, the rustle of Chandan turning pages behind his half-open door, and the slow breath of her own tired body. In this small home, everyone's life was bound to everyone else's. A job for one person would not be a victory for that person alone. It would mean that her mother could buy her medicine on time, that Chandan could sit his examinations without hesitation, and that the roof could be repaired before the rains. Yet it was because these needs were so urgent that Naina did not want to fall prey to anyone's false promises.

Chapter 3: An Old Acquaintance

The next day the sun rose fiercely over Navgarh. Rainwater from the night before still lay in the potholes, but dust had begun to blow across it. As Naina left the house, her mother put an umbrella into her hand. "It's sunny now, but it may rain in the evening," she said. Naina slipped it into her bag. She had no interview today. She wanted to find out where the Nai Disha Employment Centre was, and before that she needed copies of some documents from a cyber shop.

There was a tea stall at the first turn into the market. Bundles of newspapers were being opened there. A young man unfolded a paper and declared loudly, "So many applications for so few posts! Educated people are sitting idle at home." The owner replied, "My son has been preparing for five years. The names of his books keep changing; the place where he hopes to find a job never does." A few people laughed, but there was sorrow of their own beneath the laughter. Naina did not stop for tea. She went on with her errands.

This market road was familiar to those who came out in search of work. On one side stood a coaching institute, on the other a shop that photocopied certificates; between them were tea and paan stalls. Half a torn advertisement for an old recruitment drive still clung to a wall. A fresh advertisement was being pasted over it. Naina read one promising a "bright future", although it did not clearly say how many posts were available. She thought that advertisements were often worded to awaken hope at once, while finding answers to the questions they raised demanded a separate effort.

When she reached the cyber shop, the electricity had failed. Anil, the owner, was trying to get an old backup battery running. "It may take half an hour," he said. "May I sit here until then?" Naina asked. Anil pushed a stool towards her. Four people stood at the counter waiting to fill in forms. One young man wanted the spelling of his name corrected; another's photograph was larger than the prescribed size; a woman had not brought enough money to pay her fee online. The tasks were small, but every mistake carried a price.

"Naina?" a voice called from behind. She turned. Abhay Paswan stood in the doorway: slender, a cloth bag over his shoulder, a notebook and mobile phone in his hands, sweat shining on his forehead. For an

instant she struggled to recognise him, then smiled. "Abhay! What are you doing here?" "I need a photograph printed at this shop," he said. "But the electricity seems determined to discriminate against all of us." Naina burst out laughing.

They had met in the college library. Naina remembered the days when students' articles appeared in the college annual magazine. Abhay wrote brief reports on their difficulties. Once, after he had written about a water shortage in the hostel, the tap had been repaired. Naina had drawn up a petition concerning the library around the same time. The two had visited the principal's office together on several occasions. Their meetings had grown infrequent after college, but their respect for one another had endured.

On one occasion the college library had remained shut for ten days. The explanation was that repairs were under way, yet the books inside were gathering dust and no repairs had begun. After speaking to the librarian and the students, Abhay wrote a report; Naina collected the signatures of the students. Their efforts helped reopen the library. That day Abhay had said that asking the right question was itself a kind of work. Naina had replied that more important than asking a question was the patience to wait for its answer. Remembering the old exchange now brought an easy smile to both their faces.

"Where are you working now?" Naina asked. "At Navgarh Samachar," Abhay answered. "Officially, I'm a reporter. In practice, I'm also a photographer, a writer, a listener to complaints about delivery, and occasionally a collector of advertisements." Laughing, he asked, "And what is your news?" Naina briefly told him about the interview. Abhay grew serious. "Five thousand for ten hours' work? And no written appointment letter?" "That's why I haven't said yes or no yet," Naina replied.

"Sir, the power's back," Anil called from the counter. Abhay sent the photograph from his phone. Naina had her documents copied. Warm paper emerged from the printer; Anil straightened the sheets and fastened them with a pin. The shop was growing crowded. Abhay gestured towards the street. They went and stood in the shade of a neem tree beside the lane.

"What are you reporting on these days?" Naina asked. "We're running a series on unemployment," Abhay said. "One young person has sat an examination five times, another eight. Some families have farmland, but not every child in a family can be kept working on the

land. Private employment is available, but the pay is so low it doesn't even cover the cost of living in the city." "The posts listed on paper are one thing," Naina said. "How many people actually find work is another set of figures." Abhay agreed.

"There's another story amid all this," he said. "Illegal liquor sales have begun rising again in some lanes. Yesterday I visited three households. Prohibition had brought them considerable relief in the beginning. Now the women say that people are returning home drunk at night again." Madhavi's words immediately came back to Naina. "A woman I know was telling me the same thing yesterday. She found a great deal of relief at first."

"Would she allow me to write about her experience?" Abhay asked. Naina considered it. "I'll ask her first. She must also decide whether her name should appear in print. Otherwise, the trouble in her home could grow worse." "You're right," Abhay said. "A report needs facts, but someone's private suffering must not be turned into a spectacle." Naina liked his answer. She remembered the Abhay of their college days, who never interrupted another person while they were speaking.

Abhay explained that reporting often required him to make difficult decisions. One family might speak of its suffering on condition that its name was not published. Another person might make an accusation without presenting evidence. A third, an official, might not answer the phone. "If I print everything exactly as I hear it," he said, "someone may suffer needless harm. But if fear keeps me from writing anything, the problem will remain hidden. I have to find a way between the two." Naina could hear in his words an acknowledgement of the difficulties of his work, not a display of self-importance.

A heavy truck passed along the road, raising a cloud of earth and dust in its wake. Abhay pulled his notebook from his bag and wrote something down. "I'm collecting information about these trucks as well," he said. "A contractor has been building a new warehouse for some time. Local workers say they get work there, but their wages don't arrive on time." "Which contractor?" Naina asked. "Virendra Rai. He undertakes large projects. But I still have to verify what I've heard." With that, he closed his notebook.

"Where were you going?" Abhay asked. Naina took the Nai Disha advertisement out of her bag. He read it carefully. "I've heard the name. Their office is on the road behind the market. They were at a job fair a few days ago." "What sort of organisation is it?" Naina asked. Abhay

answered plainly, "I don't yet know enough to say whether it is good or bad. I won't make an accusation without checking, or praise it merely because I've seen an advertisement. If you go, ask for all the terms in writing. If they ask for money in advance, find out why and ask about a receipt."

"I need a steady income now," Naina said. "But everywhere I turn, some new condition comes up." Abhay remained silent for a little while. Then he said, "You're educated and you understand accounts. Even so, need can force a person to decide in haste. That is why a written record matters so much." Naina felt that he was not lecturing her; he was speaking from experience.

They met Savita at the next turning, a book in her hand and a bag over her shoulder. She stopped when she saw Naina and was introduced to Abhay. "Since you're a journalist, write about the examination centres being changed too," Savita said at once. "Yesterday a girl had an interview, and today her admit card shows two different addresses. Where is she supposed to go?" Abhay listened carefully. "Show me the documents. I'll write what can be verified." Savita showed him the notice on her mobile phone. As Abhay noted the relevant office's contact number, he said, "If I publish a report before the confusion is cleared up, the candidates may become even more distressed." "All right," Savita said. "But somebody has to ask."

Savita explained that she had to begin her journeys early to sit examinations and ask directions to unfamiliar schools. Each time, her family stayed awake half the night, worried that she might not arrive on time. Sometimes admit cards were issued far too late; sometimes the website failed. "I want time to study," she said. "But half my time goes into hunting for information." Rather than offer her an empty assurance, Abhay said only that he would seek an official clarification from the department and print precisely the answer he received. Savita thought that fair.

Savita's bus arrived. As she said goodbye, she told Naina, "If you find work, let me know." Smiling, Naina replied, "You too." Once the bus had gone, Abhay said, "How much hope is contained in that one sentence—'If you find work, let me know.'" "We all pass news of jobs to one another," Naina answered. "Sometimes I think our time will pass in nothing but this exchange of news."

The market was growing busier, and Abhay had to reach his office. "Do you still live in the same house?" Naina asked. "Yes, near the railway

crossing. Father looks after the farm, Mother the house. My younger sister is in college." "We're still in our old lane too," Naina said. Abhay hesitated. "And your father?" "It's been three years," she said softly. "He's no longer with us." Abhay's expression changed. "I didn't know. I'm sorry." "A lot of people don't know. Once college ended, everyone went their own way." They stood silent for a while.

Naina remembered her father's last days. He would return from school and sit in the back room, asking Chandan about his studies. Only a few days before his death, he had told Naina that when she began earning, she should set aside the first month's wages not for her mother but for a good book for herself. Naina had laughed at the suggestion. Now, whenever she passed a bookshop, she remembered those words. Abhay noticed the change in her eyes but did not change the subject; he simply stood beside her in silence. She felt no discomfort in it.

A tea stall ahead had a small awning. They stepped beneath it to escape the fierce sunlight. Abhay ordered two cups of tea. "I don't want tea," Naina said. "Water, then?" he asked. She nodded, and the stall owner gave her some in a clean glass. After drinking a little, she said, "Do you remember our argument in the library? You used to say that putting figures in a newspaper report did not convey human suffering." Abhay laughed. "And you used to say that without figures, what evidence would we have to show the suffering? Now both things seem true."

Abhay's phone rang. It was his editor calling from the office. He gave a brief reply: "I'm coming. I've checked the information." Putting away the phone, he said, "I must go. But if you visit Nai Disha, tell me about your experience. If anything goes wrong, first find out how to make an official complaint. I'll check the documents before writing a report." "You're a journalist," Naina said, "but not everything is meant to become news." "Exactly. Some things are spoken in confidence, not for publication."

Before leaving, Abhay told her of a small incident. The previous week he had met a young man who, after preparing for competitive examinations for three years, now taught tuition classes by day and counted goods in a warehouse at night. The young man had said, "I need a job, but I can't keep my family waiting all day." Abhay had written down the remark in his notebook. He told Naina, "When I write about this, I won't pretend that all educated young people make the same decisions. Some have land, some don't. Some are supported by

their families; others have families waiting for them to provide support." Naina understood the distinction.

They parted. Abhay headed north through the market, and Naina took the road behind it. Colourful advertising banners hung at the crossroads. Some offered computer training, some promised jobs abroad, and some displayed nothing but a mobile number. There was still no sign of Nai Disha. She asked a shopkeeper for directions. "Second floor of that big building," he said. "The staircase is outside."

A tea-and-paan stall stood below the building. On the second floor, a freshly painted sign read "Nai Disha Employment Centre". Beneath it, smaller lettering stated that the office was open every working day. Naina put a foot on the first step, then stopped. She remembered Abhay's advice: examine the documents, ask for written terms, do nothing in haste. She checked the certificates in her purse. She had decided to do no more than gather information today.

She climbed the stairs. Through an open door above came the ringing of telephones and the sound of people talking. A young woman sat at a desk recording names. Naina gave her name and asked, "Can I apply here for office work?" The young woman pushed a sheet of paper towards her. "Please sit down. Someone will give you the details." Naina took a chair. Through the window she could see the people of Navgarh hurrying about their affairs on the road below. A new application form lay in her hands. She did not yet know what lay ahead; she knew only that she would accept no condition without asking questions and checking the answers.

Chapter 4: Nai Disha Employment Centre

The young woman across the desk glanced at Naina's application, then began writing in a register. Two fans turned inside the office, but the crowd was so dense that no breeze could be felt. Five or six plastic chairs stood near the door. One had a leg shorter than the others; the middle-aged man sitting on it kept having to steady himself. The walls were covered here and there with company names and recruitment advertisements. Most displayed the salary in large letters, but the workplace and conditions in small print.

"Are you looking for work yourself, or have you come about someone else's appointment?" the young woman asked.

"For myself. I have some experience of office work. I can type on a computer and maintain accounts," Naina replied.

"Then fill in this pink form. Applicants for employment have a separate form."

Naina turned the page over. It asked for her name, age, education, experience and mobile number. On the final line were the words: "The company's decision shall be final." She asked, "Is this a position in your own office, or will you send me to another organisation?"

For the first time the young woman looked properly at her. "My name is Kusum. You'll have to meet the office manager. We do have a vacancy here, but we also arrange appointments elsewhere."

"Is there a fee for this application?"

"Not for a staff position. We charge a registration fee to those seeking placements elsewhere."

"How much?"

"Three hundred and fifty. There may be other expenses later, depending on the kind of work. The manager will explain everything."

One distinction was now clear to Naina. The advertisement was full of bright promises, but it had said nothing about fees. In front of her, a young man was counting out three hundred and fifty rupees. An elderly woman accompanying him untied a knot in the end of her sari and handed him two notes. "Mother, give me only this much for now," he said. "We'll see about the rest later." The woman's hands trembled.

"He'll get a job for certain this time, won't he?" she asked. The man at the counter replied, "We'll do our best." Perhaps the old woman did not understand the difference between those two sentences.

Naina continued filling in the form. There was no question about whether her father was alive, but it did ask for an emergency contact. She wrote down her mother's number. While entering her subject of study under educational qualifications, she remembered the college library. She did not think her education worthless merely because the post did not require all of it. Still, as she put her qualifications on paper, she thought that finding work was one thing and being able to accept its terms quite another.

A woman came briskly out of an inner room, wearing a grey sari, her hair neatly arranged, a thick file in her hand. "Kusum, where's yesterday's list?" Her voice carried urgency and authority.

"In the right-hand drawer of the desk, madam," Kusum said.

The woman opened the drawer, took out a sheet, then picked up Naina's form. "Naina Mishra?"

"Yes."

"I'm Kiran. I supervise this office. Come and sit over here."

Kiran took her into an inner room containing a small desk, two chairs and a computer. An advertising strip had been pasted across the windowpane, leaving only half the road outside visible. The files on the desk bore numbers, but each contained sheets of several different colours.

"Have you worked anywhere before?" Kiran asked.

"Not in a regular job. I tutor some schoolchildren. I once had temporary work entering examination records for a local organisation on a computer."

"Can you prepare a list of names and figures on a computer?"

"Yes. Give me an example and I can show you here."

Kiran took out an old register. Naina was asked to enter the names of twenty applicants, their application dates and the amounts they had deposited. She sat down at the computer and began. Several names were spelt differently on the receipts and in the register. Rather than alter them arbitrarily, she marked the discrepancies. Two applications carried the same receipt number. "These two receipts have identical numbers," Naina told Kiran. "I'm marking them for checking."

Kiran took the papers and fell silent for a moment. "It may be a mistake. Finish the list."

"All right. But unless the names and amounts deposited are reconciled, the accounts won't be correct."

"Many people come into this office every day," Kiran said. "If we stop over every little error, the work will never move forward."

Naina said nothing. She did not alter the figures just to make them fit; she entered "Recheck" against both records. She finished in half an hour. Kiran examined the work. For the first time, a slight sign of pleasure appeared on her face.

"You understand written records properly. We need people like that in this office. But it gets crowded every day. Some people cannot bear it," Kiran said.

"What are the hours and salary?"

"The first three months are probationary. Seven thousand six hundred a month. Ten in the morning until six in the evening, with half an hour for lunch."

"A weekly day off?"

"Sunday. But you may have to come in for special recruitment camps. You'll be given time off in lieu."

Naina thought for a moment. The first institution had offered five thousand rupees for ten hours' work. Here the pay was somewhat higher and the hours seemed more reasonable. But a written appointment letter was essential. "Can you give me the terms in writing?" she asked.

Kiran looked at her. "Not every new employee asks that sort of question."

"It will be difficult to tell my family anything without written terms. I have to account for my mother's medicines and the household expenses."

"All right. The letter will be issued once the owner signs it. No decision has been made yet."

At that moment a man's loud voice sounded from outside. "Kiranji, were there fourteen people on that first list or fifteen?" Kiran rose at once. Three people were standing outside. The man in the middle wore a white kurta and polished shoes and had an expensive watch on his wrist. Kusum stood up as soon as she saw him.

"Ratan Babu, we received twelve sets of papers yesterday. Two were added later," Kiran answered.

"Who added the two?" the man asked.

"I did, myself."

"Then give me the list. Changing it again and again causes confusion."

Kiran handed over the file. The man glanced at Naina. "A new employee?"

"She's here to apply. She did well in the work test," Kiran said.

"Name?"

"Naina Mishra."

"Good. Every applicant who comes here must be treated courteously. Our institution runs on people's trust," Ratan declared. He spoke loudly enough for the crowd outside to hear.

He went towards the stairs. "He's the owner. Ratan Singh," Kusum whispered. Naina noticed that one of the men who had come with Ratan was carrying a contractor's papers. At the sight of him Kusum greeted him respectfully as "Virendra Babu". The men went into the room and shut the door.

Kiran returned to the question of Naina's work. "Call tomorrow afternoon. If approval comes through, you could start the day after tomorrow."

"And will it be made clear in writing that there is no application fee?"

"Not for employees. You don't have to pay anything," Kiran said plainly. "Placements elsewhere are a separate matter."

Kiran took a plain sheet from her desk drawer. "These are our office rules. You can take a copy if you like." The document mentioned staff hours, attendance records and the probationary period. The date of salary payment had been left blank. Pointing to it, Naina asked, "On what date each month is the salary paid?"

"By the seventh," Kiran said.

"It would be better if that were written in the letter."

Kiran picked up a pen and filled the blank: "By the seventh of the following month." Slightly irritated, she said, "You ask a great many questions about accounts."

"There are a great many questions about accounts at home," Naina answered calmly.

The hardness in Kiran's expression softened a little. "In my first job, they withheld my pay for three months. I had to ask my family to send me the fare to get home. It was only then that I understood why written terms are necessary." She fell silent, as though she had already said more about herself than she intended.

There was a knock at the door. Kusum stood there holding a receipt book. "Madam, under what heading should I issue receipts for the twelve-thousand-rupee deposit we've been told to take for placements outside?"

Kiran glanced towards Naina. "Reconcile the list of names first. We mustn't take money from everyone yet. Don't accept payment from anyone whose papers are incomplete."

Kusum left. "Who has to pay twelve thousand rupees?" Naina asked.

"Some of the training and travel costs for employees going to companies farther away. It doesn't apply to every appointment."

"If the company itself is hiring them, why should an applicant bear such a large expense?"

"Some companies pay, others don't. The arrangements have different rules."

"But the applicants are given full details beforehand, aren't they?"

"They should be," Kiran said. "For now, think about your own work. Once you're appointed, you'll have to deal with other people's application accounts."

The last sentence sounded like an ordinary instruction, but Naina understood that Kiran did not want to hear any more questions just then. So far she had found no direct evidence of deception. In a crowded office there might be incompetent employees, or inconsistent accounts. She decided not to go home treating questions as though they were answers. When the papers came into her hands, she would have to understand what they meant.

Naina gathered her documents. "Thank you, then. I'll call tomorrow."

When she came outside, the crowd had grown larger. A young man was counting the notes in his wallet. "I need work in some factory, however I can get it," he was saying. "It's becoming impossible to carry

on in the village." Kusum gave him a slip and told him to register first. Another young man accompanying him asked, "If the company doesn't hire him, will the money be returned?" Kusum pointed to the conditions on the back of the receipt. The young man could not read them. Naina paused. "It says here that the registration fee is non-refundable."

Both young men looked at her. The first became uneasy. "So even if I don't get work, the money is gone."

"Yes. That's why you should read all the terms," Naina said. Kusum stared at her but said nothing.

As Naina went down the stairs, a message arrived from her mother: "Be sure to eat lunch. Don't worry about the medicines." Naina replied that nothing was settled yet, but there was a possibility of work. She felt no haste to announce the news. First let the written letter arrive; then there would be something to celebrate at home.

Below the building the tea seller was washing glasses. His radio was broadcasting news that an examination had been postponed. Three young men listened. One said, "How many times are we supposed to sit these examinations? Will we grow old studying?" Another held out his phone to show the screen. The report was preliminary; it had not been confirmed. Naina stopped to hear the full announcement. Chandan was preparing for this examination. She called him at once.

"What is it, Didi?" Chandan asked.

"Have you had any new information about your examination?"

"Nothing official. People are saying the question paper got out. I'm checking."

"Don't trust rumours. Look for the department's notice."

"All right," Chandan said, but Naina could hear the alarm in his voice.

She crossed the lane and headed towards the bus stand. The colourful advertisements in the office, the money taken from the old woman's sari, Kiran's watchful gaze and Ratan's loud voice returned to her mind one by one. She did not yet believe the institution was fraudulent; she had also been promised an appointment letter. But if people's hopes could so easily be turned into registration receipts, then those who kept accounts of that hope ought to bear a very great responsibility.

There was a queue at the bus stand. Two women stood ahead of Naina. One cooked meals at a school; the other had a son who had decided to leave his coaching classes and seek manual work outside the city. The first woman said, "My school enrolled a new cook. Three months have passed, and she hasn't been paid her honorarium." "Then how do people keep working?" the second woman asked. "If we stop, our names won't be on the list in future. If we carry on, the debts at home will grow."

Naina listened. In government-supported work, private institutions and daily-wage labour alike, there was one shared problem: the hours of work were fixed, but the certainty of payment was not. She thought of her possible appointment letter. The promised salary of seven thousand six hundred would mean something only if it arrived on time.

Suddenly a young man standing behind her asked, "Sister, where is Nai Disha?" He held the same advertisement she had received the previous day. Naina gave him directions. "They've written a big salary," he said. "It's a genuine job, isn't it?" "I can't be certain of anything," Naina replied. "They speak of several kinds of work. Whichever post you're applying for, ask to see the location, salary and terms in writing." He thanked her and walked away. He knew with great enthusiasm where he was going. What he might find there, nobody knew.

The bus arrived. Naina boarded with the crowd, thinking that she herself stood between an opportunity and a multitude of doubts. It was easy to tell others to be cautious. She was beginning to understand how difficult it was to remain cautious with the expenses of a household before one's eyes.

When she reached home that evening, Chandan was sitting in his room with an open book, his phone beside his hand. "Any confirmed news about the examination?" Naina asked.

"Not yet," he said. "But every group is talking about the same thing."

Naina looked at the page of his book. The heading was "General Studies". Many passages had been underlined in pencil. Those lines represented months of Chandan's labour. "Let's find out what's true first," she said. "There's no reason to stop studying now."

She took the copy of the Nai Disha application from her bag and gave it to her mother. "There may be work. But we won't count on it until the letter arrives." Saraswati Devi held the paper close and tried to read it. "Seven thousand six hundred?"

"Yes, during probation. We'll see."

Her mother put the paper carefully on top of the old cupboard. "All I want is for you to have the security of your own earnings. But don't surrender your good sense in exchange for that security."

Naina smiled. After the crowds and clamour of the day, those few words at home comforted her. The next day she would wait for Kiran's call.

Chapter 5: Poonam's Deposit

When Poonam Yadav arrived at Naina's house that afternoon, Saraswati Devi was in the courtyard cutting up an old sari to make pillowcases. Poonam removed her sandals beside the door and greeted her respectfully. She carried a plastic folder and a small bundle tied in red cloth. Her face was tired from the heat, but there was also a restless eagerness in her eyes, as though something she longed for might soon be within reach.

"Is Naina at home?"

"She's inside. What brings you here at this hour?" Saraswati Devi asked.

"I need to talk to her about some work."

Naina came out of her room and was delighted to see Poonam. They had known each other since their schooldays. They had gone on to study different subjects, but still met on festive occasions and at weddings in the village. Poonam was skilled with her hands. For the past three years she had worked at a sewing centre, where wages were often late and which eventually closed. Since then she had earned a little by sewing clothes at home and occasionally helping with wedding decorations.

"I've heard about a job outside the town through Nai Disha," Poonam said.

Naina was startled. "You went there?"

"Yesterday. An old friend gave me their phone number. Someone she knows found work away from home through them. They say a garment factory needs women workers. Fifteen thousand a month, with accommodation provided separately."

"Where is it?"

"First, training near Gorakhpur. After that, wherever the company needs us. It's written here." Poonam opened her folder.

Naina read the document. Its heading was "Skill-Linked Placement". Beneath it was the name of a private company whose full address was unclear. The salary was described as "up to fifteen thousand". A brief paragraph referred to training and accommodation charges.

"It says 'up to'. It doesn't promise fifteen thousand," Naina said.

"Even twelve or thirteen thousand would be good, wouldn't it? Here they wanted me to sit for nine hours for a three-thousand-rupee job."

"I agree with you about that. But have you received an appointment letter?"

"After I pay the deposit."

"How much is the deposit?"

Poonam was silent for a while. Then she said, "Twelve thousand. I've already paid three hundred and fifty for registration."

Saraswati Devi stopped with her needle poised in the cloth. "So much money in advance?"

"They say it's for training and accommodation. If we go away from our families, we'll need arrangements, won't we?" There was defiance in Poonam's voice.

Naina turned to the second page. It said that "under normal circumstances, deposits are non-refundable". She read the words aloud. Poonam's face fell a little. "Kiran Madam said that if I don't get a job there, they'll find me something elsewhere."

"She said it, but it isn't written here. It should be clear whether you'll get your money back if no appointment is made."

Poonam untied her bundle. Inside were two-thousand-rupee notes and a few five-hundred-rupee notes. "Here are seven thousand. Father sold an old heifer to give me this. I've borrowed five thousand from my aunt. If I don't go, how will I repay the debt?"

"And if you pay it now and still don't get a job?" Naina asked.

"That can happen too. But what will happen if I make no attempt to work?" Poonam answered. Her eyes had filled with tears, but she did not wish to cry.

The two friends were quiet for a while. Saraswati Devi brought water. Holding the glass, Poonam said, "My younger sister Reena is in Class Ten now. Her examination fee is due. Father's knee pain has grown worse. The farm brings in enough for us to live, but nothing remains. If I keep asking him for money, I won't be able to look myself in the eye."

Naina described her own experience. "I've also been offered work at that office. I'm waiting to see the written letter. I'll telephone tomorrow afternoon. If you need to go there again, come with me. We'll ask about all the conditions."

"They told me I must deposit it today, or the place will go to someone else," Poonam said.

"If they frighten you with the prospect of losing your place immediately, you ought to be even more careful. At least get a receipt, the company's full address and the terms of appointment in writing today."

Saraswati Devi said gently, "Child, before you hand over money earned through hard work, make sure of the job. It's difficult to recover a poor family's savings."

Poonam agreed, but tied the notes up again. Her decision was already half made; the other half remained caught between fear and hope.

A message arrived on Poonam's phone from home. Her father wanted to know whether she had reached the place where the papers were to be signed. Poonam called him. "I'm with Naina now. We're going through the documents."

Her father's quiet voice came from the other end. "If you're not sure, bring the money back. I'll find some way to repay the debt here in the village."

"It hurts you to walk, Father. At least let me do this much," Poonam said.

"I'm not stopping you. But wherever you go, keep telling us your address and phone number."

Poonam ended the call. The corners of her eyes were wet. "You can still stop for now," Naina said. "Your father is saying the same."

"He isn't trying to stop me. He wants me to achieve what I wish for. But when I hear his voice, I begin to change my mind. That's why I came away from home to make the decision."

Naina gave her more water. Poonam said that when the sewing centre had closed a year earlier, the owner had dismissed every worker with one week's wages. Two months of arrears were still unpaid. At the time Poonam had been holding a half-sewn pair of blouses. She had offered to finish the work, but the owner said that the customer had cancelled the order. "I'm not afraid of work," Poonam said. "But when the work is finished and the wages don't come, it breaks your spirit."

"Is there separate accommodation for women in the other city?" Saraswati Devi asked.

"They say there'll be a separate hostel."

"They say so, but is it written on the paper?"

Poonam opened her folder again. One sheet said "shared accommodation" without giving any further details. "We must also ask whether there is a female warden or a woman we can contact at the training centre," Naina said.

"I will ask," Poonam replied firmly. "I've decided to go, but I won't trust the people I'm going to with my eyes shut."

Both friends put on their sandals and came to the doorway. Poonam carried the red bundle in her bag. Saraswati Devi stopped her once more. "Look for the institution's stamp and the date on the receipt. If anything seems wrong, don't give them the money." Poonam nodded.

The two friends set off together towards the market. On the way, a recruitment notice was pasted on a school gate. The salary offered for an assistant was four thousand a month, but the first three months were to be spent in unpaid training. Poonam read it and said, "I'm twenty-seven now. Everywhere it's training first, money first. They've turned jobs into goods to be sold in a market." "Which is why it's important to look at the papers," Naina replied.

The Nai Disha office was less crowded today. As soon as Kusum saw them, she asked, "Have you come for an appointment letter?" Poonam gave her name. Kusum searched a page in the register. "You still owe twelve thousand. Get Madam's signature." Naina introduced herself. "You'll hear about your staff position too," Kusum said.

Kiran was speaking to someone on the telephone in her room. "No, I won't send five people's papers without reconciling them. Afterwards it all comes back to me," she was saying. When she put the phone down, she asked Poonam to sit. Naina took the other chair.

"Have you brought the deposit?" Kiran asked.

"Yes, but I need to understand some of the conditions," Poonam said.

"Go ahead."

"What is the factory's full address? Is the salary definitely fifteen thousand a month, or could it be less? And what happens to the deposit if I don't get the job?"

Kiran looked a little uncomfortable. "Naina must have advised you to ask all this."

"I only told her what I read in the papers," Naina replied. "Poonam will make her own decision."

"Very well. The company hasn't finalised the number of appointments yet. In the first stage, you'll go to the training centre. The salary can vary according to experience. If there's no suitable work, our institution will look for another post. The deposit is used for training expenses, so I cannot promise a refund," Kiran said plainly.

Disappointment showed on Poonam's face, but she asked, "Then how likely am I to find work after training?"

"We've sent many people. Since you know sewing, your prospects are good. But the final decision belongs to the company."

"Is there a number where we can speak directly to the company?" Naina asked.

Kiran took a sheet from a file. It bore an office telephone number and a contact person's name. "You may call if you wish, but during office hours."

Naina noted the number. The sheet bore a stamp, but the address was incomplete. "Please give Poonam a written receipt and the date of training."

"A receipt, certainly. The date will be finalised once the deposit is made."

Poonam took out her notes. Naina put her hand on Poonam's and said once more, "You can still think it over."

Poonam looked at her. "I have thought it over. If I don't go, I'll spend my whole life putting together sewing jobs that bring in four or five hundred rupees each. I have to educate my sister." She placed the notes on the desk.

Kiran counted the money and called Kusum. A receipt was issued. Poonam carefully checked the name, amount and date. "Keep a photograph of the receipt on your phone," Naina said. "And put the original somewhere safe at home." Poonam took a photograph. Kusum gave her a form asking for her home contact details, basic health information and the name of someone to contact in an emergency.

"Put down my number as an emergency contact," Naina said. "Give them another number from home as well."

Poonam agreed. She entered her mother's number first, then Naina's.

As they left the office, Poonam walked with a lighter step, as though making such a great decision had itself brought some relief. But by the foot of the stairs she had grown quiet. "What is it?" Naina asked.

"I've handed over so much money at once. Now I'm frightened."

"There's nothing wrong with being afraid. We'll call the company now. If anything is unclear, we'll ask immediately. And when the date of departure is fixed, don't set off alone."

"I'm glad you didn't try to stop me," Poonam said.

"It isn't my right to stop you. But when something isn't clear in the papers, both of us have the right to ask."

They stopped by a telephone shop. Naina dialled the number on the sheet. It rang the first time without an answer. On the second attempt a man picked up. As soon as he heard the company's name, he said that the relevant officer was away. He advised them to seek information about training from Nai Disha and ended the call. Naina wrote down exactly what he had said. "Is that a bad sign?" Poonam asked.

"We can't draw a conclusion from that alone," Naina said. "But we should have the full address of the training centre and the person responsible there."

Poonam said she should ring the friend who had given her Nai Disha's number and ask again. She called. The friend explained that a distant acquaintance had gone away through the institution, but they were no longer in regular contact. "I haven't worked there myself," she made clear. "I only passed on what I'd heard."

Poonam put the phone away. "I thought she spoke to that acquaintance every day."

"That is why we must distinguish someone who passes on information from someone who knows directly," Naina said. "She may not have meant any harm, but a decision affecting your whole life shouldn't rest entirely on hearsay."

For some time Poonam stared at the street. "Now we'll check all the papers," she said. "If they won't give me the complete address of the training centre, I won't go. Paying the money doesn't mean I have agreed to every condition." Naina felt somewhat reassured by that decision.

On their way back through the market, Poonam began reminiscing about childhood. They had both taken part in a play at school. Poonam

had been so good at sewing that she had ended up making all the costumes. She laughed now. "Even then I used to dream of opening my own shop one day. I'd buy a tailor's sewing machine and teach two girls to work. But before I can save enough for the machine, the household's needs get in the way."

"Will you open a shop when you return?" Naina asked.

"Why not, if I can save some money? Reena will keep the accounts and I'll sew the clothes. You can think of a name."

"I'll certainly think of a name. But first go, work safely and come home," Naina said.

They parted at the turning towards the village. The red bundle in Poonam's bag was empty now; a receipt lay inside her folder. Naina watched her go until she was far away. She knew that every poor family took some kind of risk for a chance of better things. Not every risk concealed a crime. But in such risks, the absence of reliable information could become the greatest danger of all.

When Naina reached home, she opened her notebook. She wrote down the possible location of Poonam's appointment, the deposit paid, the receipt number and what had been said on the telephone. She was not trying to keep watch over her friend. She wanted there to be a clear record of when, where and with whom contact should be made once Poonam had gone away. At the bottom of the page she wrote: "Check again until the appointment letter arrives."

That evening a short message came from Poonam: "I showed the receipt to Mother. Father says I must work hard." Naina replied, "Of course. And keep telling me whatever you learn."

Having sent the reply, she put her phone down. She did not want to extinguish the eagerness she had seen in Poonam's eyes. Yet she could not feel easy about a journey so consequential beginning on the strength of a single receipt.

Chapter 6: Chandan's Debt

Chandan woke at four in the morning. Darkness lay beyond his bedroom window, and rainwater was dripping into a bucket in a neighbour's courtyard. An open history book lay before him. For eighteen months he had been preparing for a competitive examination scheduled for two days hence. He had already bought a bus ticket for the journey to the city. In a plain cloth bag he had put his admit card, identity card and pens.

His phone sounded with a message. Someone in a coaching group had written, "The question paper was leaked last night. The examination will be cancelled." At first Chandan laughed. Rumours like that arose before every examination. A second message contained a photograph of some questions. In a third, an anonymous person claimed that all the questions had already been circulated. Chandan opened the photograph, but he could not tell whether it showed questions from the actual examination or an old sample paper.

He checked the department's official announcements himself. There was still nothing. It was almost five. He tried to concentrate on his book, but even after reading the same sentence three times, its meaning would not settle in his mind. Yesterday his sister had told him on the telephone to beware of rumours. He knew the advice was sound. All the same, his confidence had been shaken.

At seven, Savita called. "Have you heard anything definite?"

"No. There's no notice from the department. Have you?"

"A friend says the police went to her examination centre. But I haven't seen it myself."

"Then let's treat it as a rumour for now."

"Yes. But what if it's true?" Savita asked.

Chandan had no answer.

At nine, a notice appeared on the official website. The scheduled examination had been postponed "in view of preliminary information concerning a breach of the confidentiality of the question paper". A fresh date would be announced later. As he read the notice, Chandan felt as though the strength had gone out of his body. He remained seated in his chair. Eighteen months of preparation, the price of books,

coaching fees and his family's hopes had all, for the moment, been crushed beneath a small sheet of words.

Naina came in. "What happened?"

Chandan handed her the phone. She read the notice. "This is terrible."

"Terrible?" Chandan laughed bitterly. "I'm getting older. Every time they say the examination will be held again. When? Who knows? And what happens to those who may have bought the questions? I've just been sitting here studying."

"We'll know who actually bought any questions only after an investigation," Naina said. "But the examination has been stopped, and that is a fact. I understand why you're hurting."

"You understand? You heard about a job yesterday. I'm back at zero."

Naina was silent for a moment. "My job isn't certain either. And your work hasn't come to nothing. But I won't pretend that what has happened is a small matter just to console you."

Chandan turned away. He knew his sister was not against him. Still, his anger was looking for someone, anyone, upon whom to fall.

News of the postponement brought candidates together outside the Navgarh library. Savita telephoned Chandan to say that some of them were preparing a written memorandum to the department. He went to the library. A young man stood there holding his admit card. "I scraped together the fare from my village and came here," he was saying. "Am I supposed to go back now? If they hold the examination again, I'll have to spend as much again."

A young woman's eyes filled with tears. "Everyone at home keeps saying, 'Prepare for it one last time.' How many times can there be a last time?"

Savita was writing their demands on a plain sheet: clear information about the investigation, a date for the rescheduled examination, and arrangements to reduce unnecessary expense for eligible candidates. "Will you sign?" she asked Chandan.

"I will," he said. "But what good will a memorandum alone do?"

"If we all remain silent, who will understand that every single day of our lives has a value?" Savita replied.

Chandan signed. A man in the crowd shouted, "I have a photograph of the questions. You could get them yesterday for fifteen thousand."

Several young men gathered around him. Savita immediately said, "Until we know whether the photograph is genuine, don't accuse anyone. If you have evidence, give it to the relevant authority."

Chandan moved a little away. The man's words had reopened his hurt. Some people could raise money to buy examination questions; he himself had to borrow even to buy books. Yet he understood that anger was no justification for declaring someone guilty without an investigation. Standing amid the crowd, he asked himself: What would I say at home now? How could he explain to his mother that they must wait again? He had no answer.

He turned back. At home he found his sister hanging out washed clothes. Naina asked him nothing. Her silence brought him some relief.

That afternoon an old friend, Vikram, came to see him. Vikram had once prepared for examinations alongside him, but now ran a mobile-phone repair shop. "Chandan, unless you start thinking of earning something now, your debts will only grow," he said. "The examination will be held again. Work in the meantime."

"Where is the work?"

"They need someone to count stock at a warehouse. Sometimes to supervise loading and unloading. I know a man there. Manoj Sah."

"What's the pay?"

"Not monthly. By the day or by the consignment. Meet him first."

Money was Chandan's first concern, but he asked, "Is it decent work?"

"As far as I know, ordinary freight handling. But look for yourself. I can't guarantee anything."

Chandan considered that a fair answer. Instead of agreeing immediately, he said he would meet the man in the evening. After Vikram left, he took out an old exercise book whose back pages contained his debts. Eight thousand borrowed from a local acquaintance for coaching fees; three thousand five hundred from a friend for forms and travel; four thousand owed to a shopkeeper for repairs to an old motorcycle; and twelve thousand borrowed from a private moneylender. Interest was added to that last amount every month. The total made his head burn.

He had bought the motorcycle while his father was still alive. His father had put together his savings and the money Chandan earned

from tutoring to pay half its price. By the time the remaining instalments were paid, the machine had grown old. It now needed constant repairs. If he sold it, he would not clear even half the debt; if he kept it, petrol and repairs would continue to cost money. He tried working out new figures, but when there is no money in one's pocket, the pages of an account book often do nothing but increase anxiety.

At midday he went to the market for his mother's medicines. The chemist reminded him of the outstanding balance. "Chandan, five hundred and fifty is still due. With today's purchase, that makes seven hundred."

"I'll pay in two days," Chandan said.

The chemist gave him the medicine, but the old warmth was absent from his voice. As Chandan went outside, his phone rang. It was a man calling on behalf of the private moneylender. "It's the last day of the month. The owner says there can be no more delay in paying the interest this time."

"I told you I'd arrange something after the examination."

"Whether the examination was held or not is no concern of the owner's accounts." The call ended.

Chandan stopped beside the road. The noise of vehicles, the cries of hawkers and the bustle of the market suddenly became unbearable. He remembered how, when he first borrowed each sum, the lender had said, "Pay it back when you can." That convenient time had never arrived. The date on which interest fell due, however, had not slipped by so much as a day.

When he got home, Saraswati Devi looked at the medicine and asked, "How much did it cost?"

"About two hundred."

"Did you pay the balance?"

"No. Next time."

Saraswati Devi fell silent. She had no desire to expose her son's lie; she understood that he was worrying more about the family than about himself. Yet she was afraid that his anxiety might lead him into someone's trap.

At five that evening, Chandan went with Vikram to the warehouse behind the bus stand. Two trucks stood at the gate. Sacks of rice were being unloaded from one; empty crates were being stacked on the other.

A watchman sat by the gate with an old register open before him. "Is Manoj Babu inside?" Vikram asked.

The watchman nodded. "In the room on the right."

Manoj Sah was about forty, wearing a dark-blue shirt, clean shoes and a heavy watch. Three mobile phones lay on his desk. Still speaking on one of them, he gestured for the two visitors to sit down. "Yes, Virendra Babu, the vehicle will arrive on time. No, tonight is a different matter. I'll tell you about that myself." He ended the call and looked at Chandan.

"Vikram says you're looking for work?"

"Yes. I'd like to understand what the work involves."

"Are you educated?"

"I'm a graduate. I'm preparing for competitive examinations."

Manoj laughed. "Everyone here has worn himself out sitting examinations. Nobody wants to work. Your education will be useful: writing out receipts for goods, keeping counts, recording vehicle numbers."

"How many hours?" Chandan asked.

"No fixed hours. Five or six hours when a consignment comes in; sometimes the whole day. Four hundred and fifty for each consignment. There's a separate rate for work going out at night."

"What sort of goods?"

"Grain, building materials, household items. We also supply contractors." Manoj pointed towards the trucks outside. "Learn to keep accounts of these first."

"Will I get a copy of the receipt?" Chandan asked. "Whatever goods I'm responsible for should be recorded in writing."

Manoj's expression changed slightly. "Well, well, you know a lot of rules. All right, your responsibilities will be written down. But there must be trust in my people too."

"Trust is fine," Chandan said, "but a written record prevents misunderstandings."

Manoj took a register from a drawer and showed him the details of three consignments. "Look: rice here, cement here, iron goods here. These are the vehicle numbers. If you do your job carefully, you can earn something every day."

Chandan examined the register. All three entries appeared ordinary. "When will I be paid?" he asked.

"At the end of the day, or after two consignments. Nothing will be withheld."

A young man appeared in the doorway. Manoj said to him, "Check the count on the truck outside. The new boy will start tomorrow." The young man went away. Manoj turned back to Chandan. "There's no work for you today. Can you come at eight tomorrow morning?"

Before answering, Chandan looked at Vikram, who remained silent.

"I can," Chandan said. "But when the examination is announced again, I'll need to make time for it."

"Sit your examination. I've no desire to stand in the way of your future," Manoj said with a laugh. "Work when you have the time."

Outside, Vikram asked, "What do you think?"

"I'll see. I'll do ordinary work first. I won't take charge of goods without papers."

"Keep that caution," Vikram said. "All kinds of people come to a warehouse. Don't act merely because someone tells you something."

On his way home, Chandan saw two police officers stopping vehicles for inspection at the crossroads. A little way off, three men were whispering near a paan shop. One said, "There have been more checks since prohibition, but everything goes on at night." Another motioned for him to be quiet. Chandan walked on. At that moment the words seemed to have nothing to do with his own life. He cared only about whether he would earn four hundred and fifty rupees the next day.

He had written the warehouse address on a piece of paper. He could learn to count goods on trucks, but he had also resolved not to accept responsibility for someone else's affairs carelessly. Vikram had advised him to record the rate for each consignment. Before reaching home, Chandan bought a cheap exercise book with thin pages. "Preparing for another examination?" the shopkeeper asked. "No, keeping accounts for work," Chandan said. For a moment he felt embarrassed, then told himself there was no cause for shame in honest labour.

At home Naina was helping their mother prepare the evening meal. After coming inside, Chandan said, "I may have work for a few days at a warehouse."

"What about your examination preparation?" Naina asked.

"That'll continue. Work in the morning, study at night. Debts won't disappear just because I sit with a book open."

"Whose warehouse is it?"

"A man called Manoj Sah. They also handle goods for the contractor Virendra Rai."

Naina remembered what Abhay had said. Virendra Rai was the contractor whose workers' wages Abhay had been investigating. She did not jump to a conclusion. "Will your duties be recorded in writing?" she asked.

"There'll be receipts. I'll see," Chandan said. "Didi, don't doubt everything I do. I have to earn money for the family."

Naina looked into his eyes. "I don't doubt your work. I only want to be sure you don't end up being held responsible for someone else's wrongdoing."

Chandan said no more. Saraswati Devi served them dinner. For the first time that day, he ate until he was full. Afterwards, he went to his room and opened his new notebook beside his textbook. Across the top he wrote, "Tomorrow, first consignment—four hundred and fifty." Beneath that he tried calculating the interest he owed.

At that moment Naina's phone rang. It was Kiran. "Nainaji, your appointment has been approved. The written appointment letter is ready. Come tomorrow at ten."

Naina confirmed the salary and working hours twice. "Yes, on exactly the terms we discussed," Kiran replied. After ending the call, Naina told her mother the news. A small smile appeared through Saraswati Devi's weariness. Chandan came out of his room. "Didi, have you got the job?"

"I still have to collect the letter. But yes, I'll start tomorrow."

"Then that's good," Chandan said. There was happiness in his voice, along with a small ache at his own failure.

Chandan stayed awake until late. He read the notice cancelling the examination again. On one sheet, the space where the "next date" should have been was blank. On another he had written the warehouse address and the time—eight o'clock. Only hours earlier, his future had seemed to lie in an examination centre; now he would be counting sacks on trucks in the morning. He did not consider the work beneath him. What humiliated him was having to borrow again and again merely to preserve his chance to study.

In the courtyard, their mother was putting away the dishes. Naina was checking her certificates once more for the following day. Inside the house, preparations were under way for two new jobs: one at an office desk, the other at a warehouse gate. Behind both lay the same household concern—how much money would be left at the end of the month.

Chapter 7: The First Day at Work

At eight in the morning, Saraswati Devi put two rotis, a helping of fried potatoes and some pickle in a little container into Naina's bag. Naina took out the lunchbox and said, "Ma, the office opens at ten. There's still plenty of time."

"On your first day you won't know how long the journey takes. And who knows when you'll get a bus?" her mother replied. She tucked a plain handkerchief into the bag as well. "Eat your lunch. Don't go hungry all day thinking you can eat when you get home."

Naina looked at her mother's face. For months she had been applying for jobs, and each time her mother had packed food in the hope that her daughter was going somewhere to work. But more often than not Naina had returned disheartened from an interview or from discovering the truth behind an advertisement. Today there was a promise that she would receive an appointment letter. That promise was not yet a certainty, yet something new was stirring in the house.

Chandan had not returned yet. The previous day he had said he must reach the warehouse at eight. Naina was worried about him. She took fifty rupees from her bag and offered the note to her mother for petrol for his motorcycle. "Give him this when he gets back. How will he get to work without the bike?"

Her mother would not take the money. "You need your bus fare too. He has enough to manage for two days."

"I have more," Naina said. It was only half true. She had a little more than her return fare left, but she did not want her mother to see her anxiety. Saraswati Devi put the note back into her bag. "We'll draw up the household accounts again once your first wages are in your hands."

It was a quarter to ten when Naina reached the Nai Disha building. A queue had already formed by the gate. Several young men stood holding files; two women had brought their children. The counter was still shut. A notice on the wall proclaimed, "New Employment Opportunities." Naina thought that everyone standing in that queue had a different story at home, but inside, on the list of names, each would become merely an application number.

She went upstairs. Kusum was wiping a desk. As soon as she saw Naina, she said, "You're here on time. Madam Kiran hasn't arrived yet. First, put your name in the staff attendance register."

Eight names were entered in the register. Beside some was a time of arrival; the spaces beside others were blank. Naina wrote her name and recorded a time before ten. Kusum said, "Sometimes we have to arrive at nine, but in the register our hours are counted only from ten."

"Then is a record kept of the extra hour?" Naina asked.

"You've started keeping accounts from your very first day!" Kusum laughed, but the laughter soon faded. "I asked once before. They said the office required it. A person can't keep a job by asking only about working hours."

Naina did not press the question. The written terms specified the hours; it would not be right to quarrel over one day. Still, the fact was worth remembering. Kusum showed her a small room inside. There was an old computer near the window, registers on the desk and dozens of files in a cupboard against the back wall. A water pot and two glasses had been left for the staff.

Kiran arrived at five past ten. Her step was quicker than it had been the previous day. She carried a bundle of papers. "Welcome, Naina ji. Please read your appointment letter first," she said.

The letter stipulated a three-month probationary period, a monthly salary of seven thousand six hundred rupees, working hours from ten in the morning until six in the evening, and Sundays off. It also stated that wages would be paid by the seventh of the following month. Naina read it all. One clause referred to "other administrative duties as required by the organisation."

"How far do these other duties extend?" Naina asked.

"Registers of applicants, lists of receipts, information given over the telephone, sometimes training records," Kiran replied. "You will not be sent out to collect money."

"What if I am given such an instruction?"

"Then ask me. But at present there is no question of assigning you work beyond what is written here."

Naina signed on the condition that she could keep a copy of the letter. Kiran signed and handed her the second copy. Holding that small piece of paper confirming her employment, Naina felt a quiet measure

of relief. Her first salary was still far away, but she had crossed one stage of waiting.

By eleven the crowd at the entrance had thickened. Kusum was exhausted from writing down names. Another clerk at the counter, Ramvilas, was issuing receipts without raising his head. Naina sat inside and began entering the applications received over the previous three days into the computer. Each form gave a name, village, educational qualification, desired position and fee deposited. Some applicants had completed the twelfth standard; others held postgraduate degrees. A young man who had passed the tenth standard and a woman with a master's degree had each paid the same registration fee of three hundred and fifty rupees.

Naina paused over an entry. Receipt number 112 appeared twice: on the first sheet beside Indrajit Sah's name, and on the second beside Sunita Kumari's. The dates were different. She set the two papers aside. A little later she found five applications that recorded a payment but had no attached copy of the receipt. She wrote, "Receipt not found," against those entries.

Ramvilas came in. "Is the list ready?"

"Half of it. The same receipt number appears against two names, and five applications have no receipts attached," Naina said.

"With such crowds, papers sometimes get mixed up. Enter the names; it can be corrected later."

"I am entering the names. But I can't mark the payments as verified without any evidence."

Looking out through the window, Ramvilas said, "People are waiting behind me. Do whatever you think right. But today's list has to be finished today."

At midday a woman began protesting angrily at the counter. Her son had registered three months earlier for a job as a security guard. The training date had been changed twice, and no work had materialised. Spreading her receipt on the desk, she said, "I want the job, or I want my money back. My son comes to the market every day. Who is going to pay his fare?"

"We haven't heard from the training centre," Ramvilas said. "We're waiting too."

"And the fare goes out of our pockets every day while you wait," the woman said. "What good does it do to count my name? Give me an account of the money I paid you."

Kiran came out, offered the woman a chair and examined her papers. "Please write down your mobile number. I'll speak to the training centre today. When we have a written reply, we will inform you."

"And if there's no reply again?"

"Then come here and see me," Kiran said. The woman understood that for the moment she had no choice but to trust another promise. She went away. Watching from her desk, Naina saw on her very first day how the distance between registering a complaint and resolving it could keep growing.

By afternoon Naina's eyes had begun to ache. Seeing the same sort of characters on the computer screen again and again made her afraid that she would confuse the names and figures. She looked away and out of the room. Near the counter stood a woman with a sleeping child against her shoulder. She kept checking the time, for she had to reach someone's house to cook a meal. To pay the registration fee of three hundred and fifty rupees, she had given up a day's wages.

At one o'clock Kusum called Naina up to a small room on the roof for lunch. Four employees were sitting in a row, opening their lunchboxes. Seeing Naina's rotis, Kusum said, "Food from home has a smell of its own. I have no time from the moment morning begins. I bring whatever happens to be left over."

"How long have you worked here?" Naina asked.

"A year. I used to work in a tailoring shop. There I had to do chores at the owner's house as well. At least here I get to sit at a desk." Kusum paused. "But our salaries sometimes come after the seventh. Last month we got paid on the ninth."

"The letter says the seventh," Naina said.

"The letter says a great many things. You did right to keep your copy. I didn't take one when I started."

An employee sitting some distance away spoke softly. "Keep your voices down. Madam Kiran's room is on the other side of the roof." Kusum laughed. "It isn't as though we're talking about stealing anything." All the same, she changed the subject.

After lunch Naina resumed work on the list. A middle-aged man named Naresh Mandal came into the room. He carried an old ledger and a small calculator. "Are you the new employee?" he asked.

"Yes. Naina Mishra."

"I'm Naresh. I handle the payment accounts. Mark any doubtful entries in a different colour, but don't alter the original amount."

Naina smiled. "That's exactly what I'm doing."

Naresh examined the list. "Who has the copies of these five receipts?"

"I haven't found them yet. Ramvilas ji said he would look later."

Naresh nodded. "All right. I'll compare them with the original ledger. If a document is missing, writing that it has been found only creates trouble later." He opened his ledger and noted the numbers.

There was something solid about Naresh's words. For the first time in the office Naina had heard instructions that put accuracy before haste. But as he closed the ledger Naresh asked, "Did you get a copy of your appointment letter?"

"Yes."

"Keep it safe. And before you sign any paper connected with your work, read it."

With that he left. His final words sounded like ordinary caution to Naina. She could not tell whether he was speaking from experience or gave the same advice to every new employee.

After three in the afternoon a young man entered in a state of considerable agitation. His name was Sanjay Kumar. "Yesterday an examination was cancelled," he demanded, "and today brokers at this office are saying a job is guaranteed if we pay them. Is that the kind of business you run as well?"

"I started here only today," Naina answered calmly. "Show me the advertisement you saw. Don't treat any promise as certain unless its terms are in writing."

Sanjay opened a message on his phone. It used the name Nai Disha, but the sender's number was different from the one printed on the office papers. "Where did this message come from?" Naina asked.

"From a coaching-group chat."

"I don't know anything about this number myself. Put your complaint in writing and I'll forward it to the manager."

Sanjay's anger eased a little. He wrote down the number on a scrap of paper. Before leaving, he said, "I need a job. If dishonest people make money out of our desperation, who is going to stop them?"

Naina could give him no immediate answer. She looked again at the many names on her application list. Each person had brought a hope of their own to this office. Her task was merely to enter figures, yet those figures carried people's trust.

At five Kiran checked the list. "You've kept the doubtful receipts separate?"

"Yes. Documents still need to be matched in six cases. Copies of the receipts are missing in five of them, and the number is duplicated in one."

"The list is properly prepared," Kiran said. "But for now I need only the total number of applications."

Naina gave her the figure. Kiran was in a hurry. As her phone rang she picked up the file. "Give both lists to Naresh ji tomorrow morning. Put the original file away in the cupboard."

"A young man named Sanjay has submitted a complaint," Naina said. "Someone using an outside number is promising appointments in the organisation's name."

Kiran took the paper. "Let me look into it. A great many false messages like this circulate."

"When will he receive an answer?"

"After we investigate. Don't promise him anything at present."

The door was shut at six. Naina saved the list on the computer, left a copy of her corrections in its proper place, and tucked her appointment letter into her bag. Evening was settling over the city streets when she emerged. At the tea stall a few young men were once again discussing examinations. Standing at the bus stop, Naina thought of Chandan. She telephoned him. "How did the work go?"

"It was just counting stock," Chandan said. "They've agreed on four hundred and fifty rupees. They'll pay when the consignment is finished."

"Did they give you any paperwork?"

"Yes, my name is written on the vehicle receipt. Don't worry."

"My first day went well," Naina told him. "But there's a tremendous amount of work here."

"At least you'll have a regular salary, Didi," Chandan said. "I have to hunt for another consignment every day."

The bus arrived and Naina boarded it. At home she put the appointment letter in her mother's hand. Saraswati Devi first looked at her daughter's name written at the top, then folded the paper carefully and put it in a drawer of the old cupboard. Naina watched that small gesture. For her mother this was not merely a document; it held out the possibility of food and medicine for the coming month.

Before going to bed, Naina wrote three things about her first day in her notebook: she had received a copy of her appointment letter; the accounts for six applications still needed checking; and she had passed the complaint about the outside number to Kiran. She examined the letter once more. Its written terms had made the beginning of her work clear, but she did not yet understand every document in the office. She resolved to do carefully whatever work was entrusted to her, and never to sign as though she understood something that she did not.

Chapter 8: Kiran's Warning

The next morning, as soon as Naina reached the office, she understood that the introductions of her first day were over. Before she could even sit down, Kusum handed her three files. "Match the names in these. Madam Kiran wants the list by eleven."

"I was supposed to give yesterday's papers for the six doubtful entries to Naresh ji," Naina reminded her.

"You can give them to him. Do this first, though," Kusum said, and returned to her counter, where two women were already waiting.

Naina opened the files on her desk. This time all the applications were for a distant garment factory or a unit that made packaging. Some specified a training fee of twelve thousand rupees, others eight thousand. Many applications had a photograph attached, but the address on the second page was incomplete. The topmost sheet bore the name Poonam Yadav. The copy of her receipt was clear, but the training centre's full address had still not been added.

Naina laid the sheet aside. She had called Poonam the previous night. Poonam had told her that everyone at home was preparing for the journey, though they still did not know the exact place where she was to take up her appointment. "Let the address come first," Naina had said. Poonam had agreed for the time being, but with every passing day the people who had lent her money were asking more questions.

In another application, a young woman's name was spelt in two different ways. In a third, the deposited amount had been corrected by hand, but the correction had no signature. Without changing any of the papers, Naina noted the discrepancies in order: "Name requires verification"; "Training location incomplete"; "Alteration to amount not authenticated." She knew that writing down every irregularity made it harder to finish the list, but quietly erasing them seemed harder still.

Among the sheets she found a pencilled note on the reverse of an application: "Recruitment numbers limited." The printed leaflet, on the other hand, announced that "numerous vacancies" existed. She copied the two statements separately into her list. As she looked through the papers, she remembered Poonam's father saying that if she went away she must keep the family informed of her whereabouts. Naina could not

find it reasonable to insist on a fixed departure date when even the place of employment was uncertain.

"Are the training lists checked against letters from the companies?" she asked Kusum. "Some letters go directly to Madam Kiran," Kusum replied. "We're only given the names to type." "Then should names without letters go on the final list?" Naina asked. Looking at the file, Kusum said, "I didn't say final. Write 'provisional' against what's here." That simple answer gave Naina a clear way to proceed.

At twenty past ten Ramvilas came in carrying a glass of tea. "Naina ji, you wrote down a great many rules on your first day. Could you work a little faster today? The vehicle list has to go out at twelve."

"The information in the files is incomplete. I can enter what is there; I cannot add what isn't," Naina said.

"Your job is only to type. Why should you make every decision?"

"I'm not making decisions. I'm recording what I can see in the original documents."

Ramvilas pressed his lips together and walked away. To him Naina was a new employee who asked too many questions. Naina bore him no personal ill will. But something had begun to become clear since the previous day: the person who points out an error is sometimes regarded as the person holding up the work.

Before eleven Naresh Mandal arrived. Naina showed him the previous day's list. He checked two serial numbers against his ledger. The copy of one receipt had been attached to a different file. Two entries had been made in the wrong register. The accounts for three others were still unclear.

"Leave those three marked incomplete," Naresh said. "We'll check when the original receipt book turns up tomorrow."

"And Poonam Yadav's training location?" Naina asked.

At the name, Naresh looked up from the file. "The manager handles that matter. My ledger records only the amount deposited."

"Would it be right to send someone away without an address?"

"Right or wrong, I have no authority to make that decision," Naresh answered quietly. "But I agree that the documentation ought to be complete."

He gathered up his ledger. As he was leaving, he added, "Write down as much as you actually see. Don't treat something you've merely heard as proof. And always put the date on the lists you prepare."

Naina nodded. There was practical sense in his advice. The office contained many people and many kinds of work; she could not understand the whole history of it in a single day.

Shortly before midday an elderly man with a saffron-coloured cotton towel over his shoulder arrived with his son. The son was about twenty-two. The older man carried a receipt and two letters. He was telling Kusum, "When I call the company named on this paper, they say they haven't received the list."

"Give me the candidate's number first," Kusum said.

"I'll give you the number. But tell me whether my son is going to get a job. I borrowed ten thousand rupees to pay you."

The son tried to quieten his father. "Please listen to us first. The interview date has changed three times."

Kusum went inside to call someone. The old man sat down. Naina's desk was near the door, and she could hear him plainly. "We have two bighas of land. If the rains are poor, the harvest is halved. My son is educated, so I paid the money for him. I can't read these papers properly myself. Everyone said this agency in town was trustworthy."

Naina stopped working. "What is your son's name?" she asked.

"Vinod Kumar."

She looked up the name. Vinod's registration was there, but the space for final approval by the company was empty. "His name is here. But this record contains no final notice of appointment. I can only tell you what I can see at present," Naina said.

Vinod's face fell. "They've been saying 'next week' for a month. I want a clear answer about the job today."

"Take photographs of your application and receipt. The manager will be here shortly," Naina said.

Kiran came out. She read Vinod's papers carefully and checked a number. "You will receive a written update tomorrow," she said.

The old man grew impatient. "Tomorrow again? I'm worn out paying bus fares to come here."

Kiran softened her voice. "Don't come here tomorrow. We'll send a written message to your number. If an appointment isn't possible, we'll tell you that too."

"And the money?" the old man asked.

Kiran paused. "We will check the conditions on the receipt and let you know. I cannot promise a refund now."

Anger came into the old man's eyes, but he got to his feet. "I'll wait again. But how long must my boy keep going from place to place like this?" No one inside the office had an answer to his question.

When father and son had gone, Kusum put the empty chair back in place. The glass of water on the desk was still half full. Naina copied Vinod's application number onto a separate sheet so that his case could be found easily the next day. She wanted to help him, but she had no authority to decide on an appointment. She could at least make sure the complaint did not disappear into a file.

A young man sitting a little way off said, "I've been coming here for three days myself. Every time they tell me to come tomorrow morning." After looking at his slip, Kusum wrote down a definite time. "We won't send you around again today," she said. The young man left with gratitude on his face. Naina could see that the employees here were not all alike. Some matters were delayed simply through carelessness, while others awaited an official reply. It would not be fair to assign blame without knowing why someone had been inconvenienced.

After Vinod left, Kiran came over to Naina's desk. "Did you show him his file?"

"I showed him his name and the blank approval column. I made no promise of an appointment."

"That was good. But understand one thing. Office records are not to be shown to customers at an employee's own discretion. If you speak beyond your authority, there will be disputes."

"I didn't give him any confidential document," Naina said. "I only told him the appointment hadn't yet been entered in the records."

"That may be true. But people outside interpret every word differently. If you say the list has no approval, they may conclude the organisation is cheating them."

"Then should I say that incomplete information is complete?" Naina asked.

Kiran fell silent. Then she gestured towards her room. "Come inside. We won't discuss this standing here."

The door of Kiran's room was left open, though the noise of the street was quieter inside. Kiran sat down and drank a glass of water. "From your first day you insisted on seeing the terms in writing. I liked that. You are alert. But being alert and questioning every piece of work are not the same thing."

"If a document is wrong, I think reporting the error is part of my job," Naina said.

"Report it to me. Don't argue in front of customers. These people have invested money and hope, so naturally they are angry. But I have an office to run. Making a false promise is wrong, and so is displaying incomplete papers before everyone."

For the first time Naina heard not only opposition but reasoning in Kiran's words. "All right. I'll record complaints and pass the relevant files to the officer concerned. But if a customer asks what I can see in the record, I won't be able to tell them something untrue."

"Who is asking you to lie?" Kiran's voice rose slightly. "Carry out the responsibility you've been given. Tell people who has the authority to decide. You don't need to appoint yourself judge of every question."

For a few moments neither spoke. Outside the window a fruit seller was calling out his guavas. Between the office crowds, ringing telephones and accounts, the brief silence made Naina uneasy. She needed her job, but she also needed to understand what her own signature meant.

Kiran spoke more softly. "You told me there is financial pressure at home. I too have known days when I had to borrow to pay the rent. I understand the fear of losing a job. That's why I'm telling you to avoid needless confrontation. If you find an error in the work, report it to me in writing. Keep a copy. But it would be wrong to pronounce someone guilty without knowing all the facts."

"I haven't accused anyone of being a criminal," Naina replied.

"I'm not saying you have. I'm only warning you for the future." Kiran pushed a file towards her. "Look at this. I've asked them to send the training address and contact information. We'll add them as soon as they arrive."

The file contained Poonam's name and eight others. Naina felt a little relieved. "Their families will be given the full address before the departure date, won't they?"

"I'll try," Kiran said. "But another institution will fix the final date. Prepare the list for now."

Kiran picked up the telephone. Ratan Singh's name had appeared on the screen. At once she sat upright in her chair. "Yes, sir. Yes, the invitation to the programme has arrived. The staff list is ready." After listening for a moment, she said, "Naina has just joined. She does the written work well. Yes, I'll see to it."

When the call ended, she told Naina, "After Sunday there's an employment and educational assistance programme at the town high school. The owner himself will attend. You'll have to take the registration list there. It's part of the administrative work."

"Will it be during working hours?" Naina asked.

"During the day. You'll be there instead of working in the office. And take only the names on the list, no more."

Naina went back outside. She needed to think about both the meaning and the limits of Kiran's warning. Sitting at her desk, she matched the files. She marked duplicate entries in red and left blank whatever information was missing. The crowd outside had thinned a little.

Towards evening Kusum asked, "Did Madam scold you badly?"

"She explained the limits of my duties," Naina said.

"That's all right, then. People who keep quiet have an easy time here. People who ask questions get more work as well." Kusum laughed as she put away her purse.

"Do you really believe everything will be fine if you keep quiet?" Naina asked.

This time Kusum did not laugh. "No. But I have two children at home. If my wages stop, the stove stops burning. Do what you think right. Just remember that everyone here has different compulsions."

As she cleared her desk, Kusum said a little more about her family. Her husband repaired sewing machines, but sometimes he went two days without a customer. The deadline for her elder daughter's school fee was approaching. "It would help us so much if the salary came on the seventh this month," she said. "Couldn't you submit a written request

for timely payment?" Naina asked. "I could," Kusum replied. "But everything isn't so straightforward. I'll speak to the owner first."

Naina could understand Kusum's words. She thought of her mother, Chandan and the unpaid bills at home. She closed her notebook. So far she had found no solid evidence that the office was deliberately doing anything wrong. Yet she could not overlook the number of incomplete documents she had seen.

Back at home, Naina telephoned Poonam. "Your name is on the training list, but the full address still hasn't arrived. Make sure that's settled before you leave."

"What did Madam Kiran say?" Poonam asked.

"She said they've requested the information. When I get it in writing, I'll tell you."

"You work there now. Won't they put pressure on you?" Poonam asked quietly.

Naina was silent for a moment. "My job is to look after the records. I won't give you extra assurances because we're friends. But I'll certainly pass on anything I know for certain."

"That's all I want," Poonam said. "I need to understand my papers, not simply be reassured."

At dinner Chandan spoke of the four hundred and fifty rupees he was to receive for his first consignment. "The count matched," he said. "But they'll make the full payment tomorrow." Saraswati Devi asked, "So have you brought home the food money?" Chandan fell silent. Naina looked at him. "If you've done the work but haven't been paid, where is the value of it yet?" "The owner has promised," Chandan said. "We'll see tomorrow." There was more weariness than confidence in his voice.

Naina remembered the date her own wages were due. Two people in the household had begun to work, yet neither had received any payment. As Saraswati Devi served dinner, she said, "Whether it is written on paper or spoken aloud, money is what keeps the household stove burning." Brother and sister both fell quiet.

After putting down the telephone, Naina continued to stare for a long time at a blank page in her notebook. She had not yet found a clear line between the questions she was entitled to ask at work, the answers she was responsible for giving and the matters about which she ought to remain silent. But she had settled one thing in her mind: where other

people's trust was at stake, she would never write down her own assumptions as facts.

Chapter 9: Ratan's Reputation

Since early morning, coloured cloth was being draped across the gate of the town high school. Benches and chairs had been arranged in the courtyard. Behind the stage, large letters proclaimed: "Youth Employment and Educational Assistance Ceremony." Beneath them appeared the names of the donor organisation and local partners. Ratan Singh's name was printed highest of all, beside his photograph.

Naina reached the school before ten. She carried a list of applicants, a blank register and several loose sheets. Kiran had made it clear the previous day that no new appointments were to be promised here; they were to record the names and contact details of people seeking advice. Kusum had already arranged registration slips on a table.

"You haven't come late," Kusum said. "The people in charge of the stage have had me running about since morning. First they say move the table to the right; then they say move it to the left."

"Whose programme is this—the school's or the agency's?" Naina asked.

"It's in the school's name, but Ratan Babu has paid a large part of the expenses. Our employment centre has been asked to set up an advice desk. That's why we're here."

The front row of chairs had been reserved for the headmaster and teachers. Behind it sat parents who had come from the surrounding villages. Some pupils had dressed carefully in anticipation of receiving prizes. Damp patches marked the walls of the school's old building, and bamboo fencing surrounded a new room still under construction. There was splendour in the arrangements, but the school's everyday needs were visible too.

A little girl was saying to her mother, "Ma, when will we get the list of books?" Her mother replied, "After the programme we'll ask the teacher." The girl carried an old file whose corners were worn away. Naina showed them where to sit. The mother thanked her and took her daughter into the row.

On the far side of the courtyard, Madhavi Devi was looking after the water pots. She washed dishes and swept and mopped in several homes

around town, and sometimes worked at the school when needed. Naina knew her through her mother.

"Madhavi Kaki, you're here?" Naina asked.

"I've left all my other work for today to come here. The school asked me to see to the serving of food. The wages still haven't been settled," Madhavi said.

"You should agree on the payment first."

"Yes, I've said so. But, child, when you see work left undone somewhere, it's hard to stand idle. There are children here. If the food arrangements fail, they'll suffer." Madhavi smiled. "I heard you've got a job. That's good."

Naina bowed to her respectfully. Sunlight had drawn lines across Madhavi's face, and the skin of her hands had grown rough. Looking at her, Naina remembered what her mother had said: when prohibition first began, Madhavi's household had started saving money; but within a year, as the illicit liquor trade grew, her husband's old habit had once again begun eating into the family's expenses. Madhavi said nothing about that now. She lifted a water pot and went back to work.

At eleven two gleaming cars stopped at the gate. Ratan Singh stepped out of the first, dressed in a white kurta and pyjama, with a light shawl over his shoulder and polished shoes on his feet. Virendra Rai, a local building contractor, alighted from the other. The local politician Jagdish Chaudhary also arrived. The teachers welcomed them. Several young men took out their phones and began taking photographs.

There were many stories about Ratan in town. Some said he gave scholarships; others said he had sent relief supplies during the floods two years earlier. The headmaster said Ratan was helping to fund the new classroom. Nor was all this merely a claim in an advertisement: the unfinished walls and bundles of books were there for everyone to see.

On entering the courtyard, Ratan first shook the headmaster's hand. "Have all the books requested for the children arrived?" he asked.

"Yes, they have. But some equipment for the science laboratory is still outstanding," the headmaster said.

"Give me the list. I'll see what I can do," Ratan replied. He asked several questions of his own about the preparations. His manner gave those watching him a feeling of familiarity and goodwill.

Kiran called Naina over. "Tell Ratan sir how many people have registered."

Opening the register, Naina said, "So far sixty-eight people have given their names. Fourteen have asked for information about training. Copies of educational certificates are still missing from six applications."

Ratan listened carefully. "Are you a new employee?"

"Yes. Naina Mishra."

"You're keeping the register?"

"I'm recording names and the information received. The final decision on appointments rests with the relevant officials of the organisation."

Ratan glanced at Kiran, then smiled. "That's right. One mustn't promise what hasn't been confirmed. People come here with trust." He indicated that Naina should continue her work.

A teacher came to Naina's table and showed her an old scholarship list. With Ratan's help the previous year, he said, three pupils had been able to stay in school. One of them had now enrolled in college. "Is the assistance provided regularly?" Naina asked. "Not to everyone," the teacher replied. "Only to those on the approved list." He showed her the pupils' names. It mattered to Naina that the help was real and useful, but limited. For all the brilliance of the programme's publicity, every pupil did not have an equally wide opportunity.

A boy stepped out of the gathering to drink some water, tied the frayed lace of his shoe and went back to sit in his row. A new book presented from the stage lay on his lap. Naina saw that his smile came from receiving the book, not from the grand words spoken on the platform.

The ceremony began. The pupils sang a song of welcome. The headmaster listed the school's needs. From the stage, Jagdish Chaudhary said that young people needed both employment and education, and urged local businesspeople to contribute to educational assistance. Virendra Rai promised that construction of the new classroom would be completed soon. Then Ratan was invited to speak.

At the microphone, Ratan greeted the seated teachers respectfully. "I come from an ordinary family in this very town," he said. "I failed in my first undertaking. I understand the labour of those who educate their sons and daughters. Employment is not merely an appointment letter; it

is an opportunity to earn a living. But there must be no falsehood in the name of opportunity."

Many in the rows applauded. Ratan presented book assistance to five poor pupils. Two girls received cheques towards the following year's fees. The father of one boy came up on the stage with folded hands. Ratan stopped him and said, "This is assistance for the child's education, not a personal favour." The scene was finding a place in people's hearts.

From her registration table Naina watched the proceedings. She could see that the assistance given today was genuine. At the same time she knew that in the office registers many people were caught between money already paid and appointments still incomplete. On one side was visible help; on the other, unanswered questions. She could not feel it right to pronounce both things false or both true in a single breath.

Abhay Paswan arrived at the school during the programme. An old cloth bag hung from his shoulder; he carried a small notebook and a phone. As a representative of the local newspaper, he was invited to sit near the stage, but he stopped first at the registration table. He smiled when he saw Naina.

"You're here?" Abhay asked.

"I've brought the list from the office. They're offering advice at the programme," Naina replied.

"Your first week at work, and already such a grand gathering!"

"Watching a grand gathering isn't my job. I'm here to write down names." Naina smiled. "Have you come to report it?"

"Yes. I need evidence about the new schoolroom, the assistance to pupils and the employment counselling—all three. A report made up only of speeches from the stage wouldn't be complete."

Abhay's eye fell on the slip on the desk. "Are appointments being made here?" he asked.

"No. Names and information are being collected. Applications go through a separate process afterwards," Naina explained.

"Then I'll call it a counselling desk in my report, not a recruitment camp," Abhay said, making a note. Naina thought how a change in the meaning of written words could also change people's hopes.

Near the stage Virendra Rai was speaking to two men. One had dust all over his clothes; he looked like a construction worker. Naina heard

him speaking about wages he was owed. "Two weeks' pay is still due, Babu. There's no food in the house."

"Come to the office and show your account," Virendra said in a lower voice. "There's a programme going on here."

"I've been to the office four times," the labourer said.

"Then come a fifth time. The accounts have to be checked first," Virendra said, glancing at the people nearby. He moved the man aside and went towards the stage.

Naina did not know the full circumstances of the exchange. She did not leave her table to ask the labourer's name; people were queuing there for her attention. But she saw that while hands applauded announcements of charity on the stage, one of those hands might also be holding a receipt for unpaid wages.

Madhavi Devi reached the worker while handing out water. "Don't go before lunch," she said. "Don't stand out in the sun on an empty stomach." The worker thanked her. No announcement was made about such small acts of kindness at the ceremony, but the need for them was real.

Madhavi remained standing until the end of the lunch queue. Only after most of the guests had eaten and left did she find time for her own meal. A school attendant gave her a plate. "Eat first, Kaki," he said. Madhavi sat down for a moment, but just as she raised her first mouthful, the headmaster called her. She covered her plate and got up.

Naina saw this from a distance and said to Kusum, "She ought to be given a little time to eat." Kusum went to the headmaster and said she would look after the remaining distribution accounts herself. Madhavi sat down again. Laughing, she said, "Today I've learnt that I need special permission just to eat my lunch." Naina heard the exhaustion beneath her humour.

In the afternoon the headmaster showed Abhay the list of pupils. Abhay recorded how many had received assistance, asked about the progress of construction, and requested an opportunity to speak to Virendra Rai about the workers' payments. "If there are outstanding wages, the office will look into them," Virendra said. "Write today's report about the children."

"The construction of the school is about the children too," Abhay replied. "If you give me your written position on the payments, that will be published as well."

Virendra tried not to look annoyed, but did not pursue the conversation. Abhay closed his notebook and walked towards the headmaster. Naina watched the exchange from afar. She was beginning to understand that a journalist's work included not only asking questions but waiting for answers—and recording when no answer came.

By the time the programme ended, evening shadows were spreading across the courtyard. Before getting into his car, Ratan went to look at the old school library. He asked the pupils what books they needed. A girl said, "The mathematics question books are out of date." Ratan asked the headmaster to prepare a list. Small gestures like this strengthened the reputation he had acquired.

Kiran took the list from Naina. "How many names in all?"

"One hundred and thirty-two. But fourteen of them have mobile numbers that aren't properly written. I've marked those separately."

"We'll check them tomorrow," Kiran said. "Today's programme went well. The owner is pleased."

"When will the people who came for employment advice receive written information about the next stage?" Naina asked.

"That will be decided at the office. We only collected names today. Everyone was told that clearly."

Naina nodded. Kusum was tired as she cleared the table. Madhavi Devi was counting the empty plates. The headmaster was putting the remaining bundles of books into a room. The cloth was being taken down from the stage; the day's announcements were slowly dissolving into ordinary work.

Abhay met Naina again as he was leaving. "Which way are you going home?"

"Towards the bus stand. And you?"

"To the newspaper office. I have today's report to write." After a pause he said, "Ratan's assistance is genuine. The school has benefited. But the employment claims need to be measured against the number of actual appointments."

"I've only just joined," Naina said. "I can tell you what I know, not what I imagine."

"Exactly," Abhay replied. "And I'll write only what I've verified."

They walked together to the gate. Outside, a rickshaw puller was counting the day's earnings. In the distance a crowd of unemployed young men stood at the bus station; some were carrying leaflets from the very programme they had attended. Naina saw Ratan's car pull away with its lights on. When the dust behind it settled, the road looked ordinary again.

Sitting on the bus home, Naina went over the day's events in order. Ratan had been courteous in public and had given genuine help. The question of Virendra's unpaid labourers remained unanswered. The future of those whose names had been entered in the hope of employment was still uncertain. It was necessary to understand these three things separately. The full picture of a respected man in the town could not be drawn from speeches on a platform alone; an office desk, a labourer's home and an applicant's long wait were parts of that picture too.

That evening Naina told her mother about the ceremony. "Did the children get books?" Saraswati Devi asked.

"Yes, Ma. Some were helped with their school fees too."

"That's good. When someone helps a poor child stay in school, it brings real relief."

Naina agreed. Saraswati Devi asked again, "The papers for your salary are all right, aren't they?"

"The letter is in order. I'll understand more as I work," Naina said. Her mother seemed a little reassured.

That night Naina put away a copy of the registration list which Kiran had given her to check the following day. At the top stood the glittering name of the ceremony. Inside were the ordinary names of one hundred and thirty-two people. Before turning out the light she looked through the list once more. So many people's hopes had been set down in writing. What would be said about those hopes—and what would actually be done—mattered to her more than the speeches delivered at the ceremony.

Chapter 10: The First Salary

On the morning of the seventh day of the month, as Naina prepared to leave for the office, Saraswati Devi slipped a small piece of paper into her bag beside the lunchbox. It listed the costs of medicines, rice, lentils, kerosene and the overdue electricity bill. At the top her mother had written in her own hand, "What is necessary comes first." Naina read it and smiled.

"Who knows for certain that the salary will come today, Ma?"

"Doesn't the letter say by the seventh? It costs nothing to hope for once."

"Hope does cost something when it isn't fulfilled."

Saraswati Devi looked at her daughter. "Then keep less hope and better accounts today."

Outside in the lane the milk seller rode past, ringing his bicycle bell. After the rains the sunlight had grown fierce again. A slender crack in the roof had dried pale, but Naina knew it would leak as soon as the next rain came. When her father was alive, repairs to the roof were something he saw to. Since his death, every broken thing in the house had become another item in the accounts.

Chandan was cleaning the motorcycle chain in a corner of the courtyard. During the previous month he had counted several consignments at Manoj's warehouse, but his wages had not been paid in full or on time. "Back to the warehouse today?" Naina asked him.

"This afternoon. I'll go to the library in the morning. Savita says they've replied to the petition about the new examination date."

"Have they announced a new date?"

"No date. They've only written that an inquiry is under way. They haven't said when it will end."

"Don't stop studying in the meantime," Naina said.

Chandan put down the cloth in his hand. "Didi, it's easy to say that every day. You need the heart to study too."

Naina heard the weariness in his voice. She paused. "Even on days when you have no heart for it, reading two pages is still an effort. All I'm

saying is that the warehouse owner mustn't decide the course of your future."

Chandan did not answer. He began oiling the chain. As she left the house, Naina carefully tucked her mother's list back into her bag.

At Nai Disha Employment Centre, the seventh of the month meant a different kind of waiting for the employees. Kusum was opening the counter, but her eyes kept straying to her phone. Ramvilas was binding together the receipts from the previous week. Naresh Mandal had opened his ledger and was checking the totals on the page where office salaries and fees for outside training were recorded separately.

"Your first salary is due today," Kusum said. "For three months now, the seventh has pleased itself as far as my wages are concerned. Sometimes the sixth, sometimes the eighth, sometimes the tenth."

"The letter says by the seventh," Naina said.

"Yes, the date on the paper is in order. People's needs don't obey it." Kusum tried to laugh, but worry showed on her face. Her daughter's school-fee slip was sticking out of her bag.

Naina sat down at her desk. Of the hundred and thirty-two names registered at the programme, contact details for twenty-six were still incomplete. As she worked through them, an old applicant came and stood before her. He was Vinod Kumar, who had also come the previous month to ask about the status of his appointment.

"Didi, they said before that I would get a call in the third week," Vinod said. "Now the month is over. My father says that if the company's name has changed, I should get our deposit back."

Naina consulted the register. "Your application is still recorded as pending. I have no confirmation of an appointment from the company."

"Then what am I supposed to do?"

"Take a copy of your application receipt and ask the manager for a written reply. I'll make sure the date of the application and its present status are clearly stated."

Vinod was disappointed, but he steadied himself a little. "At least let me get something in writing. It's hard to go home hearing a different answer every time."

After he left, Kusum said softly, "You give everyone papers, and then they keep coming back with them."

"It wouldn't be right to run away from what has been put in writing," Naina answered.

Kiran emerged from her room carrying the salary list received from the bank. "Everyone, check your accounts. The payment orders have gone through. Naina's first month's salary is the full seven thousand six hundred rupees."

Naina took out her phone and checked the bank message. The credit notification had already arrived. Seven thousand six hundred rupees. It was neither a large sum nor a miracle that would transform her life. The money was her own. After so long, her labour had for the first time become a definite figure in her own bank account.

She asked Kiran for a payslip. Kiran gave a little laugh. "You won't take a step without a document, will you?"

"I have to keep the household accounts. If there's a discrepancy later, things should be clear on both sides."

"All right. Get a signed copy from Ramvilas."

Kusum checked her phone too. "Mine has come as well!" She breathed out in relief. "I'll pay the school fee today. My daughter's name won't be struck off the list."

Naina saw how the same payday had eased two different anxieties in two households. She congratulated Kusum. Outside the office, young men stood in a queue, waiting for news of employment. The staff inside were rejoicing at receiving their wages; those outside were imagining what the day of their first salary might be like.

At lunchtime Naresh came over to Naina's desk with his ledger. "You prepared the registration list for the programme very neatly," he said. "But I can't see where the confirmation of payment for these three names came from."

"I didn't confirm any payments," Naina replied. "Where there was no original receipt, I left the space blank."

Naresh peered over his spectacles at the paper. "You did right. Yesterday another list arrived on the manager's instructions. It has amounts entered against all three names."

"On what basis?"

"That still has to be asked."

Naresh gathered up his ledger. Naina stopped him. "If the original receipts are found, shall I match them against the computer list?"

"Certainly. But remember where each written statement came from. Not every document tells the same story."

There was neither threat nor speculation in Naresh's voice. He was an ordinary accountant who examined discrepancies in figures. Naina returned to her work, but the matter of those three names stayed in her mind.

In the afternoon an elderly woman came to Naina's desk with her grandson. His name was Rakesh. The woman unfolded a paper from the end of her sari. "I paid this out of my old man's pension," she said. "They told us the boy would work as a watchman in a warehouse. Now, for three months, they've been saying there's no vacancy."

"Grandmother, there's no need to tell everyone that," Rakesh interrupted.

"Why not?" the old woman asked. "Everyone knew when we paid the money. Why should we be ashamed to ask about it now?"

Naina examined the receipt. The application was three months old. The agency had placed Rakesh on its waiting list. "I can't tell you the job is certain," Naina made clear. "But I can send your written application to the manager. Keep the original receipt with you."

As the woman folded the receipt, she said, "If the money won't be returned, put that in writing too. I won't spread false hope at home."

The words jolted Naina. She wrote the date of receipt on the petition and signed an acknowledgement. As she rose to go, the woman said, "Daughter, I can tell you're new here. The older employees look at their watches the moment I ask them anything."

Naina watched her make her way to the stairs. She did not know whether the woman's judgment was fair, but one difference in the office was plain. Those who deposited money had to come repeatedly. Those who received it seldom needed to leave their chairs.

As Naina was leaving the office, a message from Abhay appeared on her phone: "I've finished at the newspaper early today. Could we meet near the bookshop at the bus stand?" She checked the time before replying: "Fifteen minutes. I have to get home on time."

Abhay stood beneath the awning of the bookshop, holding two newspapers and his old cloth bag. When he saw Naina, he asked, "How was your day?"

"I received my first salary," Naina said.

"Congratulations, then. In this town, that's news worthy of the front page."

Naina burst out laughing. "There are so many unemployed people on your front page already. Don't give up space for my seven thousand six hundred rupees."

"Fair enough. But it's a special day for you. What are you planning to buy first with your own earnings?"

"Medicines for Ma, groceries for the house, the electricity bill. If there's anything left, I'll put it aside for the roof repairs."

Abhay fell quiet for a moment. "Nothing for yourself?"

"I still have to work out what there is for myself that's separate from what the house needs."

"A book?" Abhay asked.

Naina looked towards the shop. Among the piles of new novels lay an old book of Maithili poetry. She picked it up and turned a few pages. It cost sixty rupees. Then she put it back. "Not today. The household list comes first."

Abhay did not insist on buying it for her. He merely said, "When you feel like it, spend a little of what you earn on your own happiness too. I have no right to tell you so, but friends can offer advice."

"Why do you bring up rights so quickly?" Naina asked with a smile.

"Because giving advice and deciding how another person should live are different things."

A brief silence passed between them. Across the bus stand a rickshaw puller had seated his child beside him and was feeding the child roasted gram. Abhay showed her the report published about the school programme. It mentioned the facts of Ratan's book donations, and also noted that the contractor's response on outstanding construction wages was awaited. Naina read the headline.

"Virendra Rai still hasn't replied?"

"Not in writing. He says the accounts are being checked. I've written what can be substantiated. What can't be substantiated I've left as a question."

"There are plenty of questions at my office too," Naina said.

Abhay looked at her. "Don't take responsibility for answering them all upon yourself. You're an employee. Record what the papers establish correctly; where something isn't clear, say you don't know."

"That's what I'm trying to do."

A bus was approaching. Abhay stepped aside to give her room to board. "Go home and see your mother's face. That will matter more than today's newspaper," he said with a laugh.

Naina got on the bus. Through the window she saw Abhay raise his hand in farewell. Standing amid the crowd, she checked the amount credited to her phone once more. So ordinary a number seemed extraordinary to her today.

After getting off the bus, Naina went towards the chemist's shop. Outside, Madhavi Devi stood with a small dish holding slips for oil and spices. Naina greeted her respectfully.

"Is everyone well at home, Kaki?"

"Well enough, you could say. Today I was paid for work at three houses. I'm going to buy oil and lentils," Madhavi answered.

"How are the children's studies going?"

"My elder girl has reached Class Nine. When prohibition first came, her father gave up drinking for several months. That was the first time I bought her new books. There were no quarrels at home at night. My husband felt happy too, being able to bring something home with the money he saved."

Naina looked at her. "And now?"

"Now he sometimes comes home drunk again. Not every day as before, but whenever it happens, the household savings are ruined. I don't know where he gets the drink. One day my elder daughter asked me, 'If liquor is banned, how does Father come home drunk?'" Madhavi's voice faded with sorrow. "What answer could I give her?"

"You can talk about this with the women in your neighbourhood," Naina said. "You needn't carry the whole burden alone."

"We do talk. Not every home is the same. In some, drinking really has stopped. But the suffering of a woman whose husband has started again is no less for that." Madhavi gathered her things. "I was glad to hear you have a job. Be sure to buy something for your mother with your first salary."

Naina touched the piece of paper with her mother's accounts inside her bag. "That's just what I'm on my way to do."

Madhavi smiled. "Then off you go. The first earnings shouldn't be late reaching home."

When she got home, Naina first told her mother she had withdrawn four thousand rupees from the bank. Saraswati Devi opened the list she had written: medicine, the previous month's electricity bill, rice and lentils, savings towards a gas cylinder. Naina set aside each amount in turn. Chandan had already paid the outstanding bill at the chemist's that afternoon, using some of the wages he had received from the warehouse. Hearing this, Naina asked him, "You got paid?"

"Half of what I'm owed. Manoj said the rest would come with the next consignment. I gave seven hundred to the chemist."

"And your own debt?"

"The interest is still due." Chandan lowered his eyes. "I thought that when Didi's salary came, the house expenses would ease a little. But I won't put my debt on your shoulders."

"The debt is yours, but this is your home too," Naina said. "There's no shame in that. Just don't take another unnecessary loan."

Saraswati Devi stopped them both. "No quarrelling today. With the money we have, let us at least eat in peace in this house."

That evening, bottle gourd was cooked alongside the lentils. Naina had brought home a small box of sweets from the market. Saraswati Devi fed the first piece to her daughter and gave the second to Chandan. "There are two people in this house earning now," she said.

"We aren't both earning yet, Ma," Chandan said with a laugh. "I count consignments and get paid only half the wages."

"Then do the counting honestly. And ask for the full price of your labour," his mother replied.

That night Naina wrote out the month's budget in her notebook. After medicines and food, she set aside part of what remained for the roof repairs. She wrote down her idea of buying a book to read, but did not cross it out. Instead she wrote beside it, "Next month."

A message from Poonam arrived: "The travel papers have come. The full address is now written on the second page. I'll show you tomorrow." Naina replied at once: "Bring all the papers. We'll match them against the office copies."

Poonam had not yet gone away. There was hope of employment in her eyes, and in Naina's mind an anxiety to keep that hope safe. By the end of the day on which she received her first salary, Naina had understood that she could improve the accounts of her own household, but questions tied to other people's lives could not be resolved by her hard work alone. She put down her phone and turned out the light. Inside the house everyone was preparing to sleep. Outside, a vehicle moved slowly along the lane, and the night returned to its ordinary quiet.

Chapter 11: Suspicious Goods

When Chandan reached the warehouse gate, the first man he saw was not a truck driver but the watchman. His name was Bholaram. A cloth tied around his head, he sat chewing betel on an iron chair. As Chandan parked his motorcycle beside the wall, Bholaram said, "You're late today, aren't you? Manoj Babu has been looking for you since morning."

"I went to the library. Yesterday they told me the afternoon consignment was due at three," Chandan replied.

"There's more goods today. Timings keep changing." Bholaram glanced inside. "Go and see him first."

Two trucks stood outside the warehouse. One carried sacks of cement; the other held metal trunks and cardboard boxes. In an inner room, beneath a fan, Manoj Sah was speaking on the telephone. "If we don't get the signatures today, must the goods be held up? I've told them from my side. Get the papers here by evening." Seeing Chandan, he put down the phone.

"Are you keeping up with your studies?"

"I am. There's no word yet on when the examination will be held again."

"Don't put your life on hold for an examination. Today we have to prepare the accounts for two consignments." Manoj spread papers across the desk. "The first is cement for a school building. The second is household goods. The second vehicle leaves at night. You can count that load as well, if you like."

"What time at night?"

"After dark. The time depends on the vehicle. You'll be paid separately for night work."

Chandan went first to count the sacks of cement. The company's name, quantity and supply number were clearly printed on each sack. The driver handed him a copy of the receipt. Chandan noted the figures in his exercise book and checked the count with Bholaram. When he had begun this work, he had resolved not to assume responsibility for goods without documentation. With the first consignment, that rule was easy to follow.

At midday, a labourer sat down in the shelter of the warehouse with rice and fried potatoes. His name was Shambhu. He had not received his wages for two days. He asked Chandan, "Do they pay you for keeping the accounts on time?"

"Sometimes all of it, sometimes half. Whatever I receive, I write it down."

"That's the right thing to do. I didn't know how to keep records. Now I get my son to write them for me. Otherwise the owner says, 'When did you ever work so many days?'"

Chandan looked at Shambhu's notebook. In some places the number of full days was recorded; elsewhere, half-days. He advised him to make a separate column for the money paid against the work. Shambhu said, "There is one advantage in working with an educated man. At least he understands the accounts."

The compliment gave Chandan little pleasure. The education on which he had spent his family's money now seemed to have brought him no further than a desk for counting sacks. Yet, looking at Shambhu, he also understood that the accounting of even a single day's wages could matter greatly to someone.

In the afternoon Manoj summoned him for tea. A thick file lay open on the desk. "The accounts for your last five consignments have been reconciled," he said. "Take part of the payment today and the rest with the next instalment."

Chandan counted the money. It was equal to the payment for three consignments. "So two consignments are still unpaid?"

"The vehicle owner hasn't paid us yet. You won't lose your money."

"I have interest to pay at the end of the month. It would help if I received it on time."

Manoj leaned back in his chair. "Vikram told me you went into debt because of your studies. If you want, you can clear it sooner by taking night shifts. There's not much hard labour involved, but there is more responsibility."

"What responsibility?"

"Checking the number of boxes, accompanying the vehicle and, if necessary, confirming that the goods have been unloaded."

"Will there be papers for the goods?"

"There will. But if you ask this many questions about everything, the owners will get annoyed."

Chandan said quietly, "I need to ask about goods I'm expected to check."

Manoj watched him for a moment, then laughed. "Now I see you're an educated boy. All right. You'll see this evening."

A thick plastic curtain hung across another section of the warehouse. Beyond it stood metal trunks and cardboard boxes. Some were marked 'Household Use'; others bore only numbers. One corner of a trunk had torn open. From within came the faint clink of glass bottles striking one another. Chandan thought of reaching in to look, but the watchman stopped him.

"Don't touch that consignment. Manoj Babu has another man to count it."

"Then why did he call me?"

"Work arrangements keep changing. I don't know whose goods belong to whom."

After this reply, Chandan stood to one side. There were none of the orderly papers here that accompanied the sacks outside. Neither the weight nor the complete address was clear. He considered that bulk shipments might sometimes be this disorganised, but he could not properly certify a count without the necessary information.

By evening the driver, Naseem, arrived. He collected some papers from Manoj and came over to Chandan. "You're Chandan, aren't you? Count these trunks."

Chandan examined the papers. They referred to forty trunks, but fifty stood inside the warehouse. "There's a difference of ten," he said. "Is there another receipt?"

Naseem frowned. "These are the only papers I was given. Ask the owner."

Manoj was on the telephone. Chandan waited. When the call ended, he pointed out the discrepancy. Manoj took out another sheet and said, "The other ten trunks are from a separate supply. They're going in the same vehicle."

"There should be separate slips for the two supplies. Otherwise my count will remain forty."

Manoj's voice hardened. "I've been doing this for years. You've been here three weeks. Learn to keep the accounts; don't try to become the owner."

Chandan's face grew hot, but he did not answer. On a page of his notebook he wrote plainly: "Documents received for forty trunks; no separate particulars for ten." He kept the page with him.

Just then a jeep stopped outside the warehouse. Two men in ordinary clothes stepped down. Manoj escorted one of them inside with marked respect. Bholaram whispered to Chandan, "Bhanu Babu has come. Everybody here knows him."

"Which Bhanu Babu?"

"He's in the police. Don't ask anything more."

Chandan looked towards the jeep. There was no government emblem on it. He could not make out the words of the conversation inside. After a while he heard Manoj laugh. He had heard the name Bhanu Pratap at the local crossroads, but he saw no reason to connect a man he had merely seen with any crime. All he could observe was that Manoj had abandoned his usual brusqueness and become exceedingly courteous before this guest.

Naseem gathered the vehicle papers and came outside. Chandan asked, "What is the name of the place where the goods are to be delivered?"

"Read what's on the receipt," Naseem replied.

"It gives only the name of the market. There's no full address of a shop or warehouse."

Naseem was silent for a moment. "My job is to drive. Someone will tell me where to go over the phone, on the road. I don't know how they arrange these things."

"So you don't have the full information either?"

"Who ever gets all the information?" Weariness entered Naseem's voice. "I have two months' instalments outstanding. If the vehicle stops running, the household income stops. But it isn't easy to suppress something that feels wrong."

For the first time Chandan realised he was not the only man there working under constraint. Driver, labourer, watchman—each carried his own debts and the weight of a family. Such compulsions did not

remove the responsibility to make decisions, but they did make clear decisions difficult.

After Bhanu Pratap left, Manoj came outside. "The separate paper for these ten trunks will arrive by tonight. Get into the vehicle. I'll give you the remaining documents tomorrow."

"I won't certify receipt without the documents," Chandan said.

"Don't certify anything, then. Just accompany the vehicle. You'll get one thousand two hundred rupees for the night."

Chandan was startled. Twelve hundred rupees instead of the day rate of four hundred and fifty. The calculations of his debts passed before his eyes: his mother's medicines, repairs to the motorcycle, calls from the lender. "Why so much?" he asked.

Manoj's expression hardened once more. "Night work, an out-of-town route, responsibility. If you don't want it, there are others."

Chandan did not say yes at once. "My work was to reconcile the daytime receipts. I haven't told anyone at home about working at night."

"Go home and ask. We need a decision today."

He sat on his motorcycle but did not start it immediately. The money Manoj had offered tempted him. What harm could there be in merely going along? Then he remembered the sound of glass in the torn trunk, the incomplete papers and the visiting policeman. Each detail taken separately might have an ordinary explanation; together, they raised questions.

On his way home he saw a small crowd at the crossroads. A rickshaw puller's wife was taking her husband home by the hand. The man was staggering. A shopkeeper said, "When prohibition first came in, the men in this lane began to mend their ways. Now liquor is arriving again from goodness knows where."

Another man answered, "Don't say the same thing about everybody. Some households are still free of the addiction."

Chandan paused a short distance away. He remembered Madhavi Kaki's household. During the first year of prohibition, the quarrels there at night had diminished, and the money saved had bought books for the children. Now, from time to time, he heard that her husband had once again come home drunk. The complete success or failure of a policy

could not be reckoned from a single lane, but every quarrel had consequences for real people.

Reaching home, Chandan parked the motorcycle in the courtyard. Saraswati Devi was taking a pot of rice off the stove. Naina was writing down the figures from her salary. While washing his hands and face before dinner, Chandan asked, "Ma, would you worry if I worked outside at night?"

Saraswati Devi set a lid on the pan and looked at him. "Whose work? Where?"

"Goods from the warehouse are going out. They've offered me work accompanying the vehicle."

Naina closed her notebook. "Why is night work being offered now, when it wasn't in the terms of your appointment?"

"They'll pay more. Twelve hundred rupees."

"What are the goods?"

Chandan could not answer at once. "They say household goods. But the papers are incomplete. I didn't sign for them."

Naina spoke plainly. "Then don't go without complete documentation. I understand we need the money. But if your name becomes attached to goods you know nothing about, it will be hard to establish your innocence afterwards."

Chandan found her words bitter. "Didi, you sit in an office and earn seven thousand six hundred rupees. I spend the whole day swallowing dust and don't always get even the full four hundred and fifty. Now that an opportunity comes along, you stop me."

"I'm not belittling your work," Naina said. "I'm only asking whether they're paying so much for the work—or for keeping quiet."

Chandan fell silent at the question. Saraswati Devi intervened. "Whatever you decide, think it through. The household's needs are everyone's; the burden of the risk mustn't fall on one person alone."

Chandan went to his room without touching his meal. He opened his notebook and looked at the day's figures. The cement receipt was clear. For the other vehicle, forty trunks were accounted for and ten remained unexplained. The same questions he had asked in the warehouse were now questions he had to answer at home.

After dinner Naina stood at her brother's doorway. "Chandan, may I come in?"

"Come in."

Two competitive-examination books lay open on the table, beside the notebook in which he kept the warehouse accounts. Naina did not pull out a chair; she sat on the edge of the bed. "If what I said earlier hurt you, forgive me. I've received my monthly salary, and perhaps I don't sufficiently understand the hardship of earning your wages day by day. I didn't mean what I said in that spirit."

After a while Chandan spoke. "I lost my temper too. But Didi, all day I wonder why my age doesn't stand still whenever an examination is cancelled. Someone whose father has money can spend another year studying. My interest keeps mounting."

"That is why you need to earn. But work you can still consider leaving today may become much harder to leave tomorrow."

"Everything is presented to us as something to fear. Fear of failing in our studies, fear of being cheated at work, fear of not paying our debts. Why should anyone try to do anything?"

Naina looked at him. "Work with understanding, not out of fear. Tomorrow, count the goods whose papers are complete. Don't touch what isn't documented. That much is your own decision to make."

"I'll speak to Vikram again," Chandan said softly. "He's known Manoj longer. If he has had any bad experience, he may tell me."

"Ask him. But don't make a decision solely on Vikram's assurance either."

As Naina rose, she noticed a sentence Chandan had written on the first page of the notebook many months ago: "This time I must pass the examination." He had never folded that page away. Looking at it, she understood that her brother had not forgotten his goal; he was merely growing weary on the road towards it.

At eight that night Manoj called. "What have you decided?"

"I won't go tonight. If the full papers are available, I can work on the next consignment during the day."

There was a moment's silence at the other end. Then Manoj said, "All right. But opportunities don't come again and again."

The call ended. Chandan put his phone on the table. Having made his decision did not put him at ease; instead he was more afraid that Manoj might refuse him work in future. He took out the syllabus for the new examination, read a page, then looked at the clock. Not one answer

would stay in his mind. Again and again he thought of the same figure —twelve hundred rupees. He still felt no complete certainty about his decision.

Before he went to sleep, Vikram called. He was closing his motorcycle repair shop. Chandan asked, "Do you know anything about the night work at Manoj's warehouse?"

"I thought he dealt in ordinary transport," Vikram replied. "He'd offered me daytime work before. I haven't done any night shifts myself."

"Are the papers often incomplete?"

"Where the papers are incomplete, don't put your name to them. I gave you the address of a place to work; I didn't take responsibility for every consignment."

There was caution in Vikram's voice alongside friendship. Chandan understood that asking a friend for advice was one thing; passing the burden of his own decision to that friend was another. He ended the call, drew a short line in his notebook and entered his unpaid wages separately.

Early the next morning Bholaram called. "There was some commotion around the vehicle that left last night. Manoj Babu is very angry at the warehouse. If you're coming during the day, call first."

"What sort of commotion?" Chandan asked.

"I don't know all of it. I heard that questions were raised about the vehicle's documents. That's all."

Chandan put the phone down and stared for a long time at the page of his notebook on which he had recorded the absence of separate particulars for ten trunks. He felt some relief at not having travelled in the vehicle that night, but also a fear that the next time his needs might become so pressing that he would no longer have the courage to refuse.

Chapter 12: Poonam's Last Message

When Poonam arrived at Naina's house early the next morning, she carried a small bag as well as her folder. She had not yet finished packing for the journey, but she had brought the bag with her nevertheless. In the courtyard Saraswati Devi was picking through rice, removing stray grains and husks. Poonam bowed to her, and she rose to offer her water.

"Has the date of your departure been confirmed?"

"The bus leaves the day after tomorrow, Kaki," Poonam replied. "I wanted Naina to see the papers."

Naina came out from inside. There was excitement on Poonam's face, but beneath her eyes lay the weariness of a night with too little sleep. She opened the folder and spread three sheets on the table. The first bore the name of the training centre, the second general instructions about accommodation and the third the travel arrangements. The contact named earlier had been replaced by someone else.

"Has the contact person changed?" Naina asked.

"Kiran Madam said the previous officer is on leave. The new officer will meet us at the bus station."

"A woman?"

"Yes, so they say. Her name is Neela Devi."

Naina studied the travel sheet. The bus would take them from Navgarh to Sonapur, a distant industrial town. From there the company's vehicle would take them to the training centre. The departure and arrival times were printed on the sheet, but the address of the training building consisted only of the name of the industrial area and a building number. There was a mobile number, but no landline.

"There's no full address for the company's head office," Naina said.

"This is the address for training. The work will be in another unit. That's what it says on the paper the company gave us."

"If those are two different places, it's necessary to ask where you'll be staying."

Poonam grew a little impatient. "Naina, I've been asking questions for four weeks. Every time I ask, I get a different answer. But now the bus

tickets and the names of our group are confirmed. Father says I mustn't let the opportunity go."

Naina understood the impatience in her voice. It was not mere obstinacy. Twelve thousand rupees had already been deposited, her family had borrowed money, and every other person in the village was asking when Poonam would start her job. If she failed to go now, she feared losing not just the opportunity but her faith in her own decision.

"I'm not telling you not to go," Naina said gently. "I only want your family to know the name, number and address of the person you'll be travelling with."

Saraswati Devi set aside her winnowing tray of rice. "Child, you're going far from home for the first time. Keep your clothes, medicines, identity card and a little money separately. In a strange place, don't hand your papers to anyone unless it's necessary."

Poonam smiled. "Both of you are explaining more about papers than anything else."

"Papers are useful only when the promises written on them are honoured," Saraswati Devi replied.

Naina took photographs of all three sheets on her phone. She also wrote down the telephone numbers of Poonam's father, mother and sister, Reena, in a notebook. "How is Reena?" she asked.

"Her school fees have been paid. But once I'm gone she'll have to manage the sewing work at home. She says when I come back we'll buy a machine together."

"Leave the thought of a sewing machine for now and think about your safety," Naina said.

Poonam's eyes grew moist. "I'm not going away only to earn money. I want everyone at home to see me as someone capable of making her own decisions."

Naina took her hand. "Then, along with your right to decide, keep your right to ask questions."

When Naina reached the office at midday, Kiran was speaking to someone on the telephone in her room. Seeing Naina, she half-closed the door. After a while she came outside. "Have you seen Poonam's papers?"

"I have. The training centre and the actual place of work are different. The full address of the head office is missing."

Kiran looked at her watch. "This is the first stage of the appointment. They'll receive the complete information once the group arrives."

"Can't they have it before travelling?"

"You've started on the same matter again."

"Poonam is my friend. But I can also see in the office register that her details are still incomplete."

Kiran's voice became sharp. "Your job is to reconcile the lists, not to make appointment decisions. Yes, the company officer's name has changed. But every change isn't a crime."

"I'm not accusing anyone of a crime," Naina said. "I'm only asking for written confirmation of that change."

Kiran was silent for a few moments. "I'll send an email. Whatever reply comes, I'll put it in the file."

Naina went back to her desk. At the office entrance, several applicants stood in line. Some had brought employment advertisements; others held receipts for fees they had deposited. Ramvilas called out their names one by one. At the back Naresh Mandal was turning the pages of the ledger. Everything was proceeding as on any ordinary day. Only Poonam's three sheets seemed out of the ordinary to Naina.

By evening no new letter had come from Kiran's room. When Naina asked, she was told, "The email has been sent. We're waiting for a reply." Naina recorded precisely that status in the office list. She did not want an unverified fact entered as a certainty on anyone's papers.

Two days later, the morning of Poonam's departure arrived. It was not yet properly light at the bus station. A tea seller was kindling his fire. Passengers carrying bags and trunks hurried from one place to another. At her mother's urging, Naina had come to see Poonam off. Abhay was there too, to meet the newspaper vehicle; when he saw Naina, he stood a little way off.

Poonam came with her father. The elderly man walked with difficulty. Her sister Reena was looking after the bag. Poonam's mother was silent. In her hand was a little cloth bundle containing puris and dried vegetable curry for the journey. She kept reminding her daughter to eat at the proper time.

Two other young women who were travelling with Poonam reached the bus station. One was Mamta, the other Shabnam. Both had come

from different villages in hope of finding work. Mamta's brother said that a company representative had booked their tickets together. Shabnam's father asked, "Who will they report to after they get off?"

Mamta showed him the folder. "There's a number for Neela Devi."

"Have you spoken to her yourselves on this number?" Naina asked.

"Yes," Shabnam said. "She said a vehicle would be waiting outside the bus station. But she doesn't know its number yet."

"Call home when you've met her," Naina said. "And send the name of the company building."

In the meantime a middle-aged woman arrived, carrying a mobile phone and a list on paper. She introduced herself as Neela Devi. She matched the three young women's names against her list and showed them the bus tickets. Poonam asked her directly, "Where will we work after the training?"

"Get there first. Your department will be decided there," Neela said. "It's crowded here. Get ready to board."

Naina asked to see Neela Devi's identity card. The woman showed her a card bearing the name of a private organisation and her photograph. Naina wrote down the name. The woman looked somewhat displeased, but with so many passengers crowding around she did not argue further.

Before boarding, Poonam came over to Naina. "Are you angry?"

"Why would I be?"

"You keep asking about everything. Neela Madam doesn't like it."

"There's nothing wrong in asking for information about a place you are going to," Naina replied. "I want to hear you say that you've made this decision for yourself."

Poonam looked straight into her eyes. "Yes, I've made my decision. I'm frightened, but I want to go."

Naina embraced her. "Then call when you arrive safely. If anything seems wrong, don't keep your feelings to yourself."

As she climbed the steps of the bus, Poonam turned and waved. Reena stood there with tears in her eyes. Their father silently watched the bus window. Just as the vehicle began to move, Poonam's mother ran after it with her little bundle—she had forgotten to put a second food container in the bag. Naina quickly took the container and passed

it through the window to Poonam. Laughing, Poonam said, "Tell Ma not to worry."

The bus pulled away. When the crowd had thinned, Abhay came to Naina's side. "Was she someone you know?"

"A friend since our schooldays. She's gone away for a job."

"What's the organisation called?"

"Nai Disha sent her. But some things about the training location still aren't clear."

Abhay paused before asking another question. "You're worried. If you ever need to verify any facts, tell me. For now, wait for Poonam to arrive safely."

"That's all I want," Naina replied.

A few hours after the bus left, Poonam answered her mother's call. Her mother wanted to know whether she had opened the food containers. Poonam laughed. "You gave me two of them. The three of us will eat together." Mamta, seated beside her, took out savoury snacks she had brought from home. Shabnam said she would buy a schoolbag for her younger brother as soon as she received her first salary. The three talked about their families. They might not yet have jobs in hand, but travelling together made the journey feel less strange.

Poonam watched fields and small markets pass beyond the window. She remembered Naina at school, reading examination questions aloud and laughing at herself when she gave a wrong answer. Poonam thought that with her first salary she would give Naina a fine dupatta. She would buy Reena a new pair of sewing scissors. She would also take responsibility for her father's medicines. Making plans cost nothing; the desire to fulfil them gave her courage.

In the afternoon Neela Devi came from her seat at the rear of the bus and told the three, "Stay together when we get off. Don't scatter." Poonam asked, "Will the company's name be written on the vehicle?" Neela replied, "I'll be with you, so don't worry." Poonam did not repeat the question, but she saved the name of the place where they would get off on her phone.

Poonam's first message came in the afternoon: "On the way. Mamta and Shabnam are with me. Everything is fine." Naina immediately replied, "Tell me the name of the place where you get off." A second message arrived in the evening: "Reached Sonapur. The company vehicle

is here." On that first evening of her journey, Poonam also sent a message to her sister. Reena replied that their mother was cooking, their father was sitting at the doorway, and everyone was waiting to know that she had arrived safely. Then no message came for several hours. Naina supposed Poonam would be busy settling into a new place, having a meal and talking to her family.

At half past nine that night Poonam called. Her voice was faint. Naina could hear some women talking in the background.

"Have you arrived?" Naina asked.

"Yes. But the name written on the building here is different from the name on the papers. They say this is temporary accommodation."

"Have you met a company officer?"

"One man came. He told us to submit our papers."

"Did you give him your original certificates?"

"No, only copies. But he asked to see our identity cards. Now they say they'll take us somewhere else in the morning."

"Send me the full address of where you are," Naina said.

"I can't find the address written anywhere. I can see factory warehouses outside the window. Neela Madam says they'll tell us tomorrow."

"Mamta and Shabnam are still with you, aren't they?"

"Yes. All three of us are in one room."

"Have you called your parents?"

"Yes, I told them I'd arrived."

Naina was about to say something more when the call was cut off. She called again, and Poonam said, "The signal here is poor. We'll talk in the morning."

Naina looked at the clock. She sent Poonam a message: "Make sure you send the complete address and the company's name. If you need anything, call at once." The message showed as delivered, but there was no reply.

The following day Naina had to reconcile documents at the office. Poonam's words kept returning to her, but she resolved not to turn an unverified fear into an accusation. She asked Kiran, "Has the name of the training building in Sonapur changed?"

"Who told you that?" Kiran asked.

"Poonam herself. Last night."

"It must be temporary accommodation. There are several buildings there. I'll speak to the group officer."

"Has the written reply about the contact person arrived yet?"

"Not yet," Kiran said plainly. "Get on with your work. If there's a serious complaint, tell me."

Naina turned away, but she felt that waiting until a complaint became serious and having a system to prevent harm were two different things. Kusum saw her and asked softly, "Has your friend arrived?" Naina replied, "She has, but I still don't have a clear address." Concern came over Kusum's face. "Keep in touch with her by phone," she said.

By six that evening Poonam had sent no message. Naina called once. The phone rang, but no one answered. Half an hour later she tried again. It went on ringing. On reaching home she told her mother what had happened. Saraswati Devi said, "It's only been one day. She may be busy with work. But you must get the full address."

Chandan heard the matter discussed over dinner. He remembered the incomplete papers at his own warehouse. "Didi, it's hard to trust someone who won't give you a complete address," he said.

"You're right," Naina replied, looking at her brother. "But Poonam didn't go alone. There are other young women with her. First we'll try to reach them."

She checked Mamta's number on the travel list. Her phone was switched off. Shabnam's rang, but there was no reply. Naina considered calling Mamta's brother, then thought she should first speak to Poonam's family. She called Poonam's father. His answer brought her up short: "Child, Poonam made a brief call this morning. She said she was going to the workplace. Nothing since then. I thought she might be speaking to you."

"I spoke to her last night. I'm trying to contact her now," Naina said. "If she calls, please let me know at once."

At half past ten that night, when everyone at home was preparing for bed, Naina's mobile vibrated. She answered as soon as she saw Poonam's name.

"Poonam? Are you all right?"

At first there was no answer from the other end. Then she heard a whisper. "Naina, can you hear me?"

"Yes, clearly. What has happened?"

"They brought us to another place yesterday. This isn't the work they promised. They're saying they'll take our phones away. I've hidden mine."

A shiver ran through Naina. "Where are you? Is there any landmark outside, any name on the building?"

"I can't tell. There are people at the door. Mamta is crying. Shabnam says they scolded her when she asked to go home."

"Stay calm. Tell me clearly whatever you can see. I'll get help with your family."

"Naina, they won't let us go outside. Tell someone—"

At that moment a harsh voice sounded in the distance. Poonam said hurriedly, "Get us out of here. I'm frightened."

Then the call was cut off.

Naina dialled again at once. The phone was switched off. A second time, a third—the same response. She picked up her mobile to call Poonam's father, but her hands were shaking. On the table before her were the photographs of Poonam's three sheets: the training centre's name, the journey times, the contact number. All the information she had checked and rechecked suddenly seemed like helpless pieces of paper.

Saraswati Devi appeared in the doorway. "What has happened, Naina?"

Naina looked at her mother. "Poonam asked for help. They won't let her leave that place."

Her mother was silent for an instant. Then she said, "Don't delay. Tell her family. Seek help through the proper channels."

Naina dialled Poonam's father. Night was deepening, but she understood now that this was no longer merely uncertainty about a job. Her friend's life might be in danger. At the other end, the phone kept ringing.

PART TWO

THE MISSING PEOPLE

Chapter 13: A Switched-Off Phone

It took some time for Poonam's father to answer. Meanwhile Naina stood beside the door. Inside the house Saraswati Devi was waking Chandan. It was deep into the night, yet Naina felt that with every tick of the clock something important was slipping out of their hands. When the call was answered, the voice of Poonam's father, Ramlal Yadav, was heavy with sleep.

"So late, child? Poonam is all right, isn't she?"

Naina was silent for an instant. It was difficult to give him an answer, but there was no sense in concealing the truth. "Kaka, Poonam called me asking for help. She said they wouldn't let them go outside. The call was cut off, and now her phone is switched off."

Silence spread at the other end. Then Ramlal asked, "When did you speak?"

"Just now, after half past ten. I called you immediately."

"I'll wake her mother now. If you can, come over in the morning. We'll keep trying her phone all night."

Naina told him she was preserving the messages on her mobile and photographs of the travel documents. When the call ended, Chandan came into the courtyard. His eyes were still half closed with sleep, but the sight of his sister's face woke him fully. "Didi, have you called the number they gave for Sonapur?"

"Not yet. We have Neela Devi's number, but from what Poonam said, it seems she is with those same people. We should first think of a way to get information independently."

"And Mamta and Shabnam?"

"Both phones are either switched off or unanswered."

Chandan sat down with his mobile and copied the numbers from the travel list one by one as Naina dictated them. It hardly seemed proper to telephone strangers at such an hour, but having heard Poonam beg for help, Naina could not contemplate simply waiting either. She sent a message to Abhay: "Poonam is in trouble. I urgently need to speak to you tomorrow morning. Her phone is off." Even as she sent it she understood that Abhay was a journalist, not a policeman. She could expect no miracle from him, only experience and assistance.

Saraswati Devi heated some water on the stove and gave it to all three of them. "People make mistakes when they panic," she said. "Write down all the information together: the time of each call, what she said, how many were travelling with her. It won't be easy to remember everything clearly in the morning."

Naina opened an old notebook. She made separate entries for the day Poonam left, the message announcing her arrival in Sonapur, the conversation that night, the short call the following day and the final appeal. On the last line she wrote: "Get us out of here." For a moment her pen stopped after those words. There was no ambiguity in them; her friend had explicitly asked for help.

Before dawn Ramlal called again. "I've called Poonam twenty times. The same answer every time: switched off. Reena has tried too. Her mother has been sitting awake all night."

"I'll be at your house by seven," Naina said.

The neighbours were just waking when Naina put the folder, notebook and mobile charger into her bag. Chandan brought out the bicycle. "Shall I come with you?"

"Don't give up your study time. I'll call if I need you," Naina replied. Then she looked at her brother and added, "But don't accept any night work from Manoj for now. I'm worried about you as well."

Chandan was about to say something, but merely nodded. He remembered the incomplete papers at his warehouse; to connect that suspicion with what had happened to Poonam would, however, be speculation. He accompanied his sister as far as the road.

As soon as Naina reached Poonam's courtyard, she saw three or four neighbours already seated there. Reena was standing near the doorway, holding a pair of Poonam's old slippers, which she had picked up to put inside. The moment Naina arrived, Reena asked, "Did Didi say to save her? Did she say those very words?"

"Yes," Naina answered. "She was frightened. But I still don't know where they have kept her."

Poonam's mother, Lalita Devi, was sitting on the veranda. On seeing Naina, she rose, then sat down again. "My daughter went away to work. Has something terrible happened?"

"There's no confirmed news of anything terrible yet, Kaki. We need to find the right place. We mustn't waste time." Naina sat beside her as

she spoke. She was not promising that everything would turn out well; only that the family would not be left to face this alone.

Ramlal brought out the folder. The edges of the receipt for the deposit were worn from being opened again and again. He put it before Naina and said, "I paid twelve thousand rupees. Four thousand was borrowed. We had to pawn jewellery. But I don't want any account of money now. I want my daughter."

Naina examined the receipt. She had separately recorded its number on her copy of the office registration list. It carried the recruitment organisation's seal but gave no address for the training centre. Ramlal showed her a company message on his phone: "The candidate group has arrived safely." The message had come before Poonam was moved to another location. Since then the family had received nothing.

Meanwhile Mamta's brother Rakesh and Shabnam's uncle Ismail arrived too. The two families had found one another by telephone. Rakesh said Mamta had told them the previous night, "Training hasn't started today; we're going somewhere else tomorrow." Shabnam's mother had received a final message: "I am fine. Don't worry." No one knew when it was sent, from which phone, or in whose presence.

"If all three are in the same place, how can all three phones be switched off together?" Rakesh asked.

No one answered. Outside the doorway two children passed with their schoolbags. To them this was a courtyard like any other on an ordinary day. For those seated within, every unfamiliar sound had become a possible reason for hope.

Naina dialled Neela Devi's number. The first time it rang without an answer. The second time a man's voice said, "Who is this?"

"I'm Naina Mishra calling from Navgarh, on behalf of Poonam Yadav's family. I need to speak to Neela Devi."

"She isn't available at the moment."

"Who are you? This number was provided as the travel contact."

"An employee. The group is fine. Don't worry."

"Put Poonam on the phone, please."

"Mobile phones aren't permitted during training. You can speak later."

"Give me the full company address and the name of the person in charge."

There was no sound for a moment. Then the man said, "Get the information from the office." The call ended.

Naina wrote down the conversation as nearly word for word as she could. Every question—who he was, what the address was—had been evaded. Ramlal watched her hand move across the page.

"I'll go to Sonapur," he said. "I'll book a bus ticket now."

"You may have to go," Naina replied, "but wandering around there without a complete address may achieve little. First we should demand a written reply from the office and inform the police station. If you travel, find out in advance where you can obtain local assistance."

Mamta's brother said he knew someone who ran a small shop at the Sonapur bus station. He would telephone to ask whether the man could find any concrete information about a company vehicle or a training building under that name. It was not sensible to send anyone into an unfamiliar place without information.

Then Reena returned to the courtyard, carrying Poonam's old diary. "The day Didi went to deposit the fee, she wrote something here," she said. On the last page were three names—Poonam, Mamta, Shabnam. Underneath were the proposed training dates and a second telephone number. Ramlal had not seen the page before.

Naina dialled the second number. The woman who answered refused to give her name. She said, "I used to look after the arrangements for the group. This work is no longer my responsibility."

"Whose responsibility is it now?"

"Ask the office. Don't call me again."

The conversation ended. Naina thought that changing responsibilities could be part of an ordinary administrative arrangement, but failing to give the three families a new name and complete address was not ordinary. She wrote the woman's words in her notebook without adding any conclusions of her own.

Ramdulari Kaki, who lived behind Poonam's house, arrived carrying a brass vessel of water. She did not know the whole story. "Has Poonam gone to Delhi or Sonapur? Someone in the market was saying she got work in a factory in Delhi."

Ramlal flushed with anger. "Why do people who know nothing spread rumours?"

"I didn't say it myself," Ramdulari Kaki replied. "I heard it two houses down. I came to ask. Tell me if I can help."

Naina said to her, "Please tell people only that the family is trying to make contact. Don't let unverified stories spread. When we know the truth, everyone can be told."

Lalita Devi, sitting in the courtyard, spoke after a long silence. "When Poonam was small, I used to work in the fields. She would sit at the doorway and wait for me to come home. Now I sit here waiting for her. But I don't know where the road I'm waiting on leads."

No one answered immediately. Reena sat down beside her mother. She had been crying earlier; now she wiped her eyes and took up a sheet of paper. "I'll write down all the times and names clearly. I won't let anything be missed."

Mamta's brother received another call. His acquaintance in Sonapur said there were two warehouses bearing the same name in the industrial area, but he had found nothing definite about the training centre. "Don't make guesses on your own," Rakesh told him. "Ask only people you know personally."

Ismail asked his family to send a photograph of Shabnam's appointment letter. When it arrived on his phone, Naina compared it with Poonam's letter. Both carried the same office seal at the top, but the training dates differed by one day. Ismail said, "All three travelled on the same bus. Why are the dates different?"

"It could be a clerical mistake," Naina said. "But we must ask the office about it in writing."

At that moment a neighbour of Ramlal's arrived with a motorcycle. He offered to help if they needed to go to the police station. At first Ramlal refused. "I'll go myself." Then he looked at Lalita Devi and said, "You look after the house. Reena will keep trying the phones. I'll go with Naina."

He went inside and returned in an old shirt, carefully adjusting the folds of his dhoti. Seeing him, Naina remembered Poonam climbing confidently aboard the bus the previous day with her new bag. Now her family was leaving the house with every paper they possessed, searching for the destination of that journey.

At around ten Naina reached the employment office with two members of the family. Kusum was seated at reception. On an ordinary day she would pass Naina the papers as soon as she saw her; today she

stopped short at the sight of the people with tearful eyes accompanying her.

"Is Kiran Madam here?" Naina asked.

"She's in a meeting. What's happened?"

"We can't contact Poonam Yadav or Mamta and Shabnam, who travelled with her. Poonam called for help last night. The families need the full address."

Kusum's expression changed. She opened a drawer, then shut it again. "I don't handle the details of the training groups. I'll ask Kiran Madam."

A little later Kiran came out, carrying two files. She invited Ramlal to sit down, though she herself remained standing.

"I understand that you are all worried," Kiran said. "There can be problems with communication at an outside training centre. Don't panic."

"Communication may be difficult," Naina replied calmly, "but Poonam asked me for help and said she wasn't being allowed to leave. That information has to be put on record."

For a moment Kiran looked uncomfortable. "I'll ask the officer concerned. You can all come back tomorrow."

Ramlal spoke sharply for the first time. "Tomorrow? My daughter asked for help last night. Can't you give me her address today?"

"I'll telephone immediately," Kiran replied. She went inside. Naina saw that Kiran's hand did not tremble as she closed the door, but no answer had been given to their question either.

Twenty minutes later Kiran returned. "It's confirmed that the group's accommodation has changed. But the officer in charge is travelling at the moment. We'll give you the written particulars as soon as they arrive."

"By what time?" Naina asked.

"I can't say just now."

"Then please put in writing that the family requested the address and the office has not yet been able to supply it."

Kiran was not prepared for such a request. "We can't issue that sort of certificate immediately."

Naina took a blank sheet from her bag. She wrote down the names of all three young women, the family contacts, the papers available and the time of the last telephone call. At the bottom she added a request: "The complete address, their present condition and arrangements for direct communication must be provided without delay." Ramlal signed it. Kusum entered the time the application was received in the reception register and stamped the acknowledgement.

As they left the office, Ramlal looked exhausted. "What now?"

"Now we go to the police station," Naina said. "We'll tell them everything that was said. Not just that the mobile is switched off, but that Poonam called asking for help."

At that moment Abhay called. He had seen her message from the previous night in the morning. He listened quietly, then asked, "Do you have a copy of the written application?"

"Yes. With the office acknowledgement."

"Good. Go to the police station with the family. I won't rush to write a news report. The girls' safety comes first. Let me know when you get there."

Naina ended the call. Buses were coming and going along the road. A fruit seller was weighing guavas on his scales; a school bell was ringing. The town continued at its usual pace. Only in three homes did time seem to have come to a standstill. Poonam's name was still at the top of Naina's phone, but whenever she dialled it, the same recorded voice answered: "The mobile phone is switched off."

Ramlal asked Naina once more, "You wrote down Poonam's exact words properly, didn't you?" Naina opened her notebook and showed him. Ramlal could not read it; he had left his spectacles at home. Slowly Naina read the entire line aloud to him. He listened and remained silent for a long time.

Ramlal crossed the road beside Naina. The way to the police station led through the crowded town. In the past he had taken this road only on ordinary errands; today he was going in search of his daughter. Naina knew they had little more than suspicions and a few papers in their hands. But those papers were at least evidence that the family had asked for help in time.

Chapter 14: At the Police Station

An old peepal tree stood by the gate of the police station. Beneath it were two motorcycles, an impounded bicycle and a broken iron bench. Inside, on the veranda, two families sat holding their papers. One had come to report a stolen motorcycle; a woman from the other family wanted to tell the police about violence in her home. Ramlal Yadav stopped at the gate, Poonam's folder tucked under his arm.

"Come, Kaka," Naina said. "Tell them plainly what you have to say."

A constable seated in a corner of the veranda looked up. "What do you want?"

"My daughter went to Sonapur for work. Last night she called asking for help. Now we can't contact her," Ramlal said.

"How many days has she been gone?"

"Not three days. A little over two. But this is not simply a matter of time. She said they wouldn't let her go outside."

The constable stopped writing. "Is your daughter an adult?"

"She's twenty-seven. But what difference does that make?" Ramlal's voice rose.

Naina gently touched his hand. "First let's tell them everything. Asking her age may be part of the procedure."

The constable opened a register. "Submit a written application. Include her photograph, the date of travel, the organisation and the phone numbers. The sub-inspector will see it."

Naina took out the papers. She had included Poonam's final words in the account she had prepared since the previous night. Rakesh and Ismail had supplied separate copies of the information from their families. The names and contacts of all three young women were listed individually. When she handed over the papers, the constable said, "Sit on that bench."

An hour passed. Meanwhile a police vehicle came into the compound. Two policemen went out for tea. A young man was rewriting his theft complaint; he had given the wrong motorcycle number on the first application. Ramlal went up to the constable a second time. "Babu, my daughter asked for help. Please do something quickly."

"I've kept your application. Sir is on his way back," the constable replied. He was not harsh, but he had many such files before him, each containing a different sorrow, and time passed in the same way for them all.

Naina opened a photograph of Poonam on her mobile. It was from an old school programme. Poonam was laughing in a green sari. Naina thought a more recent picture would be better for identification. She called Reena and asked for one. A little later Reena sent a photograph taken on the day of Poonam's journey: a blue kurta, a bag over her shoulder, standing beside the bus window. The image was clear.

The child of the woman seated on the veranda was asking for water. Naina offered her bottle. After giving the child a drink, the woman asked, "Is this the first time you've come to make a complaint?" Naina nodded. "It's my third time," the woman said. "At first I was afraid of what people would say. Now I've understood that if you remain silent, no one will listen." She carefully put away her copy of the application. Naina saw how the sorrows of so many households arrived at the door of a police station.

Ramlal went outside for a moment and called Lalita Devi. "I'm at the police station. They'll take the application. You must eat something. If you sit on an empty stomach, you'll have no strength." His wife said something at the other end that Naina could not hear. There were tears in Ramlal's eyes, but he wiped them away at once with his cloth.

Naina sat beside him. "Kaka, yesterday Poonam was talking about buying a pair of scissors for her sister with her first salary."

Ramlal looked at her in surprise. "She told me she would have the roof repaired. She had no list of things for herself."

For a moment they both remembered Poonam's laughter. For a little while neither the noise of the police station nor the vehicles reached their ears. Then Ramlal said, "Child, when she comes home, should I stop her from ever going away again?"

"First we must find the way to bring her home," Naina said. "Afterwards we should listen to what she herself wants. It wouldn't be right to close every road before her because we are afraid."

Ramlal nodded. The answer did not lessen his fear, but at that moment he was able, for the first time, to think about his daughter's right to a future.

Sub-Inspector Bhanu Pratap arrived after eleven. Two pens protruded from his uniform pocket, and he held a mobile phone in his hand. As he passed through the veranda into his office, he gave the constable a few instructions. A little later Naina was called inside. The room contained a large desk and two chairs, with a district map hanging on the wall. Files lay in a pile on the desk; a half-open application rested on top.

"Poonam Yadav's family?" Bhanu Pratap asked.

"Yes," Ramlal said. "I'm her father."

Bhanu opened the application. "Your daughter is an adult. She went away for work. If her mobile is switched off after two days, there could be no network coverage. On what grounds are you saying a crime has been committed?"

Naina did not find the question unreasonable in itself, but there was a tendency in it to make Poonam's last appeal seem insignificant. She answered clearly, "I'm not saying a crime has definitely occurred. But she herself said she wasn't being allowed to leave, that they were trying to take away their phones, and that she needed help. This is more serious than a family's ordinary anxiety."

"Did you speak to her yourself?"

"Yes. After half past ten last night."

"Do you have a recording?"

"No. I have the call details, and I wrote down the time as soon as the conversation ended."

"And the other two young women?"

"Mamta and Shabnam. Their families don't know their full address either. I can give you the numbers for all three families."

Bhanu Pratap picked up the paper. "The place they went to is Sonapur. The police there will also be involved. You can submit the application here, but it will be difficult to begin an immediate search without an address."

Ramlal kept looking at a glass tumbler. "I'll go there, Sir. I want my daughter. If you tell me in writing whom I should approach, I'll go there too."

The sub-inspector leaned back a little in his chair. "Don't be so hasty. I'll check the organisation's contact details first."

He dialled a number on his mobile, listened for a little while, then ended the call. Naina noticed that while dialling he had looked not at their papers but at the old contact list on his phone. Bhanu Pratap said, "Nai Disha Employment Centre? Ratan Singh runs it, doesn't he?"

"Yes," Naina answered. "I work in that very office."

"I see. Ratan Babu is a well-known man in town. If she went through his organisation, the particulars should be obtainable."

"Being well known does not make the address appear automatically," Naina said. "The office itself could not provide written particulars today. Here is the acknowledgement of our application."

Bhanu Pratap's gaze moved to the sheet in Naina's hand. This time he read it closely. "It's good that you have an acknowledgement. Your statement has been recorded in writing."

He told the constable to telephone the organisation and request updated details of the training. A little later he was shown a written notice sent over the phone. It stated that all members of group 17-B were safe within the prescribed training arrangements and that work was proceeding under the manager's supervision. The notice did not give the responsible person's full name or the young women's present address. Bhanu Pratap asked, "According to this, everything is fine. Your account differs." Naina replied, "The paper says everything is fine, but Poonam herself said she wasn't allowed out. That discrepancy needs investigating. A message from the office cannot substitute for speaking to her directly." Bhanu Pratap instructed that both the notice and the family's statement be kept with the application.

For a little while the room was silent. Outside, a jeep engine started. Bhanu Pratap called the constable and told him to attach copies of Poonam's photograph and phone number to the papers. The constable began preparing an acknowledgement for the application.

"Has the application been registered?" Ramlal asked.

"It is being entered in the incoming register," Bhanu Pratap replied. "The necessary legal action will be determined after preliminary inquiry."

"What if they are being held captive?" Naina asked.

"Then it's a serious matter. We'll try to coordinate the information with the police station concerned in Sonapur. But you must also give us every number you have."

Naina supplied the numbers for the three families, the changed name of the training centre and Neela Devi's mobile number. Bhanu Pratap glanced at the constable and said, "Keep this application separately." The constable silently placed it in a file.

As they came out, Ramlal asked, "Child, he said to keep it separately. Is that good or bad?"

"I can't know what anyone is thinking," Naina said. "Now we must see what action is taken on the information."

On the veranda, a woman sat with a small child in her lap. Her husband had come to the police station earlier. She moved to make room for Ramlal. "Is your daughter missing?" she asked softly. Ramlal nodded. The woman said, "Make sure you take a copy of the application. The first time I came, they sent me away without one." There was no sermon in her words, only experience.

Half an hour later they received the copy. It bore the time of receipt and an entry number. But when Ramlal asked who would be the officer conducting the preliminary inquiry, the man at the desk said, "Sir will tell you." Naina entered that unanswered question in her notebook. Having the paper was necessary, but it had not yet revealed where Poonam was.

Outside they met Abhay. He had a small notebook in his hand, but put it into his pocket as soon as he saw Naina. "Did they accept the application?"

"Yes. We have an acknowledgement. But it's still unclear what action will be taken immediately."

Abhay greeted Ramlal respectfully. "You know I'm a journalist. But I won't publish Poonam's name or photograph without your permission. For now, the family's peace of mind and her safety come first."

Ramlal's eyes filled with tears. "Babu, tell people the truth. But don't let my daughter be disgraced."

"I'm not talking about publishing her name at this stage," Abhay said. "First we'll compare the information we have. We need evidence before calling anyone guilty."

He examined Naina's application to the office, but asked permission before photographing it with his phone. Naina looked at Ramlal, who agreed. Abhay noted the numbers and times. "I'll check under what name the organisation is registered, and what training location is

specified in writing," he said. "Where official assistance is required, it is important that the family make its own formal report."

Naina asked, "I've seen you at this station many times. What sort of man is Bhanu Pratap?"

"You can't judge what someone will do merely from his manner," Abhay replied. "He has acted promptly on some complaints; on others there have been delays. What matters in this case is written evidence of progress. Relying on personal acquaintance to trust or accuse someone can lead to mistakes in either direction."

Ramlal had to be accompanied as far as the bus station. Naina walked with him. On the way they met a group of young people preparing for competitive examinations. They carried papers demanding that a cancelled examination be held again. One young man was saying, "After two years of work, are we to fill in applications all over again? Where will the money come from at home?" Naina thought of Chandan's face. How many people committed their families' resources to the search for employment; Poonam too had set out with such hopes.

Before reaching home, Ramlal's phone rang. It was Reena. "Babuji, someone called from an unknown number. He said Poonam is in training and we should stop calling so much."

"Did he give his name?"

"No. I asked, and he cut the call."

Ramlal stood still amid the traffic. "Did you note the number?"

"Yes. I'm sending it to you."

Naina copied the number Reena sent into her notebook. It was not the number previously given for Neela Devi. She also informed Abhay immediately, but did not attach an accusation to the number merely because its source was uncertain.

As the afternoon wore on, an employee from the police station called. "We've asked for photographs of all three young women in your application. The copies aren't clear. Send electronic versions of the original photographs."

"Have you spoken to the Sonapur police station?" Naina asked.

"The information is being prepared. Send the photographs."

She sent them. The answer was brief, but for the first time the police station itself had called. Naina told Ramlal. Lalita Devi said, "Will they search for her? Why can't the girls who went together come home?"

Naina could give her no clear answer. "We're trying to get the search started," was all she said.

That evening there was a meeting at Abhay's newspaper office. He told Naina over the phone that he had found the employment organisation's name in the town's public register, but no clear particulars of the training location. "I'll ask the office for a written reply," he said. "In the course of your work, retain information only about what you can lawfully see. Don't open any confidential file without authorisation."

"I understand," Naina said. "My friend is missing, but doing something wrong for that reason would only damage the search."

After returning from the police station, Ramlal placed the copy of his application between the pages of an old book. Reena asked, "Will keeping that paper inside an old book bring Didi back?" Ramlal said, "Not through the paper alone. But it will give us a record of what was said during the search."

That night Saraswati Devi asked Naina, "What did they say at the police station?"

"They accepted the application. They asked for evidence. But we still haven't got the full address," Naina replied.

Her mother set the lid on a pot of rice she had lifted from the stove. "You have crossed the threshold; that was the first thing to do. Now keep asking those who have accepted responsibility what they are doing."

Naina wrote the police-station entry number in her notebook. Beneath it she listed two tasks for the next day: ask Kiran for the written particulars of the training; and, in the lawful course of her work, compare Poonam's appointment letter with the office register. Night was falling outside. Poonam's name still glowed unanswered on her mobile screen. On paper, however, her name, photograph and the time of her plea for help were clearly recorded. The search had only just begun; its end was still far away.

Chapter 15: Changed Names

The next day, when Naina reached the office, she found two new files on her desk. Kusum was already seated, her tea growing cold before her. As soon as she saw Naina, she said, "You were on leave yesterday, so the training groups have yet to be reconciled. Kiran Madam wants the list by eleven."

"I suppose you know that Poonam's family came to the office yesterday," Naina said.

"I know. Kiran Madam was on the telephone with someone for a long time. But she didn't tell me anything."

"Does this file include Poonam's group?"

Kusum turned the pages of a thick register. "Group Seventeen-B. We have to match this week's training attendance with the placement details. You've been given the list, so there's nothing to prevent you from examining it. But note down any discrepancy you find and give it to Madam."

Naina sat down. In the reception area outside, three young men were filling in forms. A young woman had come with her father; they were asking when the appointment would be made. The ordinary work of the office went on as before. The fear gripping the families of the three young women had not reached every room of the building.

The first file was the registration register. It recorded each applicant's name, date of birth, home address, amount deposited and receipt number. Poonam Yadav's name was clearly entered there. The deposit was twelve thousand rupees; the registration fee, three hundred and fifty. Ramlal Yadav's and Naina Mishra's numbers appeared as emergency contacts. Naina compared the entry with Poonam's receipt. Both the amount and the receipt number matched exactly.

The second file contained the printed list of trainees. On the page for Seventeen-B, the name entered against the same receipt number was "Poonam Devi." Her address was given merely as "Navgarh," and the space for her father's name was blank. Beside the date of departure, the training centre was printed as "Bhairavpur Unit" instead of "Sonapur." At first Naina thought it might be an ordinary clerical mistake. At employment agencies, she had seen the same person's name written in

different ways, with "Kumari," "Devi," or a surname. But if the place of appointment had changed along with the name, the matter called for an explanation.

"Where is this Bhairavpur Unit?" she asked Kusum.

Kusum looked up. "I haven't heard that name before. Ask Kiran Madam. Sometimes temporary centres change their names."

"If they do, why aren't the families informed in writing?"

Kusum put down her pen. "Your question is fair. But I type the lists; I don't decide where people are sent. I'm telling you what I know."

Naina fell silent. Kusum's position was hardly comfortable either. A woman working in the hope of a salary of seven thousand rupees was being asked to answer for every wrong decision, while those who made the decisions sat in separate rooms.

The third file contained payment particulars. It recorded the salary the trainees might receive after completing their training. Against Poonam's receipt number stood "P. Yadav," with a monthly amount of "eight thousand five hundred." Naina remembered Poonam's original advertisement: "Up to fifteen thousand." It had said *up to*, not *guaranteed*. That difference was not, in itself, proof of deception. But had Poonam been told plainly before training how much she might actually earn? When she had asked, Kiran had said the salary would vary with experience. Now this entry of eight thousand five hundred rupees was something Poonam's family had probably never been shown.

One receipt number and three versions of a name; two training locations; three different levels of discussion about wages. Naina entered each detail separately on her reconciliation sheet. She neither folded nor altered any original record. The printed register pages had been given to her for the office's routine reconciliation, and recording discrepancies was part of that work.

Naresh Mandal came out of his room carrying a small stack of ledgers. Naina greeted him respectfully and asked, "Naresh-ji, if the same receipt number appears on different lists, how do you reconcile the entries?"

Naresh stopped. "The receipt number shouldn't change. There might be an error in the spelling of a name, but the amount and the basis of payment ought to agree. Which group?"

"Seventeen-B."

Nothing particular showed on Naresh's face. "The accounts for that group haven't been finally closed. Some payments are entered only after the training centre confirms them."

"The location is different too."

"Then you need to see the written order changing the location," Naresh said. "I can check the accounts, but the instruction to move a centre doesn't come from me."

"Do you have a copy of the order?"

"No. It should be in the records section. Put the question on your reconciliation sheet. Once the officer answers, the accounts can be matched."

Naina wrote, "Written order for change of location to be provided." Naresh went on his way. At that moment he seemed an ordinary accountant, a man who spent his life among figures, receipts and payments. Naina did not know what else he might know in his own room. Asking questions was more sensible than indulging in unsupported conjecture.

At ten fifty, Kiran came out of her room, mobile phone in hand. "Have you finished the reconciliation?"

"There are a few questions," Naina replied.

Kiran took the list and read it. "Poonam Devi and Poonam Yadav? Names appear in different forms all the time. Why pay so much attention to that?"

"It isn't only the name. The training location has changed from Sonapur to Bhairavpur. There's a different amount on the payment list. Her family is asking for the complete address."

Irritation entered Kiran's eyes. "You're bringing up the same subject again. I told you yesterday that we had asked the person in charge for the details."

"Has there been an answer?"

"Not yet. Your job is reconciliation, not investigation."

Keeping her voice steady, Naina said, "I am reconciling the records. That's why I'm recording the differences. Resolving them is part of the work too."

Kiran looked at her for a moment. "Very well. Prepare a written note. But don't take office papers outside."

"I don't take original papers out of the office," Naina said. "Poonam's family has its own documents. I want a written answer about the discrepancies in the office records."

Kiran gathered the pages and returned to her room. Kusum said quietly, "Keep everything you write with a date. Tomorrow someone may say the question was never raised."

"Can you see these differences too?" Naina asked.

"I didn't type those pages. But even a blind person can see that the name has changed. Writing a name wrongly is one thing; entering an entirely different location is another."

Around noon the office telephone rang. Kusum answered it. Someone at the other end was asking about Poonam Yadav's batch. Kusum said, "Please speak to the responsible officer." After hanging up, she told Naina, "An unfamiliar man. He wanted to know whether the list for Seventeen-B was ready."

"Did he give his name?"

"No. He said he would call later."

Naina did not attach too much significance to the call. Contractors, employees and applicants telephoned the agency for all sorts of reasons. Even so, anyone who wanted a list ought to say who he was and what connection he had with the work. She advised Kusum to ask for a clear name and contact number if he called again.

Meanwhile a young woman in reception was asking for an acknowledgement of her application. Her name was Uma Karn. Six months earlier she had secured a temporary job at a small industrial unit, but the work had stopped after three months. Now she wanted to apply again. Kusum looked up her previous entry.

"Was your earlier appointment properly made?" Kusum asked.

"Yes. I was paid too," Uma said. "But I received written notice of the work ending rather late. I've come to find out how to apply for another position."

As Uma examined her details, she noticed that the telephone number beside her name was wrong. "The last two digits of this number are reversed," she said. Kusum handed her a correction form. Uma filled it in and signed it. Within half an hour she received an acknowledgement of the correction as well. She left looking pleased.

Naina watched this ordinary episode carefully. Correcting a wrong telephone number was not impossible; if the officer responded, a record could be put right. For that reason it would be wrong to regard every mistake in Poonam's case as a crime. But Uma was present in person and could have her name and number corrected. Poonam was nowhere to be seen, and her family was not even being told where she was. Naina understood the difference between the two situations perfectly well.

Before leaving, Uma asked Naina, "Are you new to this job?"

"Yes. It's only been a few months."

"When I came before, you weren't here. Employees keep changing, so I have to explain everything again. If you're still here, I'll come to you with questions about my new application."

"I'll give you whatever information the office rules permit me to give," Naina replied.

Uma left. Naina thought that an employment agency was not merely a heap of papers. Some people genuinely found work through it; some returned disappointed; others abandoned the money they had deposited. Such mixed experiences both sustained confidence in an institution and made its failings harder to uncover.

Turning a page of an old register, Kusum said, "You saw that Uma's number was corrected. The name in Seventeen-B could be corrected too. Only, whoever changed it will have to explain the change in writing."

"And what if there is no order changing the location?" Naina asked.

"Then the question becomes much more serious," Kusum replied. "I won't cross it out on my own and call it an ordinary clerical error."

Naina took note of her words. It was no small thing for Kusum to speak so plainly when she was compelled to hold on to her job. Both women returned to their tasks. Kusum began assigning numbers to new applications. Naina wrote "reconciled" beside the entries on the old lists that were clear, and set aside those for which no answer had been given. Maintaining that small distinction mattered to her.

A little before midday, Kiran summoned Naresh to her room. The door was half closed. Naina could not hear what passed between them. After a short while Naresh came out holding two sheets of paper. He sat down, checked the date on the first page, then opened an old office ledger. Whether the expression on his face was worry or the ordinary fatigue of work, Naina could not tell. When he approached her desk, he

spoke only about the rules; she too refrained from asking him about unverified suspicions.

The sun had climbed high outside. Across the street, a tea seller was washing glasses. An old man was reading a leaflet promising "guaranteed placement" to unemployed young people. Naina dwelt on the word *guaranteed*. If a job had truly been guaranteed, Poonam would not have needed to pawn the silver ornaments from her home. Yet for a poor family, learning the difference between a possibility and a promise was often the most expensive lesson of all.

At lunchtime Naina and Kusum sat in a small courtyard behind the office. Kusum had brought rice and fried vegetables in her lunchbox. Naina opened the rotis her mother had packed. Kusum asked, "Who is Poonam to you?"

"She's been my friend since school."

"That's why you're so worried."

"Even if she were a stranger, a young woman asking for help would be a serious matter," Naina replied. "But ever since I heard Poonam's voice, every passing hour has felt heavy."

Kusum was silent. After a while she said, "I work here. I don't want anyone harmed because of a mistake by this office. But right now this is the only regular income my family has."

"I understand your circumstances," Naina said. "Telling the truth and making a baseless accusation are two different things. I want to do the first, not the second."

By four in the afternoon no written answer had come from Kiran. Naina prepared two copies of her reconciliation report. She submitted one to the officer; the other was recorded as received in the office's current register. The original registers were returned to the same cupboard from which they had been taken that morning. In her personal notebook Naina noted only the document numbers identifying the office pages on which she had raised her questions. She did not carry away the applicants' confidential details.

She then called the number the family had provided for contact. Ramlal answered. "Kaka, the agency still hasn't given us the full address. I've submitted my questions in writing. Keep the entry number of the application we lodged at the police station safe."

"Any word of Poonam?"

"No. The moment I hear anything, you'll be the first to know."

"I'll go to the police station again tomorrow," Ramlal said. "Reena sits beside the telephone all night. She says that when Didi calls, someone at home must answer immediately."

For a moment Naina had no words. She managed only, "Keep your phone switched on. I'm keeping mine on too."

As the office was closing, Naresh came to Naina's desk again. In a low voice he asked, "Did you submit the reconciliation report for Seventeen-B?"

"Yes. I've recorded the differences in the name, location and salary."

Lowering his eyes, Naresh said, "Until there's a written explanation for those differences, the payment against that entry cannot be treated as correct. The rule is the same for everyone."

"Will you check it yourself?"

"I'll examine the part of the accounts that falls to me," Naresh replied. "The rest is for the officer to decide."

He walked away. Naina could not rid herself of the entries she had seen. On one page Poonam Yadav, on another Poonam Devi, on a third P. Yadav. It was possible that all three were incomplete descriptions of the same young woman. But if an agency could not record an applicant's name, whereabouts and wages correctly, how could it trace her when she disappeared? There was no answer to that question in the papers yet.

Naina met Abhay that evening. She told him only that an official written response had been requested and that the records disagreed about the location. She showed him neither an original office page nor any private list of applicants. Abhay said, "That's right. If a written response comes, the family can ask for a copy. For now I won't add any new allegation to my report."

At the bus stand Naina saw a fresh employment advertisement pasted to a wall. Underneath it were the words "Limited places, register immediately." Two young men nearby were debating whether to pay the training fee. Naina continued looking at the notice. Its colours were new, but the questions were old: Where was the work? Under whose authority? At what wage? And on what paper was the assurance given in writing? Poonam had set off on her journey without clear answers to any of them.

From her bag Naina took an old note written by Poonam. At school the two friends used to write out practice questions for each other before examinations. Poonam had written her full name in clear letters on this note. Naina put it away again. What mattered now was not merely knowing Poonam's correct name, but knowing precisely where she was and whether she was safe.

At home Naina opened her notebook. On the first page she had recorded the time of Poonam's last call; on the second, the police-station entry number; on the third, the reference for the reconciliation report submitted at the office. She drew no conclusion yet. She added only one sentence: "Next task: do not merely wait for a written answer; keep asking for one." She laid her mobile beside her pillow. Poonam's number still would not ring, but Naina had come to understand that the path of the search now led through these altered entries for names and addresses as well.

Chapter 16: False Papers

When Naina reached the office the following day, there was an unusual bustle near the main door. Alongside the customary pile of applications on the reception desk lay three white envelopes. Kusum was reading the name written on one of them. An elderly woman standing outside, a cloth bag in her hand, kept asking, "Babu, will I get an answer today about the paper I submitted the day before yesterday?" Beside her was a young man of about twenty, holding his mother by the arm and keeping her a little apart from the crowd.

Naina put her bag under the desk. Kusum beckoned her aside with a glance. "The officer's reply about Seventeen-B has arrived. But the list in this envelope doesn't agree with yesterday's register."

"Has Kiran Madam seen it?"

"Yes. It has to go to her. Earlier she said to type the list exactly as it was. But because of your reconciliation report, I'm looking at it again."

Before taking the envelope, Naina asked, "Is this to be added to my daily reconciliation file?"

"Yes. It has been entered in the inward register. If the list inside is correct, the payment records will be amended."

Inside the envelope was a printed copy of a certificate of completion of training. At the top was the name "Bhairavpur Skills Unit"; beneath it, the list of candidates in Seventeen-B. Poonam's name had changed again. This time it read "Poonam Kumari." Her father's name, Ramlal, was correct, but the month in her date of birth was different. Against the same entry stood a date for completion of training—one day before Poonam had left Navgarh.

Naina read the sheet again. At first she thought the digits might have been transposed during printing. But the significance of the certificate went beyond a date. If the training was shown as completed before Poonam had even left, then whoever had prepared the document had either not examined the actual sequence of events or had recorded it incorrectly despite knowing it. Which explanation was true was difficult to say at present.

"Kusum, have you checked the date of travel in the register?" Naina asked.

Kusum opened the register. "Look here. The day on the bus ticket. Your friend's father has the original ticket. The date on this certificate is different."

"Has anyone in this group actually completed the training?"

"I don't know that much. A call came from Sonapur asking for the list. The copy of the certificate arrived today."

Naina opened a reconciliation sheet on her desk and wrote, "Discrepancy between date of completion of training and date of travel." Below it she added the three forms of the name and the two recorded locations. She did not put a question mark against every line; where there was a document to compare, she wrote "Reconciliation required." She understood that the clearer the written language, the less room others would have to interpret it for their own convenience.

Meanwhile the elderly woman from reception came inside. Her name was Kamla Devi. She was demanding the return of the training deposit paid for her son Mohan. Fifteen days earlier Mohan had been told that his appointment was certain; he had deposited fifteen hundred rupees for paperwork. Now someone was telling him over the telephone that the position had been filled.

"I work as a labourer in the fields," Kamla Devi said. "Do you know how many days it takes me to earn fifteen hundred rupees? If there's no job, give the money back."

Naina examined the receipt. It bore the name of the institution, but the signature did not match the prescribed receipt records of the office. "From which desk did you receive this?" she asked.

Mohan said, "A man was sitting downstairs in the veranda. He said he'd put my name down for training. Afterwards I was supposed to go upstairs."

"His name?"

"Awadhesh Sah. He gave me a number too."

"Awadhesh isn't a regular employee here," Kusum said softly. "Sometimes he brings applicants."

Naina told Kamla Devi, "I can have your papers entered in the inward register. But I have no authority to return money myself. Submit a written complaint and take an acknowledgement. Include the name of the person you paid and the date."

Kamla Devi took a folded sheet from her bag. Mohan began writing on it. Naina saw his hand tremble. It was more than the embarrassment of an unemployed young man; it was his helplessness at being unable to recover money earned by his mother's hard labour.

A bell rang from Kiran's room. Kusum went in carrying the page containing the written response. A little later Kiran came out herself. Her sari was arranged with particular care, though her eyes bore the signs of a sleepless night. She stopped before Naina's desk. "Have you found another mistake in this training certificate?"

"It shows the training as completed before the journey. The date needs correcting. And the full address of the location is still missing."

"An old template must have remained in the computer. These things happen in offices."

"Then ask them for a corrected certificate. Poonam's family is asking where she is."

Kiran folded the paper in her hand. "Listen, Naina, you're an employee. I've told you before that you must understand the limits of your work. I understand the family's anxiety too. But if you stop the work of an entire office over every mistake, who will arrange appointments for everyone else?"

"I'm not stopping anyone's work," Naina said. "The document that's supposed to confirm payment has an incorrect date. The accounts department will ask for confirmation too."

"Naresh-ji will look into the accounts. Leave it to him."

"Naresh-ji said plainly yesterday that he wouldn't treat a payment as correct without a written explanation."

For the first time, Kiran's expression hardened. "I'll hear whatever he has to say. You've submitted your questions in writing. Now wait for the answers."

Naina knew that Kiran spoke with the authority of her position. She did not prolong the argument. She asked only, "When will Poonam's family be given the full address of the training centre?"

"We're still in contact with the person in charge."

"If you put a date on that response, I'll be able to explain to the family where the matter stands."

Kiran gave no direct answer. "I'll speak to Ratan Babu," she said, and went back inside.

After the door of Kiran's room closed, the office peon, Hari Narayan Das, placed a thick file before Naina. "Madam says copies of Seventeen-B's attendance sheets must be prepared today. The master copy will remain in the office," he said. Naina opened the file. On one page, attendance for seven days of training had been printed. Against each day were the names and empty boxes for signatures. The last page carried a printed instruction that the group's attendance was to be certified and sent to the head office.

"Who will certify the attendance?" Naina asked.

"How would I know? I was told to bring the papers to your desk," Hari Narayan replied.

Naina examined the first page. Poonam's name appeared as "Poonam Kumari" there too, but against two dates the word "present" had been printed in small type. On those two days Poonam had been on her way to Sonapur. Naina clearly remembered the day of her bus journey and the time of her last telephone call. She was in no position to add another indication of attendance without written verification.

Kusum came closer. "These printed sheets were prepared without anyone's signature. Even the trainer's name is missing."

"Then how can the head office certify them without the centre's original attendance register?" Naina said.

Brushing his hands together, Hari Narayan said, "Ask the officers. I was only told to deliver the papers." He went away.

Naina wrote a separate note: "Certified attendance register from the centre not available. Attendance for the period specified below has not been verified by the head office." She put her initials and the date beneath it. She did not strike out the printed entries. Whether what was written constituted proof was not something she intended to decide by herself.

"Will Kiran Madam like this note?" Kusum asked.

"It isn't a question of liking it. I have no way of knowing whether Poonam was present in Bhairavpur on a day when I was sitting here in the Navgarh office."

After that, both women were silent for a while. A bell sounded on the street outside. A new applicant was asking whether a job paying eight thousand five hundred rupees a month also provided food and accommodation. Kusum advised him to ask for the terms in writing.

"But the advertisement says accommodation is provided," the young man protested. Kusum explained that a promise in an advertisement was not the same as one in an appointment letter; he needed to see in writing whether any charges would be deducted.

Naina listened. Poonam's papers had promised earnings of up to fifteen thousand rupees; the accounts showed an entry for eight thousand five hundred; and now a date for completion of training had been recorded in advance. She thought: when a young woman leaves home to work, she needs not only wages but also a safe place and reliable information. If even one of those three things is uncertain, how can her family be at peace?

At midday Naresh Mandal came out of a room at the rear of the office carrying an accounts ledger. Naina asked permission to show him her reconciliation report. Naresh read the date on the certificate, then searched for an entry in his ledger. "This payment is described as having been made after training began," he said quietly. "If the completion certificate was prepared earlier, there's an inconsistency. But I don't know how it happened."

"Whose signature is on this document?"

"The name of the person in charge of the Bhairavpur Unit is printed on it. I've never met him. A printed name by itself doesn't authenticate a signature."

"Does that mean the certificate is false?" Naina asked.

Naresh looked directly at her. "There is a distance between a discrepancy and a lie, and investigation must bridge it. We need to know why the date is wrong. If someone deliberately prepared a false document, that is a very serious matter. For now I'll raise the question in the accounts."

Naina listened carefully. When fear has taken hold of the mind, every suspicious circumstance can seem complete proof of a crime. But that is not how an investigation proceeds. She thanked Naresh.

Just then Kusum arrived with another sheet of paper. "The number on Mohan's receipt—the one you were helping him with—doesn't appear in our records. Nor is Awadhesh's name in the employees' register."

Naresh said, "That is a separate complaint. If the institution refuses responsibility for a receipt issued in its name, the applicant must be

informed in writing. Check whether the receipt is genuine or forged before saying which it is."

Naina was startled. In a single day two kinds of questionable paper had come before her: one in an official institutional file, the other in the hands of a poor mother. There was no direct proof that the two were connected. Yet both were causing tangible harm. No one could tell Poonam's family where she was; Mohan could not recover the money he had deposited.

At lunchtime Kusum said, "You've asked a great many questions today. What if it affects your job?"

"I'm frightened, of course," Naina admitted. "There's my mother's medicine, Chandan's debt and the everyday household expenses. The first salary didn't put everything right. But whenever I visit Poonam's family and see Kaka's eyes, I can't suppress the questions."

"My family isn't well off either," Kusum said, closing her lunchbox. "So I'll say only what the register clearly shows. I won't sign anything false."

"That alone is a very great thing," Naina said.

Before evening Kamla Devi returned. Seeing the stamped acknowledgement gave her a little relief, but she asked, "Daughter, will this paper get us our money back?"

Naina offered no false reassurance. "I can't say yet. But your complaint has been registered. If no answer comes, you have the right to show this acknowledgement to the appropriate authority."

Kamla Devi looked at Mohan. "See? Papers keep coming and going. Work never comes into our hands. Your father is ill. The household money is gone." Mohan kept his eyes down. As he left, he folded his hands to Naina. There was a trace of shame about his circumstances in the gratitude of his voice.

One column in the office's inward register remained empty beside the complaint: "Officer responsible for response." Naina asked Kusum to which officer Kamla Devi's application had been sent. Showing her the acknowledgement number, Kusum said the file had gone to Kiran's office. Naina kept the matter separate from her reconciliation report. It would be unreasonable to force the two complaints into a single incident. Kamla Devi's case concerned the return of money and verification of identity; Poonam's concerned the safety of a missing

young woman. The urgency of the questions was different, but in both cases the responsible officer's name needed to be recorded in writing.

In the evening Abhay met Naina outside the office. She told him that the date of completion of training differed from the date of travel, and that the agency had issued no written correction. She did not give him a confidential copy of the certificate. Abhay asked, "May I see the copy of the travel document Poonam's father has? He has already given his permission."

"Of course. I'll call him tomorrow. There's another matter too. A receipt bears the institution's name, but the man said to have issued it doesn't appear in the employees' register."

"I'll speak to the different parties about that separately," Abhay said. "I won't accuse anyone outright in a news report without hearing from the person holding the receipt, the institution and the man who was named."

"Are you going to write a report?"

"I'll write about complaints of recruitment fraud. We still have to be careful about Poonam's disappearance. No headline matters more than the safety of the person harmed."

When Naina got home, Chandan was sitting in the courtyard with an accounts book open before him. Beside it lay two plain sheets recording outstanding wages. Seeing his sister, he asked, "Any news of Poonam Didi?"

"No. The agency has sent a paper with an incorrect date. I've asked them to correct it."

After looking at her for a little while, Chandan said, "Vehicles get stopped because of incorrect papers too. Manoj Babu was furious that night. But the blame can be put afterwards on whoever happens to have the papers in his hands."

Naina looked at him closely. "Are your own transport papers in order?"

"Not all of them. I've made a separate note of the parts that aren't right."

"Be careful. Don't let your name become involved in work you don't even understand, merely for a little money in wages."

Chandan gave no answer. Naina did not know the reason for his silence. She opened her notebook and recorded three events of the day:

the wrong date on the Bhairavpur certificate, Kamla Devi's questionable receipt, and the lack of a written reply from Kiran. Then she dialled Poonam's number. The telephone was still switched off.

One look at Naina's face told Saraswati Devi that something difficult had happened at the office. "Your own job isn't in danger, is it?" she asked. "Not yet," Naina replied. "I've asked questions." Her mother said, "Ask questions that seek the truth, but keep the accounts and copies of documents where they belong. A poor person's hope often rests upon those very things."

At night Saraswati Devi called, "How long will you go on looking at those papers? Your food has gone cold." Naina shut her notebook and rose. The papers were put away in her bag, but the questions remained within her. If an institution could not account for the names and dates it had itself recorded, on what grounds could families trust it? The answer now had to come not from someone's personal explanation, but from an investigation conducted according to law.

Chapter 17: Abhay's Report

Three files of different colours lay on Abhay Paswan's desk. The first contained notices about competitive examinations and departmental letters concerning a cancelled examination; the second, receipts for money deposited in the name of recruitment; the third, details of wages owed to workers. The office fan was turning, but the corners of the papers beneath it kept lifting. Abhay took a heavy stone off an old newspaper and set it on the sheets. Only yesterday his editor had told him, "Don't write merely about people's anger. Write what can be verified."

Savita Kumari had telephoned that morning. "There's a meeting of applicants outside the library today. We've decided to submit a memorandum. Can you come?" Abhay had asked who was organising the meeting and whether a copy of the official order cancelling the examination was available. Savita had given him the details. He had then set off with his camera, notebook and pen.

Forty or fifty young men and women sat in the library veranda. Some held books on Hindi grammar, others on general science. Chandan Mishra was among them. Seeing him, Savita said, "A photograph of the question paper was circulated, and there was an inquiry into that. But the department's decision to cancel the examination is now official. We want to know the new date and what's happening with the inquiry."

Abhay read the departmental letter. It stated that the examination had been cancelled, but said nothing about where the question paper had actually escaped from, who had sold it for money, or how many candidates had bought it. Abhay noted the distinction. Savita said, "We don't want anyone called guilty on the strength of a rumour. But who will account for the year lost by someone who sold his land to prepare for the examination?"

A young man seated at the back rose. "My father died. I've put off my sister's marriage while I study. If the examination is held again, will we have to pay the fee again? Will the person who made the mistake pay, or will I?" Another young woman asked whether he intended to give up preparing. "If I stop, where will the family's income come from?" he replied. "If I don't stop, how will the family manage?"

Abhay wrote down their words. He was not listening merely in search of a moving headline. Behind each question lay a household reckoning. When Savita read the draft memorandum, its first demand was an impartial inquiry; the second, an announced date for the fresh examination; the third, a clear policy on the candidates' additional expenses. They decided to send representatives to the relevant district office.

Chandan was standing a little apart. Abhay asked him, "What do things look like at home?"

"Didi has started working. I've spent a year and a half preparing for the examination. Now I work in a warehouse," Chandan replied. "The earnings there aren't very dependable. That's why I can't put my books away either."

"How did you hear about the examination paper being leaked?"

"A photograph came on my mobile. I couldn't verify it. Later the department cancelled the examination. Those aren't the same thing," Chandan answered.

Abhay was pleased that Chandan understood the difference between conjecture and fact. But the exhaustion in his body and his worn, crumbling shoes made the pressure of work plain. "What are the hours at the warehouse?"

"As long as there's goods to handle. Sometimes during the day, sometimes in the evening. There's no permanent appointment yet."

Abhay closed his notebook. Before using Chandan's name in the report, he asked permission. Chandan said Abhay could write about his experience of unemployment, but the name of the warehouse owner should not be brought into this account; he was not making a personal complaint at present. Abhay agreed. To him, deciding whether to name a person in a news story also meant considering responsibility for that person's safety.

Leaving the library, Abhay went to a building in the market where several people had gathered to lodge complaints against the employment agency. In a plain room, Mohan stood holding his mother Kamla Devi's receipt. Naina had told Abhay by telephone the previous day that a written complaint had been submitted. Abhay introduced himself to Kamla Devi and asked whether she would permit him to publish her account.

"You may use my name," Kamla Devi said. "I don't mind. But will they ever catch the man who took the money? I'm ready to give evidence."

"Tell me what you saw yourself," Abhay said courteously.

"The man sitting in the veranda said Mohan's name would be entered for training. He took fifteen hundred rupees and gave us this paper. Now he won't answer his telephone. The employees upstairs say he isn't a regular employee."

"Does the receipt carry the company's stamp?"

"It does. But how am I supposed to know whether the stamp is genuine?"

With Kamla Devi's permission, Abhay photographed the receipt. The name and amount were clearly visible. Near a corner of the shop he spoke to Mohan separately. "Did you see a written offer of work?" Mohan shook his head. "They only said to deposit the money and an opportunity would come immediately."

Abhay recorded the receipt number on his mobile, but had no intention of printing anyone's personal telephone number in the news. The substance of the complaint could be reported; it was not yet for him to decide whether the receipt was forged.

At noon he reached Nai Disha Employment Centre. Kusum saw him in reception. "You're a journalist, aren't you?" she asked.

"Yes. I'd like the institution's official response. I've received some complaints about recruitment fees and training receipts."

Kusum pushed the inward register towards him. "Write down your name and purpose. You can speak to the officer if she's available."

Naina watched all this from her desk. Abhay merely greeted her. They both understood the need to keep office business separate from their personal acquaintance. A message came from Kiran's room that the journalist could submit a written questionnaire. Abhay handed over five questions he had prepared: the approved rules for charging applicants fees; the connection, if any, between the agency and outside intermediaries; refunds when placement failed; verified addresses of training centres; and the procedure for resolving complaints.

Reading the page, Kiran said, "Our institution has provided training and employment opportunities to many unemployed people. If someone

outside the institution made an improper promise, the institution cannot automatically be held responsible."

"I'm recording your position," Abhay said. "But the institution's name is printed on the receipt. If the receipt is unauthorised, why is there no procedure for the institution to make that clear in writing?"

"An inquiry is under way."

"How many days will it take to provide an answer?"

"I can't specify a time at present."

Abhay asked another question. "Poonam Yadav's family and the families of other trainees are asking where their daughters are and whether they're safe. Has the institution given them verified addresses?"

Kiran's expression changed a little. "We're speaking to the relevant officer about that. Information concerning their safety will be provided to the police."

"When will it be given to the police?"

"I can't provide the details at this time."

Abhay wrote down the reply just as it had been given. He still needed the family's express permission before deciding whether to print Poonam's name. The principal aim in her case was to find the missing young woman safe, not to draw attention through publicity.

Ratan Singh was not in the office. Abhay left a request to speak to him on his official number. An hour later Ratan called. His voice was controlled and courteous. "Abhay-ji, you know the service I've given the young people of this town. If there are complaints, we'll have them investigated. But don't malign the institution without evidence."

"I haven't called anyone a criminal," Abhay replied. "I'm asking questions on the basis of written complaints. Will you give a written response on the fee rules and the role of intermediaries?"

"Kiran will look into it. Include my side of the matter in your report."

"Certainly. If a detailed response reaches me by this evening, I'll include that too."

Ratan ended the call. His courteous tone remained in Abhay's ears, but courtesy alone could not settle the questions of fact.

After leaving the office, Abhay went to the town's labour-assistance centre. A list of registered service organisations hung on a noticeboard.

Some names had been written in fading paint; slips recording corrections were pasted over others. A clerk explained that registration alone did not authenticate every promise of employment. "An organisation may be registered to provide ordinary training," he said, "but that doesn't mean it has been authorised to provide government jobs."

"If an applicant deposits a fee and gets no appointment, where should the complaint be made?" Abhay asked.

The clerk explained two different procedures: one for disputes over written conditions of service, the other for allegations of deliberate deception. "First keep copies of the receipt, the advertisement and whatever promises were made in writing. The appropriate officer will examine the facts," he said. Abhay did not present either procedure as a guarantee of success. The notice on the wall also made clear that the resolution of each dispute depended on reasoning and evidence.

Outside, a young woman named Hasina Khatoon stopped him. "Are you a journalist? I got a placement through the employment centre too. My experience was good. But my friend's deposit is stuck. Will you write about both?"

Abhay introduced himself. Hasina said she had obtained a temporary job for three months at a sewing unit. She had been paid on time, but found no new work after the contract ended. Her friend Jamila Khatoon, who had gone with her, fell ill before the first day of training and had been unable to recover her deposit. "I can't say the days I was given work were worthless. But Jamila is worn out asking for her money back," Hasina said.

Abhay asked permission to speak to Jamila herself. On the telephone Jamila said she had a receipt for the initial training deposit but had never received a clear letter explaining the refund conditions. "Your experiences are different," Abhay said. "I won't judge one of them on the basis of the other."

Hasina was reassured. "Just write that poor people need a chance to understand what a document means before signing it. I'm educated, yet there were many things I didn't understand."

After this meeting, Abhay made an important change to his first draft. He wrote not only about people whose money had been held up but also about someone who had genuinely obtained short-term employment. That made the question more precise: if some applicants

could receive a proper service, why was there no clear arrangement for answering the others about their deposits and contact details? It would be unfair to ignore differences in evidence and place everyone in one category.

When he returned to the newspaper office, the editor asked, "How much material is ready?"

"I have the government letter cancelling the examination, the candidates' memorandum, two written complaints about recruitment fees, and the institution's preliminary response. I've set out the limits of the evidence separately."

The editor turned over the papers. "Will you include Poonam's case in this report?"

"No. I won't publish her identity without the family's permission. Her case involves a question of safety. For now I'll write about collections made in the name of employment and the consequences of the cancelled examination."

"Good. The cancellation is confirmed, but we still don't know who leaked the paper. Keep that distinction in mind in the headline."

Abhay sat down to write. His opening paragraph reported the official cancellation of the examination. The second gave Savita's statement: students wanted a clear new date and an impartial inquiry. The third spoke of candidates struggling with fares, coaching fees and household debts. After that came a separate section on recruitment-fee receipts and written complaints. He preserved the sense of the institution's response as well: the inquiry was continuing, and the position regarding unauthorised promises by outsiders remained unresolved.

Just then the newspaper office telephone rang. Savita said the official who had received their memorandum had told them it would take time to announce a new examination date. "Please write that we haven't given up preparing," she requested. "I'll print that," Abhay said. "The candidates' movement isn't merely a protest. It's also about their hope of sitting the examination again."

While laying out the page, a colleague asked, "Shall we publish the candidates' photographs?" "The meeting was public," Abhay said, "but not without permission from anyone who wanted to keep their face out of sight. Savita has agreed to be named. I've written about Chandan's experience, but I won't name his employer in this report." His colleague agreed.

An advertisement had already been placed in a corner of the second page: "Employment opportunities after training." The editor read it and said, "This is an ordinary advertisement. It isn't a news report about this institution. Keep the advertisement and the news visually distinct so readers aren't confused." Abhay saw that a promise and an investigation could be printed on the same newspaper page. The responsibility of the news was to ensure that readers could tell them apart.

Once the report was scheduled for the next day's edition, the printing staff began checking the pages. Abhay reread the names and dates. One mistake, he knew, could create a fresh difficulty in an unemployed person's life. He compared the cancellation date with the departmental letter, the fee amounts with the receipts, and the institution's response with his notebook. Only then was the page released for printing. He received no additional payment for such care; it was simply part of his responsibility as a journalist.

By evening the first copy of the newspaper had come off the press. Its headline read: "Examination cancelled, costs rise for unemployed youth; response awaited on recruitment-fee complaints." There were no loud, sensational words. Even so, Abhay knew that many readers would recognise their own households in the story. He took a cup of tea onto the office veranda.

He telephoned Naina. "The report has been printed today. Your name isn't in it. Neither is Poonam's identity."

"What response has there been to the complaints about employment?" Naina asked.

"A few calls have already come in. But I'll check what people say before reporting it. Don't get into unnecessary arguments at the office. Keep the acknowledgement of your written questions safe."

"I understand," Naina said. "Poonam's family called again today. They want a true address, not a newspaper headline."

Abhay was quiet for a while. "That worries me too. Tomorrow I'll ask whichever responsible officer I can reach for a written account of where matters stand."

Leaving the printing office, Abhay saw the police outpost across the street. He remembered the entry number of Poonam's family's application. Publishing a report about a possible crime and searching for a missing person were different tasks; he understood their limits.

On his way home, near the bus stand he saw coaching students crossing the rain-wet road with their books. Pasted to the glass of a shop was a photograph of the notice cancelling the examination. Next to it was another sheet: "Guaranteed employment, limited opportunities." No one had drawn a line between the two, yet in an unemployed young person's life the passage from one piece of paper to the other had become perilously short.

Over dinner Abhay's mother asked, "You're late again. When you report accusations against people, take care of yourself."

"I've kept allegations separate from evidence, Ma," Abhay said. "But people who ask questions don't always please everyone."

His mother served him more dal. "Ask questions, but keep some faith in people too. Otherwise you'll grow weary of your own work."

Abhay smiled. Naina's words returned to him: Poonam's family wanted a true address. The news had been published, but that alone had not advanced the search for the young woman whose telephone was switched off by so much as an inch. Keeping that in mind, he wrote down the contact numbers of the relevant offices for the following day.

Chapter 18: Slander in the Village

The weekly market was held on Wednesdays in Poonam's village. From early morning, carts and bicycles crowded the unpaved road leading from the pond towards the marketplace. Ramlal Yadav stood at the doorway of his house, an old cotton towel in his hand. He had hardly been to the fields for three days. People passing by greeted him, asked for news of Poonam, or avoided his eyes and walked on. Such behaviour had once been familiar and ordinary; now Ramlal sensed an unspoken question in every gesture.

Lalita Devi sat in the courtyard sorting rice. Her hands kept moving, but her eyes repeatedly rose towards the door. Reena dialled her sister's mobile number once more. The answer was unchanged: the phone was switched off. She put it down and sat beside her mother. "People in the market are saying terrible things about Didi," she murmured.

"Who said so?" Lalita asked.

"On the way back from school, I heard two girls saying Poonam Didi had run away with someone. They said she was bringing disgrace on our village."

Lalita Devi laid aside the rice in her hand. "How can people talk about something they haven't seen? Your sister wanted to support this household through her own hard work. Everyone ought to know she called asking for help."

"I didn't quarrel with them," Reena said. "I came home."

"You did right. But if anyone asks again, tell them we've applied to the police to search for her. They mustn't make guesses without knowing the facts."

Ramlal heard the last part. He came inside. "I've lived in this village for forty years. Whenever someone was in trouble, I went and sat beside them. Will people now laugh at the suffering of my own daughter?" Anger was in his voice, but exhaustion almost concealed it.

Before noon Naina got off the bus and arrived at Poonam's house. In her bag were a copy of the police acknowledgement, a record of the timing of the telephone calls, and some questions she had written for Ramlal. She had brought no fresh news. She had simply come as people

who know one another come to a house in difficult times—to sit alongside the family even when they have nothing to offer.

"Has the agency given you the address?" Ramlal asked.

"Not yet. But we've found a wrong date on one of their documents. I've asked for a correction. Abhay has submitted written questions too," Naina replied.

Lalita Devi brought Naina a seat. "When Poonam was small, she learned the songs sung while filling a bride's lap with gifts at other people's homes. She came first at school. And now people say her conduct was bad. No one comes to ask me why I cannot sleep at night."

Naina took her hand. "Kaki, she was working hard to find a job. People's rumours cannot change the truth of her life. Her last telephone call has been reported to the police in writing. We're trying to get the inquiry moving."

"They're saying things about you too," Reena said. "Some say Didi went away because you told her to."

Naina looked at Reena. "After reading Poonam's documents I advised her to be careful. Poonam made the final decision herself, with her family's agreement. If someone accuses me, I'll answer. But what matters most is finding her safe."

Two women returning from the market stopped at the door. One asked, "How far has the search for Poonam reached?" The other caught her arm and whispered, "If she went so far away, she must have wanted to, mustn't she?" Lalita Devi rose to her feet.

"If a daughter asks for help, listen to what she says," she answered clearly. "Don't slander her. If you have truthful information, tell us. Otherwise stop spreading falsehoods."

The first woman looked ashamed. The second went away without replying. Naina understood that Poonam's family was fighting not only at officials' doors but also at the crossroads of its own village.

As Naina prepared to leave, Malati Devi, a teacher at the village primary school, came to the doorway. She had taught Reena for years. She carried two exercise books. "Reena hasn't been to school for four days. I came to find out why," she said.

Reena came out. "There's more work at home because we're searching for Didi. Mother is alone."

Malati Devi sat her down beside her. "It's natural to worry about home. But giving up your studies would dishonour Poonam's hard work. Finish the homework you've missed little by little. I'll explain at school."

"What can we do about the false stories going around the village?" Lalita Devi asked.

"Call anything unsupported by facts a rumour," Malati Devi replied. "At school I'll make it clear to the children that it is wrong to judge a young woman's character because she is missing. A teacher's work is not only to teach lessons but also to cultivate a sense of justice in children."

Ramlal sat down beside a chair. "Just your coming has given the family strength."

Malati Devi did not promise that Poonam would be found immediately. She said only that if the authorities needed school identity records, educational documents or photographs, proper copies would be provided. Reena put away her exercise books. Naina saw that in a crisis, real help often took the form of small acts: someone wrote an application; someone else gave a child the courage to return to school.

On her way back from the village Naina saw Madhavi Devi. She was returning to Navgarh after working at several village homes. A basket of vegetables rested on her head and an old bag hung from her hand. "Kaki, what brings you here?" Naina asked.

"My sister lives in this village. I came to see how she was keeping," Madhavi replied. "Have you been to Poonam's house?"

"Yes. The family's terribly worried. And then there's what people are saying."

Madhavi stopped. "When a poor man's daughter leaves home to earn, first people tell her to go and find a job. If something goes wrong, the same people ask why she went out at all. Either way the blame lands on her head."

Naina walked with her for some distance. Beside a tea stall by the road sat a few labourers. One man, his speech unsteady, was asking someone for money. Madhavi recognised him. "That's Ramvriksh. When prohibition first came in, things improved at his home for a whole year. Now he drinks again."

"Where does the liquor here come from?" Naina asked.

"No one can say for certain. Some say from near the border, others say from the warehouses. What I can see is broken utensils in a home and a child's empty schoolbag," Madhavi replied.

Madhavi began to speak of the earlier days in her own household. "When prohibition began, we thought evening wages would finally reach home. In the houses where I washed dishes, the women—the householders, the maids, the women working in the fields—used to tell one another that there would be fewer quarrels over bread now. In some houses it really happened."

She smiled a little. "One day a friend of my husband asked him, 'How are you?' He answered, 'I don't always feel right, but at least there's money in my pocket now.' I laughed when I heard it. With that money I bought books for our elder daughter. At the end of the month, for the first time, I didn't have to take grain on credit."

"And what happened afterwards?" Naina asked.

"Within the first year, liquor began to be sold in secret. Higher prices, greater fear. Some of those who'd given it up began drinking again. My husband stayed away for a long time; then he too started drinking once or twice with his friends. I objected, and the quarrels over expenses returned. Now he is trying to give it up, but once trust breaks in a household, it doesn't come together easily."

There was no grand judgement in Madhavi's voice. She knew the accounts of her own life: the money saved when prohibition first began, children's books, the violence that had stopped; then the rising expenses, secret sales and fear at night. "Not every household has the same story," she said. "Some men still don't drink. But in the families where the trouble has returned, an announcement alone cannot fill an empty stomach."

On the way Madhavi and Naina met four women at a public water tap. Some worked in other people's homes; others laboured in the fields. Rajjo Devi was asking someone to lend her a needle to mend her son's torn shirt. Seeing Madhavi, she asked, "Is there peace in your house now?"

"Not as much as there was before," Madhavi said. "But things haven't fallen apart completely either. We have to work things out day by day."

"When my husband stopped drinking, we saved two hundred rupees at the end of the month," Rajjo Devi said. "Don't laugh. I bought shoes

for my daughter with those two hundred rupees. Now he drinks secretly again, and there's no money left for shoes."

Another woman, who washed clothes in other people's houses, said, "There were fewer quarrels in my home after prohibition, and there still are. Not every man has gone back to drinking. But those who sell liquor need to be stopped."

Naina heard how different their experiences were. In some homes the relief of the first year had endured; in others the old fear had returned. What united the women's concerns was children's food, the cost of education and the dignity of their homes. The true effects of a social policy were visible in these small expenses and human relationships.

At the turn into the village, a police motorcycle stopped. The constables questioned someone near the tea stall and moved on. Looking after them, Madhavi said, "People say so much liquor couldn't move without protection from some traders, politicians and contractors. But I can't call something true that I haven't seen. If the officers want to investigate, let them investigate."

Naina listened carefully. She remembered the uncertain papers from Chandan's warehouse, but it would be wrong to draw a conclusion from coincidence alone. "If someone has evidence, there must be a proper way to submit it," she said.

"How is a poor woman to gather evidence?" Madhavi asked. "Work all day in other people's homes, look after your own in the evening. My words will have greater value only when an officer is willing to listen."

Preparing to board at the bus stand, Madhavi said, "Tell Poonam's mother she isn't alone. I'll go to see her tomorrow. She mustn't shut her door for fear of people's malicious talk." Naina held her hand and thanked her. Help like this seldom found its way into a newspaper's bold headlines, but the presence of a neighbour mattered greatly in a grieving household.

On returning to Navgarh, Naina saw people reading Abhay's report at a tea shop. Young men were asking about the new date for the examination. Others were studying the report on recruitment fees. An elderly man said, "What won't people do when they're unemployed?" Another replied, "Understand their desperation, but don't justify a crime." Naina kept the distinction between the two remarks in mind. Economic hardship could push someone towards a wrong decision, but responsibility for the consequences of that decision did not disappear.

At home she found that Saraswati Devi had set aside a covered plate of food for Chandan. He had not yet returned from the warehouse. Naina told her mother about her visit to Poonam's family. "It's difficult to silence people's tongues," her mother said. "But if others continue visiting Ramlal's house, the voice of falsehood will grow a little weaker."

"Madhavi Kaki will go and see them tomorrow," Naina said.

"That's good. She's suffered herself, so she understands another person's sorrow."

That night Reena telephoned. "Didi, two women from the village sat with Mother for a long time today. She felt a little lighter. But there's still been no call from Poonam Didi."

"I haven't found any new address yet," Naina said. "I'll speak to the responsible officer again tomorrow. Keep writing down unfamiliar numbers that call your mobile. Don't believe anything without evidence."

"We won't give up the search," Reena answered quietly.

Reena found a notebook tucked among her sister's books. On its first page Poonam had written: "When I get a job, I'll buy spectacles for Mother." Reena read the sentence and gave the notebook to her mother. Lalita Devi held it against her breast, but instead of weeping she said, "When she comes back, I'll buy the spectacles myself. Let her be safe first."

At night Ramlal also remembered his fields. He needed to send word to the sharecropper who was due to come the next day to irrigate them. He had been unable to go to the fields while searching for Poonam. "How will we run the household if we abandon the farming?" Lalita Devi said. "I'll stay with Reena. You must go to the fields during working hours." "And if Poonam calls while I'm away?" Ramlal asked. "I'll call you immediately," Reena answered. "We'll all keep our mobiles on." In the midst of their sorrow, the family worked out a new arrangement for their everyday tasks. None of it was easy, but they had to preserve both the food that sustained the house and the hope that sustained them.

After ending the call, Naina opened the window and looked outside. People in the lane were closing the doors of their houses. The door of Poonam's house too would close, but the waiting inside it would not end. Fear of disgrace was trying to silence the family that had suffered.

Naina knew that what mattered most now was to go on listening to its voice.

Chapter 19: Secret Accounts

Naresh Mandal reached the office early in the morning, while the veranda floor was still being mopped. Asha Devi, who did the cleaning, saw him and moved her bucket aside. “So early today, Babu?” she asked. “Yesterday's reconciliation is still unfinished,” Naresh replied. “Once people start arriving, the pile of papers will grow again.” Asha Devi returned to her work. Naresh unlocked the accounts room. Inside lingered the stale smell of windows shut throughout the night.

Three registers lay on the accounts desk. One recorded the training fees collected from applicants, another the office expenses, and the third the travel costs and allowances of workers sent to workplaces outside the town. Naresh had already examined the reconciliation sheet Naina had prepared the day before. The date on which Poonam's group, Seventeen-B, was said to have completed its training preceded the date of its journey. He could have dismissed this as a mere mistake and closed the file, but the payments recorded against that group made him stop.

Money had been drawn for seven days' food, accommodation and training materials for Group Seventeen-B. The receipt named the food supplier as “Seema Service Supplies,” yet no regular vendor of that name appeared in the office's register of suppliers. Travel expenses had been entered under another heading. Naresh added up the figures. He suspected an excess payment, although the manner in which the accounts were arranged made them difficult to understand. He began looking for the original authorisation.

Where the original authorisation should have been filed, there was only a narrow scrap of white paper bearing the words, “Original copy with management.” Naresh grew uneasy. Under the rules, the accounts department should hold a written authorisation before an expense was entered. The organisation was private, but it had drawn up its own rules. If payments were made without written approval, the employee responsible could later be called to account.

The office attendant, Hari Narayan, came in carrying a glass of tea. Naresh asked him, “Who took the authorisation out of this file?” Hari Narayan looked astonished. “All I did was bring the file from Kiran Madam's room yesterday. How would I know what was inside?” Naresh did not blame him. “Very well. But there ought to be a written slip

saying on whose instructions you brought it. From now on, record every movement of a file." Hari Narayan nodded.

At eight o'clock, Naresh received a call from home. His sister Rekha said, "Bhaiya, Father's medicine is running out. Bring some when you come back this evening." He asked her its name and wrote it in the corner of a sheet. "I will. I may be late today." "Come late if you must," Rekha said, "but eat your meal on time." After the call, Naresh took the rotis from his old shoulder bag and put them in the desk drawer. This ordinary request from home reminded him that finishing work at a reasonable hour mattered too.

When Kusum arrived, Naresh asked her to come and see him. She approached his desk, checking receipt numbers as she walked. "How many people from Group Seventeen-B actually departed?" he asked. Kusum opened the list. "Twelve names are entered. Copies of tickets are available for eight. For the other four, they said arrangements were made by the central office." "Then why have food and accommodation costs for all twelve been entered in full?" Naresh asked. Kusum could not answer.

"Is this embezzlement?" Kusum asked softly. "Don't arrive at such a conclusion yet," Naresh replied at once. "The documents are incomplete. First we must see whether the four travelled separately or whether their papers will arrive later. But there must be grounds for the money that was paid out." His tone was cautious. He knew that evidence alone could establish the difference between a bookkeeping error and deliberate deceit.

Naina entered the accounts room carrying an employment register. She knew nothing of Naresh's inquiries. "The employee numbers on these three receipts are different," she said. "Kiran Madam said yesterday that you would examine them." Naresh read the page. The money deposited by Mohan, Kamla Devi's son, was described on one receipt as a training fee and on another as a registration fee. "Have you seen Mohan's original receipt?" Naresh asked. "Yes. I noted its date and number and gave the original back to him."

Naresh pushed a notebook towards her. "Write down only what you have seen. Don't guess at what you haven't. Your signature will confirm no more than that you compared these documents." Naina wrote in unambiguous terms: original receipt examined; amount and date recorded; number did not match the office's permanent receipt register. Naresh closed the notebook.

At ten, a copy of the monthly bank statement arrived. A two-day difference between the entries in the office ledger and the actual withdrawals from the bank was ordinary enough, but two payments had been made on the same day under different names. The first was labelled "training assistance," the second "vehicle service." Both sums appeared to have gone into accounts that were linked to one another. The recipients' names differed, but the documents submitted for the deposits gave the same building on the same market street as their address. Naresh circled the address in red ink.

Chandan's name did not appear in the bank papers. This mattered. It would be wrong to regard a young man who worked in outside transport as the principal beneficiary of a payment merely because his name had been mentioned. Naresh recorded the drivers' wages separately from the money paid to the contractor. Wages had often been delayed, while advances to the contractor were released on time. The difference concealed more than figures: it also revealed whose needs were regarded as important.

Naresh opened the previous month's register and found that the deposits against trainees' names had not been entered consistently. Against some names stood "full," against others "half," and against three simply "special." There was no note explaining what "special" meant. On the next page he found a list in Awadhesh Sah's handwriting. It contained the names of government competitive examinations, although the organisation itself had no authority to make government appointments. Naresh left the sheet where it was and added another number to his list of questions.

"Awadheshji sits outside and collects fees from people," Kusum said, "but his name has never appeared in the accounts as a regular employee. Who accounts for the money given to him?" "If the organisation collected money through him, it must produce the authorisation," Naresh answered. "If he took it on his own behalf, that raises a separate question. For now, keep the two possibilities distinct." He told Kusum not to confirm payment against a new application without the original receipt. "Otherwise the people who have suffered will have no evidence left in their hands," he added.

Kusum told him that two young women had applied the previous day for a refund of money deposited towards examination registration. One was leaving her coaching course because of her father's illness. Naresh examined a copy of her application. The sum was small, but the request

was plain: "I request the return of the money I deposited, as I have received no service." He checked the certificate number written beneath it. It was correct. Naresh thought that if recovering so modest a sum required so much paperwork, raising questions over accounts running into lakhs could hardly be called a whim.

At noon, Kiran summoned him. On entering her room, Naresh noticed that Ratan Singh's chair was empty. Kiran slid a fresh expense statement towards him. "The accounts for the Bhairavpur group must be closed. The end of the month is near. Please verify this copy." "Where is the original authorisation?" Naresh asked. "At the head office," Kiran replied. "Let me have that in writing, stating where the original is. Then I'll reconcile the accounts," Naresh said.

Kiran's voice hardened. "Will you hold up payments for an entire department over petty discrepancies?" "I'm not stopping any payment," Naresh replied politely. "But whoever has the authority to certify these figures needs the complete documents. If questions are asked tomorrow, it will be my signature on this paper, not the head office's." Kiran remained silent for a moment. Then she said, "Speak to Ratan Babu."

Ratan arrived at half past twelve, accompanied by the contractor Virendra Rai. Laughing together, the two crossed the veranda and went inside. Virendra carried a new plan for a construction contract. Naresh had seen him before at a public function. It struck him as curious that the man whose name had appeared in the vehicle-payment papers should walk straight into the owner's office. But acquaintance, in itself, was no evidence of wrongdoing.

Soon afterwards a summons came from Ratan's room. "Nareshji, please come in." Ratan sat beside the desk; Virendra was looking at his phone near the window. "What's the difficulty with the accounts?" Ratan asked. Naresh spread out two pages of figures. "The supporting papers for the expenses shown under food, accommodation and vehicles are incomplete. Also, money has gone to two accounts with different names but the same address. Who authorised these payments?"

Ratan picked up the pages and glanced at them. "This is a developing organisation. Sometimes one contractor provides several kinds of service. There's nothing unusual in that." "That may be so," Naresh replied. "But we need a record of the services provided and the approval." Virendra put down his phone. "My company transports goods. If the accountant has doubts, we can show him the books openly." Naresh

looked at him. “The bill in this file isn't in your company's name. It's another name whose accounts I'm asking about.”

For a few moments the room fell silent. Ratan put the papers on the desk. “Give all this to us in writing. Management will reply. But remember, don't link a private businessman's name to an accusation.” Naresh nodded courteously. “I haven't accused anyone. I'll submit my questions in numbered order.” Ratan's expression remained composed, but Kiran, standing by the door, plainly disliked Naresh's answer.

After the meeting, Naresh went to the narrow veranda behind the office to eat his rotis. Two labourers were sitting there discussing unpaid wages. “They've written down eight days of driving,” one said, “but they've paid me for five.” The other replied, “The manager says ask the contractor. The contractor says ask the office.” Naresh did not intrude on their conversation, but resolved to look again at the wages register.

When he had finished eating, he asked the labourers their names and the dates on their receipts. The first gave his name as Nandkishore Sah. He had been paid for five days though he had worked eight. For the remaining three, he had only a verbal promise. “Then submit a written application and take an acknowledgement,” Naresh advised. The labourer laughed. “Babu, I can write one, but what if they stop giving me work?” Naresh did not dismiss his fear. “I understand. But unless I can show the unpaid amount in the accounts, I can't raise the question of payment.”

In the afternoon, Naresh brought out the ledgers for the earlier months. There had been an unusual increase in transport contracts after prohibition came into force. The total hire charges for vehicles supposedly carrying “construction materials” were many times the amount paid in wages. It was possible, of course, that contract work had expanded; but permits for the vehicles and records of what they had actually transported were unavailable. Naresh declared no one guilty. He entered in the accounts that the original records were missing.

As evening approached, Naina had to return to the accounts room. “The location of Poonam's group has been changed again,” she said. “It says Sonapur instead of Bhairavpur. There is no signature.” Naresh asked her to sit down. “Preserve evidence of what you've seen. Don't take the original sheet away with you. Keep it in its proper order in the office file. If someone changes anything, the register will allow us to check it again.”

Naina hesitated. "Do all these seem like ordinary mistakes to you?" she asked. "One mistake can be ordinary," Naresh replied. "When several point in the same direction, questions multiply. But I won't pronounce a verdict before the questions are answered." Naina listened closely. For the first time she felt that someone in the office was taking a stand not because of his position, but because of his conscience.

Just then Ratan's personal assistant came in with a sealed envelope. "Sahib says to complete the accounts for this file today." Naresh opened it. Inside was a new approval letter bearing Kiran's signature and a printed seal with Ratan's name. It was dated three weeks earlier, though the paper and the style of printing matched the new stationery currently in use at the office. That might have been a coincidence. Naresh wrote the present date on the letter as the date of its receipt.

"Why have you written the receipt date on this page?" the assistant asked. "Because I received it today," Naresh answered evenly. "I haven't altered the date at the top of the letter." The assistant had no reply and went away. Naresh placed a copy in the designated file and added to his written questions: approval letter bearing an earlier date received today.

By evening the voices inside the office had died down. Kusum closed her desk and left. Hari Narayan looked in with a broom in his hand. "Sweep this room tomorrow morning," Naresh told him. "There are papers lying open." Hari Narayan said, "Babu, the owner's driver came a second time today to ask when you were going home." Naresh smiled faintly. "Did he have some papers to deliver?" "He didn't say anything."

When Naresh left for home, the chemist's shop in the lane was about to close. He ran and bought his father's medicine. Reading the name on the prescription, he thought of the vouchers of his profession. An error in the account of medicine for a household could bring suffering to a patient; an incorrect figure in office accounts could have consequences for many people. He voiced the comparison to no one. He put the medicine in his bag and set off home.

Rekha opened the door. "You're late. I'll warm your dinner." "Give Father his medicine first," Naresh said. His father was sitting on the bed listening to the news. As he handed over the medicine, Naresh realised how important it was to preserve the ordinary rhythms of family life. "Is everything all right at the office?" Rekha asked. He did not answer directly. "There are a few questions in the accounts. I'll know whether things are all right when I have the answers."

After dinner he opened a private notebook. He had brought no confidential office documents home. He merely wrote out a list of questions: actual attendance of Group Seventeen-B; two different names at the same address; original details of vehicle hire; three days of unpaid wages; an approval letter newly received but bearing an old date. At the end of the list he wrote a separate question: "Who bears responsibility for the decision when another person keeps the accounts?"

Closing the notebook that night, he resolved to submit formal written questions to management the next day and preserve a copy of the reply in the office records. He still did not know where Poonam was or what the vehicles had carried. But one thing had become clear: blank spaces in the papers could no longer be dismissed as ordinary carelessness.

Chapter 20: An Illicit Relationship

By the time Kiran reached home, dinner had been left on the stove. Dinesh was sitting on a plastic chair in the veranda, studying the electricity bill. A bulb flickered in the room. “Late again today?” he asked. Kiran put her purse on the table. “It's the month-end accounts. Employees' salaries, training payments—everything comes together.” Dinesh did not look up from the bill. “You said the same thing yesterday. Dinner's still warm. Eat something.”

They had been married for twelve years. Dinesh had once worked for a private pharmaceutical distribution company. When it closed, he was unemployed for a time. Now he ran a small motor-parts shop in the market, but its income was irregular. Kiran's salary paid the house rent, electricity bill and bank instalments. On that basis she regarded herself as the household's firm support. Yet alongside that support she was nurturing a secret relationship she did not have the courage to acknowledge before Dinesh.

As he set out her plate, Dinesh asked, “Mother has her examination at the hospital tomorrow. I told you about it.” Kiran stopped short. “There's a meeting at the office in the morning. Could you take her?” “I'll take her,” he answered. “But we fixed the date together. These days you put the office timetable before everything else.” Kiran ate her first mouthful in silence. In his complaint she heard less harshness than the pain of being neglected.

During dinner, a message appeared on her mobile. Kiran glanced at the screen and immediately turned the phone face down. Dinesh smiled a little. “Is the office still open?” “They want an answer about some papers,” she said. Dinesh asked nothing further. His silence brought her no relief; within it, she could hear her own lie all the more clearly.

The message was from Ratan: “See me before ten in the morning. Naresh is asking more questions.” It was a short sentence, but Kiran understood the worry behind it. In the past two years Ratan had often summoned her away from the office on the pretext of work. At first these meetings had concerned negotiations with major clients, necessary bank documents and travel arrangements. Gradually private meals, gifts and meetings alone had become part of her routine. Kiran began confiding the troubles of her marriage to Ratan, and he spoke of his

discontent at home. An intimacy that had begun as sympathy had, in time, become an extramarital affair.

Kiran typed a reply: "We'll meet at the office. Not somewhere else." She read it again before sending it. Ratan's answer came immediately: "All right, but we need to speak in private." Kiran switched off the phone. It seemed to her that her two lives were joined by a slender thread; on the day it snapped, nothing would remain in either household. Then she grew angry with herself for the thought. Two households were built on the trust of their members, not on any secret thread.

The next moment she remembered something her mother had said. Two days earlier her mother had told her on the telephone that Dinesh sent medicines every week, while her daughter had not come to see her for several weeks. Kiran had pleaded that she was busy. Now she realised that being busy was not the whole truth. She found time to meet Ratan, but not her family. In resenting Dinesh's financial weakness, she had come to discount his steady affection. Even so, Ratan's closeness had never seemed merely a transaction of self-interest. This confusion made her evade any clear account of herself. She could see that, while offering reasons for her decisions, she laid the blame on Dinesh, although the choice to enter an extramarital relationship had been hers. Admitting that truth was painful. She did not want to place the fault on someone else.

There was little peace that night in Ratan Singh's house either. Vibha Singh had set two plates on the dining table. Ratan had returned late. Their daughter Anushka was studying for an examination in her room. "A fee reminder came from school today," Vibha said. "You said payment would go through the bank. It still shows as outstanding." Taking off his shoes, Ratan answered, "I'll check the account. A great deal of money is tied up in business."

Vibha did not merely manage the household expenses. In the early years of their marriage, she had invested some money received from her mother in Ratan's first shop. Later she had taken responsibility for the domestic accounts, their daughter's education and the treatment of her elderly mother-in-law. Ratan's business had grown, but the papers recording its decisions had stopped coming before her. She was trying to understand what this change meant. Money was not scarce in the household, yet where it came from and where it went remained obscure.

"A payment went out of an account in my name yesterday," Vibha said. "I got a message from the bank, but I don't know whom it was for." Ratan was silent for a moment. "An advance office expense. I'll explain." "Why is an account in my name being used for business without my being asked?" "Such arrangements are common in business. Don't worry about it." "Allow me to decide when I should worry," Vibha answered calmly.

Anushka came out of her room. "Ma, where's the water?" Vibha gave her a bottle. Looking from one parent to the other, the girl understood that something unpleasant was being discussed at the dining table. She went back without asking anything. Vibha turned to Ratan. "We won't quarrel in front of the child. But I want to see the accounts in writing." Rather than reply, Ratan picked up his meal and went inside.

That night, as Vibha opened the wardrobe, she noticed a paper envelope. There was a hotel bill in Ratan's coat, listing dinner for two and a room charge. Its date was the day he had said he was away at a business meeting. A bill alone did not prove an affair; he might equally have been meeting a client or colleague. Vibha put it back. She could not decide whether to ask him about it or remain silent.

The next day, Kiran read Naresh's written questions at the office. There were five points: attendance, supplier, vehicles, authorisation and unpaid wages. Each required clear documentary support. Ratan arrived before ten. "If a letter like this gets outside," he told Kiran, "people will begin making assumptions." "Then answer it," Kiran said. "If all the papers are there, the questions will resolve themselves." Ratan looked at her in surprise. "Are you taking Naresh's side now?"

Kiran went to stand by the window. "I'm not taking anyone's side. I work here. All day the employees ask me questions. I need answers." Ratan came beside her and spoke softly. "Don't you trust me any longer?" She did not look at him. "Trust doesn't mean signing false papers with my eyes closed. You've put me in a position where I tell lies at home and make excuses at the office."

Ratan softened his voice. "I brought happiness into your life. When did Dinesh ever appreciate your hard work? You've shown what you're capable of in this institution." Kiran flushed. "I got here through my own hard work. You gave me an opportunity, but that doesn't mean I owe you my conscience." Ratan was silent for a moment. Then he said, "If that's how you think of it, I'm hurt."

Kiran felt the contradiction within herself. Did she love Ratan, or had she become dependent on him? There was no simple answer. Some of the hours spent with him had genuinely been happy. His attentiveness, his willingness to listen and his gifts had once seemed to fill an emptiness in her life. Now, however, she saw how business decisions and the private relationship had become entangled. Even when she wanted to, she could not give a clear answer without Ratan's permission.

In the outer room, Naina was speaking to Kusum about Poonam's group. "Her family will ask again tomorrow," Naina said. "Nothing in the office's reply gives an actual address." "Should we write to Kiran Madam again?" Kusum asked. "Yes. This time we'll state that the family has already submitted the police acknowledgement. Knowing the name of a training programme isn't enough." Kiran heard them through the glass door. At the mention of Poonam, her eyes fell.

Kiran had seen a copy of a travel authorisation in her files, on which the final destination of Poonam's group had been left blank. Ratan had said that the central office would fill it in later. She was now trying to understand what that document meant. She did not know what had happened to Poonam, but she knew that failing to provide an actual address could not be dismissed as an ordinary office mistake.

At midday Ratan spoke to Virendra Rai on the telephone. Kiran entered with the meeting papers. "Don't hold up the new payment for the contract work," Ratan said. "Virendra's labourers' accounts are separate." "Naresh has asked for the address connected to this payment," Kiran replied. "If he doesn't get a direct answer, he'll stop again." Ratan covered the phone. "I'll deal with it. Just keep the letter ready." Kiran understood that she was being treated not as a participant in decisions, but as someone there simply to carry out orders.

That evening Dinesh stood outside Kiran's office with his motorcycle. No one had called him there. After taking his mother to hospital, he had been returning from the market. When Kiran came out he smiled. "I thought we could go back together. Mother's report was good today." Kiran was startled, then tried to appear at ease. "You could have phoned," she said. "Your mobile was switched off. I was passing, so I stopped."

Just then Ratan's car came through the gate. A short distance away it stopped. Ratan lowered the window and looked towards Kiran, then saw Dinesh and offered an ordinary greeting. Dinesh nodded in return. "Is

Sahib only leaving now?" he asked Kiran. "Yes, there was a meeting," she answered. The car moved on. Dinesh's question was commonplace, yet inside Kiran it grew into an extraordinary burden.

On the way, Dinesh told her about his mother's examination. The doctor had changed her medicine and wanted to see her again the following week. There was weariness in his voice, but satisfaction too. Kiran listened patiently. She realised how little time she herself had given to hearing the pain and effort of the man with whom she ate every day. The regret she felt at that moment did not mean her old lies had vanished. She knew that the decision to tell the truth was still ahead of her.

After they reached home, Dinesh took an old photograph from the wardrobe. It was their wedding picture. "Mother was looking at this today," he said with a laugh. In it the vermilion on Kiran's forehead was fresh, and Dinesh looked shy. Holding the photograph, Kiran remembered, after many years, the room in their first home where they had slept in the heat beneath a single fan. There had been fewer comforts then, but not so many lies.

"Are you all right?" Dinesh asked. "I'm tired," Kiran answered. He took back the photograph. "Get some rest. New stock is arriving at the shop tomorrow. I'll leave early." He showed no curiosity. Kiran felt again the weight of his trust.

Ratan returned to his house late that night. Vibha was awake. On the table lay a school-fee receipt and a bank statement. "There's a discrepancy between these two papers," she said. "You told me the payment was made, but the bank shows a withdrawal I don't recognise." In a tired voice Ratan said, "I'll have the accountant reconcile it tomorrow." Vibha asked, "Whenever I ask about the business accounts, you say tomorrow. How many tomorrows are still to come?"

Ratan grew irritated. "The moment I come home, the interrogation starts." Vibha remained composed. "This is a home, not an office. I'm not an employee under your command. I have every right to ask about money being handled in my name." Ratan watched her for a few moments, then lowered his voice. "All right. I'll show you everything on Sunday." Vibha folded the papers and put them away. For the first time she felt that she had obtained his agreement, but not his trust.

That night another message from Ratan appeared on Kiran's phone: "You seemed distant from me today." She stared at the screen for a long

time. Many possible replies formed in her mind. In the end she wrote: "Answer the office's questions with documents. This isn't the time for private matters." She sent the message and switched off the phone. Dinesh was asleep on the other side of the bed. Kiran could not sleep. Love, guilt and fear had ceased to be separate things within her. She knew that the real cost of an illicit relationship was not merely the discomfort of the two people involved, but the trust of everyone who knew nothing of the choices being made.

The following morning Vibha took out her old bank passbook and set several pages aside. She was not searching Ratan's confidential papers; she wanted to understand transactions made in her own name. As their daughter prepared for school she asked, "Ma, has the fee been paid?" "I'll pay it today," Vibha answered. And with those words she resolved that she would no longer stop asking questions about decisions affecting her own household.

At midday Vibha went to the school. When she deposited the fee, she learned that no payment had reached the school's account in the previous month. The message Ratan had shown her concerned a different withdrawal from a business account. Meeting the headmistress, Vibha said politely, "I don't want my daughter's education interrupted. I'll make the payment now." A school employee handed her the receipt. As she put it in her bag, Vibha decided to keep her independent savings separate for essential household expenses.

On her way home through the market, Vibha met her old friend Aarti. "We haven't seen you at a school function for ages," Aarti said. Vibha offered a conventional smile. "There's more to do at home these days." Aarti noticed her tired face but asked no personal questions. She merely said, "If you have difficulty reconciling bank accounts, my brother works in that field. He could explain the rules." Vibha thanked her. She hesitated to accept help, but no longer felt that insisting on understanding everything by herself was wise.

In the crowded market she saw a newly married couple. The young woman was carrying a small bedspread; the young man was asking its price. Vibha remembered the first year of her marriage, when Ratan, tired though he was, would sit before her and open the shop's accounts. They used to check the balance in the bank together. There was more money now, but less partnership. She did not decide that everything her husband did was wrong. She resolved only that she had a right to demand clear answers to her doubts.

That night Anushka left her studies and sat beside her mother. "Ma, my friends at school say Papa is a very important man, so I needn't worry about anything." Vibha looked at her daughter. "Being important isn't just a matter of having money. You have to account for what you do," she said. "Have I done something wrong?" Anushka asked. Vibha stroked her head. "No. You concentrate on your studies. These are matters for grown-ups, and grown-ups must take responsibility for them." The fear left the girl's face. Vibha understood that, whatever differences she had with her husband, she did not want to leave their daughter feeling unsafe.

Chapter 21: The First Threat

When Abhay Paswan reached the newspaper office, the editor had left a folded newspaper on his desk. The portion containing Abhay's report was surrounded by lines drawn in red pen. Above it, in small letters, someone had written, “Know your limits.” The paper had arrived by ordinary post, without a sender's name. Abhay unfolded it. The report was old, but the red marks were fresh.

“The postman delivered it this morning,” editor Manjari Jha said. “I've kept the envelope. Do you suspect anyone in particular?” “The report deals with examinations, fees and the institution,” Abhay replied. “It's hard to say yet who objected.” “Quite right. First photograph the paper and note when it arrived. We shouldn't dismiss a threat like this as an ordinary joke.”

Abhay opened the file for the report. There were no confidential government documents in it: only departmental notices, candidates' statements and the institution's written response. Why should anyone who could answer published facts resort to a sealed envelope? He could find no answer. He began working as the office telephones rang around him.

The first call came from an unknown number. A man's voice said, “Abhay Babu, you're a well-educated man. You write about young people's interests. That's good. But don't set fire to a house that is running.” “Who's speaking?” Abhay asked. “What difference does a name make? Forget what you published about jobs. If anyone's name appears in your next report, you'll regret it.” The call ended.

Abhay wrote down the time and told Manjari what had been said. “That's a direct threat,” she replied. “Save the call details and submit a written report at the police station.” “Should we publish something about it immediately?” Abhay asked. “Safety and the complaint come first,” Manjari answered. “Our duty to report the news is another matter. Whatever can be verified can be published later.”

Abhay went on with his regular work until noon. Savita Kumari telephoned. “Tomorrow the candidates are holding a peaceful protest near the university gate. We want a new examination date and an impartial investigation into the allegations of a paper leak. Will you be there?” “I will. Have you prepared the notice seeking permission and a

copy of the memorandum?" "We've informed the administration. We won't block anyone's way." Abhay advised her to guard against provocation in the crowd.

Savita added, "Awadhesh Sah's people keep hanging around outside the library. Yesterday a young man said he'd make the questions available before the new examination if we paid him. I didn't believe him." "Do you have a name or anything in writing?" Abhay asked. "No. Two of us heard him." "Then don't make a public allegation yet," Abhay replied. "If you get an offer in writing, give the details to the investigating officer. Your demand for a fair examination remains entirely valid."

In the library's rear veranda, Savita sat with five of her companions. One young man said angrily, "The examination has been cancelled, there are allegations that questions were leaked, and the officials are asking for more time in the name of an inquiry. We'll block the road." Savita did not interrupt. She let everyone speak. Then she said, "Blocking the road would hurt ambulances and people who earn their living each day. We'll make our case through a memorandum and a peaceful gathering. Checking the truth may take time, but we have every right to demand a definite date."

Another candidate, Ruby, said her family was no longer willing to pay for coaching. Savita proposed an arrangement for sharing old books at the library. "We won't punish one another because the examination was cancelled," she said. Everyone agreed. One student wrote down volunteers' names, while another took responsibility for bringing old science question papers. Alongside the preparations for protest, they began a small arrangement to keep their studies going.

Savita had also heard about the false message circulating on Naina's phone. She called Naina immediately. "Is the allegation being circulated with your name true?" Naina answered, "I can show written copies of my work at the office. But I don't know where the accusation came from." "I won't spread anything without checking it," Savita said. "We've already suffered enough from rumours about examination papers." That small decision gave Naina a measure of courage.

After Savita hung up, Abhay grew thoughtful. The brokerage carried on in the name of unemployment did more than rob people of money; it robbed those preparing for examinations of trust in one another. When no one believed that questions would be distributed fairly, the

selection of one candidate made another suspect the successful person's merit. That distrust lay at the heart of Savita's protest.

At that moment there was unusual commotion in Naina's office. Outside, two young men were loudly demanding their deposits back. Hari Narayan was asking them to sit inside. "Do you have your receipts?" Naina asked. One pulled a crumpled sheet from his pocket. "Awadhesh told us this organisation arranged government recruitment. Now he's saying the questions leaked and the exam was cancelled, so everything has stopped." Naina explained plainly, "This is a private training institution. I have seen no proof that it has the authority to make government appointments. Submit a complaint in writing."

A third young man held out his mobile screen. A message naming Naina was circulating on it: "Woman employee who collects money in the name of employment." The photograph was from a public event at the office, with the accusation written beneath it. Naina's heart lurched. "Who sent this?" she asked. "It appeared in our group. Lots of people are forwarding it." "I haven't taken money from anyone," Naina said. "If you have a receipt bearing my signature, show it to me." The young man had no such document.

Kusum gave them the complaints register. "You can file a complaint against an employee too," she said. "But forwarding something without evidence can harm a person." One of the young men said, somewhat ashamed, "All we know is that our money is gone." "It shouldn't simply disappear," Naina replied. "Follow the proper route for a complaint." The men began filling out their applications.

Kiran came over to the outer desk and looked at the message on the mobile. "Don't respond to this kind of publicity on your own," she told Naina. "Will the institution deny a false accusation made against an employee in its name?" Naina asked. Kiran remained silent for a moment. "I'll speak to the owner." The answer was painfully familiar to Naina. Whether the question concerned her own name or Poonam's address, every answer seemed to stop at "I'll speak to someone."

In the afternoon, Abhay sent Naina a message: "An unknown caller threatened me today. I'll file a written complaint. If anything strange happens concerning you, record it." Naina called him at once. "They're circulating a false message with my photograph," she said. Abhay was silent for a moment, then asked, "Do you have the original message?" "Kusum saw it. It was on the phone of a young man submitting a

complaint." "Ask his permission and preserve a screenshot. Don't answer an accusation with another accusation. I'll meet you this evening."

Naina worried about her mother. Saraswati Devi had no smartphone, but neighbours did. Naina feared damage to her reputation not merely for her own sake: if someone told her mother a lie, it could affect her health. She called home herself. "Ma, if anyone says something strange about the office, ask me. I'm all right." "What's happened?" Saraswati Devi asked. Naina told her briefly. "Keep doing your work truthfully," her mother said. "But don't get into a quarrel alone."

Chandan was working at the warehouse that day. Manoj Sah handed him a new transport slip. It bore a vehicle number, but the goods were described only as "construction materials." "The accounts for the earlier slip, which didn't even carry the warehouse signature, still haven't been cleared," Chandan said. "Why is it the same again?" Manoj raised his voice. "Are you here to work or to act like everyone's father? You want money, don't you?"

Chandan remembered the date his loan instalment was due. A late payment to the bank meant a penalty. The person who had lent him money privately had also become harsher. A few days earlier, when the examination was cancelled, he had thought of leaving this work to concentrate on his studies. Yet each day without wages increased the worry about essential household expenses. Manoj knew that constraint very well.

"I want clear papers for the goods," Chandan repeated. Manoj handed him a signed sheet. "This is enough. If you ask questions every time, I'll give the job to another driver." Chandan examined it. There was a signature, but it was not clear whose. He put the motorcycle key in his pocket. "I'm not taking this vehicle today. Show me the complete details first." Manoj glared at him. "All right, leave it for now. But if you work with me, you'll have to trust me."

Chandan set off for home, but halfway there Manoj called. "Your sister is asking too many questions at the office. Make her understand at home." Chandan stopped. "What has Didi's work got to do with my transport job?" he asked. "The connection isn't as little as you think. Keep what you know inside your house." The call ended. Chandan's hand began to tremble. He pulled his motorcycle to the roadside and sat there a long time.

At a tea stall in Navgarh, Virendra Rai was sitting with two associates. A poster for a public event by the local politician Jagdish Chaudhary hung nearby. One associate said, “The journalists are asking too many questions. They're ruining businessmen's reputations with reports about examinations and jobs.” Virendra put down his tea. “It's not my job to stop news from being printed. Show the papers that are in order. But if we give people who don't understand business a free hand in everything, how will contract work get done?” Hearing his tone, the other man fell silent.

One of Jagdish's assistants arrived. “Something must be said about unemployment at tomorrow's meeting. Savita's group will submit a memorandum too,” he reported. “Make the arrangements for the meeting,” Virendra replied. “But don't turn someone else's protest into a disturbance. The cameras will be watching everyone.” After the assistant had gone, Virendra told someone on his phone, “The contractor's name mustn't figure in rumours. Have the office accounts examined separately.” No one at the tea stall heard who was at the other end.

Checking the pages of the evening edition, Manjari said, “If we report the threat against you, readers will understand that people doing this work face danger too. But we still can't say who made the threat.” Abhay agreed. He did not want news of a journalist's fear to overshadow the search for Poonam or the candidates' central questions. “Don't go reporting alone late at night for now,” the editor said. “If anything actually happens, get somewhere safe first.” Abhay accepted the precaution. A display of bravery would not increase the evidence. He also remembered his mother's words: to write the truth, one must keep both one's life and health safe.

That evening Abhay submitted a written complaint at the police station. The officer on duty recorded the envelope and the time of the call. “You say you've been threatened, but you don't know the person,” he said. “That's why I'm requesting an inquiry,” Abhay replied. “I've written what I know. I haven't added what I don't know.” The officer gave him an acknowledged copy, which Abhay placed in his file.

Outside the station he met Naina. She was carrying a small bag. They crossed the road and sat beside a quiet tea shop. Abhay showed her the threatening paper. Naina showed him the screenshot of the circulating message on her phone. “For the first time I understand how quickly a lie can reach someone's home,” she said. “For truth you need applications,

receipts and an investigation." "The work of truth is difficult," Abhay replied, "but anger alone cannot answer a lie."

Naina was silent for a while. "Have you landed in trouble because of me?" she asked. Abhay spoke gently. "I'm doing a journalist's work. You're working in an institution. I accept that the questions I've asked have increased your family's difficulties. But whoever made the threat is responsible for it, not you." Naina looked into his eyes. "I feel I shouldn't speak to anyone. I should keep everyone away." "Whether to keep your distance is your decision," Abhay said. "But I wouldn't want fear to leave you alone."

The tea-shop owner set down two glasses. For the first time Naina managed a smile. "You write everything as though it were a news report," she said. Abhay laughed. "And you ask for a receipt for everything." The light exchange eased their exhaustion for a moment. Neither had anything to declare about their relationship yet; nevertheless, each found comfort in sitting silently beside the other.

On returning home, Naina saw that Chandan had not eaten. He was sitting in a dark corner of the courtyard. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Nothing," he said at first. Then he asked, "Didi, how much do you know about the accounts of the people at your office?" Naina was startled. "Only what I've seen through my work. Why?" "Manoj Babu said I should make you understand at home. You mustn't ask so many questions."

Naina became serious. "Why would he say that to you? What have you been carrying in your vehicle?" Chandan looked away. "They don't show us all the papers. They don't even give us a full account of our wages." "Then don't do work whose details they won't explain," Naina said. "I worry about the loan too, but such work won't free you from it." Chandan wanted to say something and stopped. He was thinking of an earlier night, the locked door of the warehouse and a vehicle that had gone out with Manoj. But he did not yet tell his sister everything.

Saraswati Devi came into the veranda. "Are you two going to eat or not?" she asked. Naina looked at Chandan, who rose to wash his hands. During dinner their mother talked about ordinary matters: medicines, market prices, a neighbour's wedding. Naina and Chandan answered, but each was occupied by separate questions. The family still shared its daily meal that night; nothing dramatic happened, yet certain words had already found their way into the house.

That night Abhay received a message from his editor: "There will be a security guard at the newspaper office's main gate tomorrow. The copy of the threat complaint is safe. Report Savita's event after verifying the facts." Abhay replied, "All right." He looked through the window at the street. A police vehicle passed once, followed by the sound of motorcycles. He did not know where the person threatening him was, but he knew that every report from now on would raise questions of his own safety and other people's dignity.

The same evening Reena, Poonam's sister, telephoned Naina. "Someone called from an unknown number and said we should stop going to the police station, or we'd never hear news of Didi." Reena was frightened. Naina asked her to repeat the exact words, noted the time and the number, but did not guess who had called. "Tell your father to inform the police about this threat too," she said. "We won't stop searching," Reena replied. Her voice trembled, but her words were clear.

Naina placed a printed copy of the phone message and the acknowledgement of her written complaint at the office in her desk drawer. Poonam's photograph was there too. She picked it up. Poonam was smiling on the day she had made a file of her certificates in the hope of an appointment. It seemed to Naina that beneath all the false messages, threats and tangled accounts, the most fundamental question remained unanswered: where was Poonam? She put the photograph away. In the morning she would not be able to turn away from that question.

Chapter 22: Naresh's Decision

Early in the morning, Naresh Mandal was drawing water in the courtyard of his home. Whenever he released the pump handle, the metal clanged. His sister Rekha had put tea on the stove. Their father was sitting on a cot inside, trying to read the newspaper's front page; one arm of his spectacles had broken. Naresh put down the water, went in and took the spectacles. "I'll get these repaired on the way home this evening." His father asked, "Why were you so late last night?" "It took time to reconcile the account papers," Naresh answered. His family was satisfied, but he felt as though the papers were following him beyond the office now.

He had barely slept. It was not merely the differences in the figures of the accounts register that troubled him. The place where a young woman named Poonam was to work had been changed twice. There were no travel documents for four workers. Large payments entered as the transport of construction materials were regularly released while labourers' wages remained due. Each question might have an answer of its own, but Naresh was troubled by the fact that none of the answers could be obtained without the permission of the same people. In his notebook he recorded, with dates, what he himself had seen. No conclusions—only references to the papers placed before him.

As she rolled out the rotis, Rekha asked, "Bhaiya, shall we go to the hospital this evening? Father's getting short of breath." "We will," Naresh said. "But if I can't leave the office, take him to the doctor first." Rekha laughed. "Since when has your office become so important?" Naresh gave a faint smile. "Not the office. Its accounts have become important." Rekha heard something unusual in his voice. "Have you quarrelled with someone?" He paused. "If asking questions leads to a quarrel, should I stop asking them?" "Ask your questions," she replied, "but keep yourself safe."

On his way to the office, Naresh stopped at a printing shop in the market. He needed copies of some letters he had written. The shopkeeper, Ramlal, was an old acquaintance. Naresh made three copies of an ordinary office letter; he had brought neither the original account books nor any employee's personal documents. The letter contained five questions: the trainees' attendance, their actual destination, unpaid

wages, vehicle bills and payment approvals. A sixth had now been added: within how many days would management provide its answers? "Auditing the monthly accounts?" the shopkeeper asked. "Yes. I need an account in writing," Naresh said. The full gravity of his decision was contained in that short reply.

Leaving the shop, Naresh met a retired teacher, Shashibhushan Jha, who had known him since his schooldays. "You look tired," the teacher said. "There's more work," Naresh answered with a smile. "Can't you take leave?" "If I take leave, the accounts will stop. Someone must stay to put the work right." The teacher offered no lecture. He merely said, "What is recorded in writing can be checked again. But remember to keep account of your health too." Naresh touched his feet respectfully and took leave.

He reached the office a little before eight. Two applicants sat in the veranda. Their applications for the return of deposited money had been pending since the previous week. Recognising Naresh, one asked, "Babu, has our receipt been checked?" "I'm reconciling the accounts under my charge," he answered. "Keep a copy of the acknowledgement safe. If anyone asks for your original receipt without written notice, don't give it away." "Will we get the money back?" the young man asked. Naresh made no false promise. "I can't say yet. But first we must establish whether your deposit was recorded." Disappointment and relief appeared together on the young man's face. At least he knew someone had heard him.

Entering the accounts room, Naresh saw that the upper drawer of his desk was half-open. He had shut it the night before. The registers inside were in order, but the arrangement of the loose papers had changed. He called Hari Narayan. "Has anyone come in here?" "There was cleaning early this morning," the attendant replied. "Yesterday evening Kiran Madam asked for a file. I told her you'd locked up and gone." "Was the lock opened?" "Not in front of me." Naresh closed the drawer without agitation. It was possible he himself had not shut it properly in his haste. Even so, he recorded today's date so that later he would not mistake his recollection for a fact.

Kiran arrived at half past nine. There were traces of too little sleep on her face. Naresh handed her the office letter. "Please acknowledge receipt of these questions," he said. Kiran stopped as she read. "You've already shown this to Ratan Babu." "We discussed it orally. Now I need written answers," Naresh replied. "And to whom will you give a copy?"

"One will remain in the office accounts records. If there is no reply, I'll inform the appropriate authority, in accordance with the rules, about the papers available." Kiran stared at him. It was the first time Naresh had spoken not merely of caution, but of a definite next step.

"You know this letter could affect the employees' jobs, don't you?" There was more concern than menace in Kiran's question. "Incorrect accounts are already affecting people," Naresh answered. "What must be happening in the home of someone whose wages are unpaid? But I'm not calling anyone guilty. I'm saying only this: let written questions be answered in writing." Kiran looked at him for a moment, then signed and dated the copy to acknowledge receipt. She also advised him to be careful. "Careful in office matters, or personally?" Naresh asked. Kiran gave no answer.

Naina came with the day's list of applications. She was waiting for a new reply concerning Poonam's Group Seventeen-B. Naresh told her that a copy of the original appointment letter had still not been found in the accounts. "Whenever I ask, they say management will look into it," Naina said. "Poonam's elderly father is waiting at home. What am I to tell him?" "Tell him what you know," Naresh replied gently. "Don't send him wandering again with a false address. I've asked for a written reply." Naina sensed the firmness in his voice.

At eleven, Ratan Singh summoned Naresh to his room. Naresh's letter lay on the desk. "Why are you thinking of taking office affairs outside?" Ratan asked. Sitting in the chair opposite, Naresh said, "I'm giving the office an opportunity to answer first. No papers have gone outside yet." Ratan leaned back. "Letters of this kind destroy an institution's reputation." "An answer will protect its reputation," Naresh replied. "Where payments are proper, the authorisation will be found. Where there's a mistake, it can be corrected." Ratan smiled with his mouth, but not with his eyes.

"I've kept you employed here for years," Ratan said. "Have I ever withheld your salary?" Naresh kept his voice low. "No. I'm grateful for that. But the salary I receive doesn't change what my signature means." "What exactly do you want?" Ratan asked. "Real evidence for services whose bills have been paid; the destinations of the people sent away; and an account of outstanding wages." "We can't gather every document in a day. Give us seven days." "If that period is given in writing, I can record it," Naresh replied. Ratan called Kiran and had "seven working days" entered below the letter.

As Naresh went out, he met Manoj Sah near the gate. Manoj greeted him casually. “Accounts Babu, why wear yourself out over this? Vehicles run; people get wages.” “It's my duty to examine the wage accounts,” Naresh said. Manoj laughed. “Not every vehicle carries the same kind of papers. Some goods belong to the contractor, some to the company.” “Then they should have separate records.” Manoj's smile diminished. “If you follow every rule, work will come to a halt.” “If rules aren't followed, who will answer for the mistakes?” Naresh asked. Manoj walked away without replying.

At noon, Naresh received a call from his sister. Their father had been taken to hospital. After examining him, the doctor had prescribed regular medicine and rest. “Don't worry,” Rekha said. “Come late if you must, but don't forget the medicines.” Naresh put down the phone and opened his wallet. The prescription was folded into a small slip of paper. He thought of how much Rekha managed alone in his absence. It would have been easy for him to withdraw from the office matter. His job was the family's stable income. But having seen untruths in the records, he now found it difficult simply to close his eyes.

When Naresh stepped outside for water at lunchtime, he found Asha Devi sitting with her monthly wage receipt. “They've paid me two days less,” she said. “They say I was absent, but I cleaned the office on those days.” Naresh promised to check the register. Gathering her bag, Asha Devi said, “Babu, even a little less money is a great deal to me. A day's wages keep the stove burning.” Naresh understood that accurate accounts were not merely an office regulation. They were a question of food in many homes.

In the second half of the day, Naresh examined the wage register once more. Nandkishore Sah and two companions had submitted applications for their unpaid wages. Against the three days owing, the register said “in contractor's accounts,” but in the contractor's account those very three days were shown as paid in full. Naresh prepared a written request for certified copies of both pages. “Will their names get outside?” Kusum asked. “We'll protect the privacy of those whose rights are in question. An employee's personal details won't be made public without good reason.” A glimmer of confidence came into Kusum's eyes.

Before evening, some candidates for competitive examinations gathered outside the office under Savita Kumari's leadership to submit a memorandum. Some had the government's notice cancelling the examination; others had training-fee receipts. They alleged that

Awadhesh Sah had collected money after promising government appointments. Naina directed them to the regular complaints window. Naresh watched from inside. A young man was giving a careful account of his expenses, his voice trembling. Naresh remembered his own unemployment as a young man. Before finding his first job, he had submitted dozens of applications.

"We want the alleged question-paper leak investigated," Savita said. "But we don't want to call anyone guilty without proof. Ask the institution simply to say what services it took money for." Hearing her, Naresh understood anew the meaning of his letter. Asking for written evidence was not a performance of rebellion; it was an ordinary and justifiable question. Abhay had also come to report on the gathering. He saw Naresh in the crowd but did not speak to him in front of everyone. He was mindful of Naresh's employment and safety alike.

When the crowd had dispersed, Abhay met Naresh a little way from the office gate. "There are a few facts I'd like to confirm with you," he said. Naresh explained, "As an accounts officer, there are limits on my authority to make the papers I receive public. But the people affected can speak about their own receipts. I won't say anything about what I haven't seen." "I need evidence, not accusations, as well," Abhay replied. Their conversation went no further. Naresh mentioned his letter but handed over no confidential list.

As the office was closing, Kiran came back into the accounts room. "Will you really inform the authorities?" she asked. "Management has asked for seven days," Naresh answered. "But the police are already investigating the missing young woman. If they formally request the papers, it would be wrong to withhold them." Fear showed on Kiran's face. "You know there are people here who get angry." Naresh could see that she wanted to say more. "If you have any concrete information, give it in writing," he said. Kiran lowered her head. "Not yet."

Naresh put the acknowledgement of his office letter, the list of bank reconciliations and the register of unanswered questions in their proper files. The original ledgers remained in the office. In his private notebook he recorded only the dates, file numbers and the names of those from whom he had requested papers. Before setting out for home, he noted the contact details of the local labour officer's office and resolved to learn the proper way to approach the police concerning the missing young woman. He was afraid, but he did not wish to hide evidence because of that fear.

At the gate, the evening sunlight had faded. Manoj's motorcycle stood to one side, though Manoj was nowhere to be seen. “Babu, are you going straight home or to the market?” Hari Narayan asked. Naresh felt the prescription inside his wallet. “First the chemist, then home.” “It'll be dark on the road,” Hari Narayan said. “Take the main road.” Naresh nodded, taking it as ordinary advice. He could not tell whether Hari Narayan spoke from experience or simple affection.

There was a queue at the chemist's. Naresh handed over the prescription and waited. Some of the people in line were talking about the rise in illicit sales after prohibition. “There was peace at home at first,” one said, “but now the stuff sold secretly costs twice as much.” Another replied, “A law is useful only when the people entrusted with enforcing it obey it too.” Naresh listened, but drew no conclusion connecting their conversation with his own questions. His task was to investigate differences in the accounts, not pass judgment on rumours.

After buying the medicine, he received a call from an unknown number. “Naresh Babu? I need to discuss a vehicle account with you,” said a voice. “Who's speaking?” he asked. “Someone who knows the office. It'll only take two minutes.” “The office is closed for today,” Naresh replied. “Give me your name and the details of the papers. Meet me at the office tomorrow.” “Tomorrow could be too late,” the caller said. “Even so, we won't settle accounts in the street.” The call ended. Naresh recorded the time and number in his notebook without guessing who had called.

Before heading home he telephoned Rekha. “I've got the medicine. I'm on my way.” “Bhaiya, what shall I cook?” she asked. “Whatever we have. Just make sure Father gets his medicine on time.” After hanging up, he stood for a moment at the street corner. Taking the main road meant a slight detour, but he remembered Hari Narayan's advice and turned towards it. The lights of a vehicle approaching from behind stretched his shadow along the road. One thing alone was clear to Naresh: having set down the facts he knew in writing, he could no longer disown them.

Chapter 23: Beside the Canal

In the first light of dawn, two men were gathering their fishing nets beside the canal west of Navgarh. The night's rain had softened the earth, and dew lay on the grass. Near the old canal bridge, a narrow track branched from the main road. Farmers used it in the early morning to reach their fields. Gokul Sahni, one of the fishermen, noticed a shoe lying a little way from the bridge. He thought some traveller must have lost it. But as he moved on he saw a man lying motionless behind a thicket. Alarmed, he called to his companion Ramu.

Ramu did not go up to the bushes. He stood a few paces away and called, "Babu, can you hear me?" There was no reply. Gokul noticed a bag on the ground. Its strap had not been torn, but the bag was open. The two feared there had been an accident. "Don't touch anything. Inform the police," Gokul said. Ramu dialled the emergency number and clearly described the canal, bridge and direction of the paved road. The officer on the phone told them to keep people from crowding the place and not to move anything.

People began coming from the surrounding fields. Some said a vehicle had struck the man during the night; others thought he had fallen into the canal. But the body lay not in the water, but a little above the bank. Holding back the gathering, Gokul said, "We haven't seen what happened. We'll tell the police only what we saw. Don't make guesses." A young man raised his phone to take a photograph. Ramu stopped his hand. "Don't circulate pictures like this before his family has heard." The young man was displeased but lowered his phone.

The sky was clearing when the first police vehicle arrived. The officer on duty asked everyone to step back. He recorded Gokul's and Ramu's names, the time of the call and the things they had first noticed. In the bag beside the body were an old spectacle case, a packet of medicine and some papers. The police documented where the objects had been found and arranged to preserve them for further examination. An identity card in a pocket bore the name Naresh Mandal. The police did not draw a final conclusion from the name alone; the family would need to identify him.

At that hour Rekha was making tea at Naresh's house. When her brother had not returned during the night, she had called him. At first the phone rang; later it was switched off. She had thought perhaps he was held up by an emergency at the office, yet Naresh never spent a night away without a word. Their father had risen twice to ask, “Has Naresh come?” The second time Rekha had reassured him falsely, “He'll be here any moment.” When the police called at dawn, the weight of that unfulfilled assurance pressed upon her chest. Naresh's wife Seema had gone to her mother's house two days earlier with their son to see her ailing mother. Rekha had considered telephoning her in the night, but held back in the hope that her brother would return. Hearing the morning news, Seema immediately set out for Navgarh with her son.

“Is there a Naresh Mandal in your family?” the officer asked. “Yes, he's my brother,” Rekha answered. “You'll have to come to the police station or near the place where he was found. We need someone to identify a person.” Rekha's hands trembled. “What's happened to him? Is he all right?” The officer did not offer reassurance he could not substantiate. “Please bring someone with you. We'll explain the details.” Rekha called her neighbour Shyam Babu, asked another neighbour to sit with her father and left with Shyam Babu.

Before going to the scene, Rekha reached the hospital's emergency department, where Naresh's body had been brought on police instructions. A doctor had already confirmed his death. During formal identification, Rekha looked at her brother's forehead and called his name. No answer came. She tried to stand, but her knees gave way. Shyam Babu supported her. The police officer gave her time and did not question her immediately. Shyam Babu offered a glass of water. She drank a mouthful, then said, “Yesterday he said he was bringing medicine home. He bought it, but he never reached home.”

The first rumour in the market was that Naresh had died in a road accident. Some said the canal bridge was dark at night. Others claimed he had been struck by a vehicle transporting illicit liquor. There was as yet no evidence for either claim. When a journalist questioned Gokul, he answered plainly, “I saw the body. I saw neither an accident nor a fight.” That simple sentence was among the most useful pieces of information that day. Everyone reaching the canal bank seemed eager to add a story, but no eyewitness to the incident had come forward.

The chemist heard of Naresh's death and examined the previous evening's sales register. Naresh had indeed bought his father's medicine,

and the shopkeeper had handed him a receipt before he left. He remembered that Naresh's phone had rung once at the counter, but he had not heard what was said. He decided to give this information to the police. He had no desire to turn what lay beyond his own observation into a story.

When Naina arrived at the office, Hari Narayan was standing at the gate. His bunch of keys was in his hand, but he was not opening the door. “What's happened?” she asked. “Naresh Babu... they found him beside the canal. The hospital says he's no more,” Hari Narayan said softly. Naina stopped where she stood. Only yesterday she had spoken to him about the appointment records. Reaching into her bag, she took out her mobile and tried to telephone Rekha. There was no answer. She felt it would be wrong to add questions to the family's burden just then.

When Kusum arrived, she sat near the central desk and began to weep. “Yesterday he told me not to blame anyone without proof,” she said. “Today he himself is gone.” Kiran came out of her room. Hearing the news, she gripped a chair to steady herself. In her mind she saw Naresh's written questions, receipt of which she had acknowledged the previous day. Someone called Ratan Singh. He did not believe it at first. “An accident?” he asked. “We don't know yet,” Kiran replied. “His body is at the hospital.” Ratan said he would come immediately.

Naina went to the accounts-room doorway but did not enter. There was a pen on the desk, a file bound with red thread and a glass of water. Absence alters the appearance of things. The objects that had been instruments of work only yesterday now caused her pain merely to look at them. “Shall I keep the room locked?” Hari Narayan asked. “Yes. No one should touch the papers. The police can examine what they need,” Naina answered. Hearing this, Kiran decided to retain the key herself and told Kusum to lock the accounts room.

Abhay received a call at the newspaper office. Manjari first told him to get confirmation from the hospital. On hearing Naresh's name, Abhay was silent for a moment. He had met him near the gate after Savita's protest the day before. Naresh had said that accusations must not be made without evidence. Now Abhay faced the question of what should be written. He went to the hospital, sought an official statement from the police and took no photograph without the family's permission. In his report's opening line, he wrote that Naresh's body had been found beside the canal and that the cause of death was under investigation.

In the hospital corridor an employee explained the post-mortem procedure to Rekha. Her hand trembled as she signed the papers. Shyam Babu gave her time to read each page. At one point Rekha asked, "Will all this tell us why my brother died?" The employee answered, "The medical cause of death can be established. How the incident happened will become clear through the police investigation." Rekha signed. She understood the difference between the two procedures, but that understanding did nothing to lessen her grief.

Investigators continued working at the scene through the afternoon. Earthen tracks ran on both sides of the bridge; rain during the night could have blurred many marks. One officer noticed crushed grass a little distance from where Naresh's body had been found. On the other side, tyre marks lay on the road, but goods vehicles regularly used the same route. It was impossible to identify any particular vehicle from the marks alone. The scene, its objects and the photographs were recorded in order. The investigators put forward no conclusion prematurely.

After an initial examination, the doctor said there were signs of injuries on the body, and their character meant that the assumption of a simple fall into the canal would not be enough. A detailed post-mortem report would be needed to establish the cause of death. The police recorded this information in writing. They did not consider it appropriate to link Naresh's death immediately to the ongoing inquiry into Poonam's disappearance, but decided to gather information about his office and his recent work.

Ratan Singh reached the hospital wearing a white kurta. The contractor Virendra Rai accompanied him. Ratan tried to console Rekha. "Nareshji was a long-serving employee. The institution will give whatever assistance is needed," he said. Rekha looked at him. "I don't want money now. I want to know where my brother went yesterday. He said he was coming home." "He left the office in the evening," Ratan replied. "I don't know what happened after that." Virendra stood to one side. Abhay made no comment on seeing him; being present at a hospital was not evidence of a crime.

As Virendra left the hospital, he asked his driver to bring the car round. "Shall we go back by the canal road?" the driver asked. "Take the main road," Virendra answered. Both remarks were ordinary, but a man standing nearby began telling someone else they were a secret signal. Abhay heard the whisper and stopped it at once. "Without evidence, it's wrong to connect someone's choice of route with a killing." The man

fell silent. Rumour, begun at the site of the incident, had reached the hospital.

By evening the news of Naresh's death was given to his father. The old man remained silent for a long time. Sitting beside him, Rekha said, “Bhaiya won't come home now.” Her father placed a hand on the cot and asked, “Did he get my spectacles repaired?” Rekha could not answer. He asked nothing further. The medicine Naresh had bought had been entered in the police record and was being held at the hospital. Whenever Rekha thought of that packet, she could hear his voice on his last telephone call.

At dusk Seema reached home with their son. Stopping at the doorway, the boy asked, “Where's Papa?” Instead of answering, Seema clasped him to her breast. Rekha took her sister-in-law's hand and led her inside. The elderly father removed his spectacles. That night Seema stayed awake with Rekha, while the boy tried to fall asleep under a neighbour woman's care.

The employees worked half-heartedly throughout the day. Straightening the corner of Naresh's register, Kusum said, “His family should receive whatever salary is still owed to him.” “We'll seek a written decision from management,” Kiran replied. “And what about the unpaid wages we've been asking about?” Kusum then asked. Kiran said nothing. Even on a day of mourning, questions of livelihood did not cease. Naresh's empty chair had only made them more severe.

When Naina returned from the hospital that evening, Saraswati Devi was sitting at the door. She too had heard the news. “Was Naresh Babu a good man?” her mother asked. “He never pretended to know what he didn't know,” Naina answered. “There aren't many people like that in an office.” Her mother was silent. After a while she said, “Grief never comes alone to the house of the dead. Worries about earning a living arrive with it.” Naina thought of Rekha, whose father's treatment and household expenses depended on Naresh's income.

Chandan was unusually silent that night. When he heard the news at dinner, the spoon slipped from his hand. “Did you know Nareshji?” Naina asked. “He was the company's accountant. I'd seen him at the warehouse sometimes.” “And?” “Nothing.” Naina saw fear on her brother's face, but did not decide that it must have a single cause. Amid rumours of murder, accident and illicit transport, she had no basis yet for understanding his silence.

Manoj Sah had come and gone from the warehouse office two or three times during the day. Whenever the workers talked about Naresh's death, Manoj told them to concentrate on their work. A young man asked, "Didn't Naresh Babu look after the accounts for the evening vehicles?" "Someone else will look after them now," Manoj answered. "There's no benefit in leaving vehicles standing idle." Those listening could not tell whether he was making an effort to sound ordinary or whether his tone truly was ordinary. Chandan watched him from a distance and slipped his phone into his pocket.

As darkness fell, the crowd beside the canal bridge thinned. Beneath the bridge the water flowed at its customary pace, but fear from the morning's discovery still clung to the bank. The police arranged a guard so that nothing remaining at the scene relevant to the inquiry would be disturbed. Taking his fishing nets home, Gokul Sahni told his wife, "I won't cast my net in the canal today." "Why?" she asked. "A family's been ruined. My heart isn't in it." He ate dinner that night, but the scene he had witnessed beside the canal would not let him sleep.

That evening several people came again to ask Gokul whether he had seen a fight during the night. He repeated his first statement: "I saw the body in the morning. I wasn't there at night." One young man was dissatisfied. "What does that tell us?" "If I speak about what I didn't see, I'll be lying," Gokul said. He also told his son not to repeat rumours heard at home as fact at school.

For his newspaper report, Abhay checked three statements separately: where the body was found, the family's identification and the investigation into the cause of death. A colleague said, "If we put 'murder' in the headline, people will read it." "If we call it murder before the investigation yields evidence, we'll be giving readers something unverified," Abhay replied. "If it was murder, let the evidence emerge." Manjari agreed. The report made limited mention of the financial questions Naresh had recently raised at his office; it did not claim that one event had definitely caused the other.

That night Rekha wanted to open her brother's desk drawer and look at what he had written. Shyam Babu gently advised her to leave everything in place in case the police requested papers for their inquiry. She stopped her hand. On the desk lay Naresh's old pen and the household expense ledger. She picked up the pen, then put it back. She remembered her brother in childhood, teaching others at the village

school not to touch someone else's notebook. Today she was afraid to touch things in her own home because of the investigation.

A message from Rekha reached Naina: "Bhaiya was troubled by something at the office yesterday. If you know anything, please tell the police." Naina sat down to write what she knew. She had personally seen Naresh question the accounts for Poonam's group, ask for the original authorisation and insist on written replies. That was all. She could not identify anyone as his killer. Writing sentence after sentence, she understood that protecting the truth required restraint even in the midst of grief. She resolved to tell the police what she had seen the following morning.

The incident by the canal was no longer only one family's mourning. Employees of the employment institution were afraid, applicants who had paid deposits had more questions than ever, and Poonam's family feared that the search for her would somehow be pushed aside. There was still no answer to how Naresh had died. But one thing was clear: when rumours, fear and self-interest move in different directions after a death, gathering evidence becomes more important than ever.

Chapter 24: Murder and Investigation

At the Navgarh police station's morning meeting, Inspector Sujata Kumari was presented with the details of Naresh Mandal's death. Rather than begin with rumours from every quarter, she examined the report on the scene. The body had been found west of the canal; Gokul Sahni had made the first report; the family had identified the dead man; and the medical report was awaited. "Have you recorded the time of the first call? Are all the photographs of the scene from before the body was moved preserved?" she asked. Her fellow officer answered both questions. Then she asked, "Have the statements of those who saw the body been kept separate from what others merely heard?"

"Two people saw it first. The others arrived later," the officer replied. "Then record the statements of those two clearly," Sujata said. "Don't mix anyone else's guesses with them." Gokul's insistence that he had seen a dead body, not the cause of death, was important in this case. Sujata did not want to announce any names at the beginning of an investigation. The search for truth required patience, especially when the dead man had already been asking questions about financial irregularities.

Before noon the preliminary medical report arrived. Some of the injuries on the body did not fit the explanation of an ordinary fall. Looking at their nature and the other available facts, the doctor had expressed concern that a violent assault might have occurred. Some findings of the detailed examination were still pending. Comparing the medical report with the record of the scene, Sujata directed that a formal investigation proceed on suspicion of murder. She made one distinction clear to her colleague: "Investigating a suspected murder and identifying a murderer are two different things. We have grounds for the first. We have no proof of the second yet."

The station was already crowded because of news about Savita's examination protest. Some were instantly linking Naresh's death to the question-paper leak; others spoke of an illicit liquor gang. Sujata ordered that each complaint be entered separately. "The same institution's name is appearing, so we'll examine the possibility of a connection. But writing down a possibility doesn't turn it into evidence," she said. Naresh's livelihood, office work, family relationships and movements on

his last day were all matters for investigation. Choosing one story and forcing every other fact into it was not criminal investigation.

Rekha Mandal came to the station with Shyam Babu. She had not slept, but had prepared herself to recount her brother's last day in order. Sujata offered her water before asking, "What time did your brother leave home yesterday?" Rekha gave the time. "We spoke about the hospital at midday. In the evening he said he'd come home after buying medicine. He never arrived." Sujata asked her next question gently. "Was anything in particular troubling him?" "He said there were questions about the office accounts. I asked whether he'd got into a dispute. He said, 'If asking questions causes a dispute, does that mean I shouldn't ask?'"

Sujata tried to record Rekha's words exactly. "Did you yourself examine the office accounts?" she asked. Rekha shook her head. "No. Bhaiya didn't tell us everything in detail at home. But he had been worried for the last two days. Sometimes he wrote in a notebook at night." "Where is that notebook?" "There are several notebooks on his desk at home. I haven't moved anything." "You did well," Sujata said. "If necessary, they'll be examined through the proper legal procedure. Make a list of the ordinary household belongings you remember." "Was my brother killed because he told the truth?" Rekha asked. "We have no proof of that yet," Sujata replied. "But we'll examine everything he said."

Another officer, Subodh, brought initial information about Naresh's phone. The family did not have it, and the inventory of things found near the body did not clearly mention it either. Sujata directed that the missing item be recorded. "It may have fallen into the canal; someone may have picked it up; or it may have been left somewhere else. Examine each possibility separately." The process of obtaining the phone-use records under the applicable rules was begun. Rekha remembered that the phone had rung at first and later been switched off, but this sequence did not, of itself, establish murder.

After taking Rekha's statement, Sujata summoned the chemist. The shopkeeper gave the time on the receipt and said that Naresh had left in his usual condition. He remembered a phone ringing but had not heard the conversation. "Did you see anyone waiting for Naresh outside the shop?" Sujata asked. "There was a crowd. I didn't recognise everyone." Sujata recorded that answer as it stood. They now had one confirmed point in the timeline of Naresh's evening: the chemist's shop. What route he had taken afterwards remained unknown.

Abhay met Rekha as she left the station. He did not overwhelm her with questions. “Whenever you feel able, I'd like to ask about Nareshji's work,” he said. “My brother met you one day, didn't he?” Rekha asked. “Yes, outside the office. He said no accusations should be made without evidence.” Tears filled Rekha's eyes. “He was like that at home too. He never called anyone wrong without hearing them.” Abhay offered his condolences but did not turn the encounter into an emotional quotation for a news story.

Naina arrived at the police station with a written account of what she had observed. She described the changes in Poonam's appointed workplace, the discrepancy between training dates and Naresh's request for the original authorisation. “Did you hear anyone threaten Nareshji?” Sujata asked. “Not directly. Kiran Madam told him to be careful. I don't know what she meant by it.” “Did Nareshji give you confidential papers?” “No. He told even me to write down what I'd seen, not what I imagined.” Sujata acknowledged receipt of Naina's statement and told her that she might be questioned again if necessary.

Naina then raised Poonam's case. “She's still missing. Her sister Reena has reported a threatening call. Nareshji was examining the accounts for her group.” Sujata called for the earlier complaint. She saw that the institution's different documents gave different locations for Poonam's appointment. “The institution is the same in both cases,” she said, “but for now I need separate evidence in each. The search for Poonam must not stop.” Naina felt somewhat reassured. She had feared that all attention would shift to Naresh's death and Poonam's search would once again be neglected.

Outside the station Abhay met Naina. “Are you all right?” he asked. “It's hard to say I am. Until yesterday I could ask him for evidence. Today he isn't alive. But I've told the police what I know.” “That will help the investigation move forward,” Abhay said. “I must wait for more confirmed facts before reporting.” “Will you put Nareshji's murder and the office fraud in the same story?” Naina asked. “Whether the two are connected is a matter for investigation,” Abhay replied. “I'll tell readers where the investigation stands, not pronounce a verdict.”

Meanwhile, Poonam's sister Reena had the details of the threatening call entered at the station. The officer asked when the message had come and whether she recognised the voice. “I didn't recognise it. They only said to stop searching,” Reena answered. Holding back tears, she added, “We're all frightened, but we can't stop looking for Didi.” Sujata

attached the inquiry into this threat to Poonam's case, not as direct evidence of Naresh's murder.

Inspector Sujata arrived at the employment institution with two fellow officers. At the gate Hari Narayan handed over the visitors' register. Kiran came out of her room. Introducing herself, Sujata said, “We need to examine Naresh Mandal's working hours, attendance, recent duties and the condition of his accounting records.” “We'll cooperate,” Kiran replied. “The accounts room has been locked since yesterday.” “Who has the key?” “I do.” Kiran held it out. Before opening the room, Sujata had the names of all those present and the time recorded, so no one could later claim that the papers had been altered without authorisation.

Naresh's chair was empty. The piles of papers looked orderly, but merely looking at the desk could not establish whether pages were missing from the open files. Sujata had the accounting registers inventoried and gave instructions to secure necessary documents in accordance with the proper procedure. She asked Kusum which employees had assisted Naresh with his recent work. “I prepared lists of payments. Naina compared the applicants' receipts. Nareshji had been asking for the original authorisation letters.” “Did management answer him?” Sujata asked. “They agreed in writing to take seven days,” Kusum replied.

Kiran showed her a copy of the acknowledgement. Sujata recorded its date, signature and time of receipt. “Has a draft reply to this letter been prepared?” she asked. “Papers were being requested from some departments,” Kiran said. “Which departments?” Kiran named three. “We'll verify that,” Sujata answered. She then asked, “What sort of man was Nareshji?” “He followed the rules. Sometimes he asked too many questions.” “Did those questions inconvenience anyone?” Kiran fell silent, then said, “It was difficult to assemble the papers, but I know of no personal dispute.”

Ratan Singh arrived at the office while the inquiry was under way. Sujata informed him that she was questioning people about Naresh's death and the financial matters he had raised. “We'll cooperate fully,” Ratan said. “Naresh was a long-serving employee. News of the accident has shocked me.” “The circumstances of his death are being examined as a suspected murder,” Sujata said. “Your institution's papers could be important.” Ratan's face stiffened slightly. “An institution doesn't

become guilty because someone suspects it." "I haven't said it does," Sujata replied. "Help us by answering the questions."

"At what time did Nareshji leave the office on his last day?" Sujata asked. "I saw him a little before evening. The visitors' register or security guard can give the exact time." "Did you have any dispute with him?" "We disagreed about the accounts. I had given him seven days." "How are Manoj Sah and Virendra Rai connected to this office?" "Manoj looks after transport arrangements; Virendra is a construction contractor. They have separate contracts." Sujata requested copies of the contracts. Ratan instructed his assistant to arrange for the papers to be made available.

During the investigation Vibha Singh came to the office. She was grieved by Naresh's death, but questions about withdrawals made in her own name were also on her mind. She wanted to tell Sujata something, then realised she needed to prepare a separate list of the household financial documents. Sujata gave her a time to meet, with the details, if she wished to provide information. Vibha looked at Ratan's face; he was silently watching his wife. Amid the office crowd, they said nothing to each other.

Manoj Sah was also summoned for questioning. He said his concern was vehicle permits and warehouse work. "When did you last meet Naresh Babu?" Sujata asked. "We spoke near the gate yesterday. He was asking about wages." "Was there a quarrel?" "No. He asked for the accounts, and I said the office would have the papers." Sujata recorded the time he gave. "Where were you last night?" Manoj listed certain places and times. Sujata directed her officers to obtain separate confirmation from the people concerned. Without checking his account, she declared Manoj neither guilty nor innocent.

The inquiry turned to vehicles using the canal road. There were two shops near the bridge. A camera was fixed outside one, but its field of view covered only a portion of the main road. Sujata ordered that the original footage be preserved. "It rained that night, and the light was poor," the shopkeeper said. "Then we mustn't pretend that what isn't clear is clear," Sujata replied. The times and directions of some vehicles might be confirmed, but they still did not know which, if any, was connected with Naresh's death. An incomplete picture could not be made into an entire incident.

Sujata decided to seek available details of vehicle permits from the transport office. There was much talk of illicit liquor outside the police

station, but no proven connection between that trade and Naresh's death. She told an officer, "Ordinary construction materials also go along that road at night. If we call every vehicle suspicious, it'll become harder to identify the one that actually matters." Times, directions, registered details and eyewitness statements were therefore being compared in sequence.

One of the two streetlights near the canal bridge was out. Sujata requested maintenance records from the municipal office. If the light had been broken for a long time, travellers at night might have had trouble seeing the road. If it had failed only that night, the cause would need separate examination. A municipal employee said the correct date could be supplied after checking the register. Sujata made clear that a broken streetlight was not in itself evidence of a crime, though it could help explain conditions at the scene.

That evening Abhay discussed the planned report with Manjari. "Will you write about Naresh's family?" she asked. "Not about their private grief without Rekha's permission. But I can publish her question: where and how did a man die while returning home from his office?" "Make it clear that the official investigation is proceeding on suspicion of murder," Manjari said. "Don't automatically present the paper leak, illicit liquor and Poonam's case as crimes of a single gang." Abhay agreed. He wanted a sequence of verified facts, not sensation.

As Naina put the office files in order, she tried not to look at Naresh's empty chair. "Should we keep working in this office or not?" Kusum asked. "People whose livelihoods depend on it can't simply leave at once," Naina said. "But we won't certify doubtful papers as correct." Kusum remembered Naresh's old instruction: write what you have seen. They agreed that they would always issue a receipt when accepting a new deposit and would not promise services whose details were unclear.

After evening fell, Sujata set three sheets apart on her desk. The first held the timeline of Naresh's last day, the second the written questions he had raised at the office, and the third the record of where the body had been found. She left blank spaces beside several questions. Whom had Naresh met that evening? Which road did he take after leaving the chemist for home? Where was his phone? Had an office disagreement turned into personal enmity? The investigation could proceed without answers to these questions, but no conclusion could yet be given.

Before the first edition went to press, Manjari asked Abhay once more whether he had named anyone without proof. Abhay removed a

line that might have led readers to think Ratan's public connections were sufficient cause for suspicion. Instead, he wrote that the police were examining the institution's financial records and the employee's recent responsibilities. The report grew shorter, but more reliable. Abhay understood that one way of honouring the dead was to do justice to the facts.

Rekha sat beside her father at home. With Naresh gone, the household accounts had begun to change from that very day. Medicines, groceries, electricity bills—all would still have to be paid on time. For the first time, she opened the household expense ledger. Naresh had recorded even small amounts clearly. On its last page were the words "Next doctor's appointment." Tears filled Rekha's eyes. As she closed the ledger, she said to herself, "Bhaiya, I'll look for the answer to what you've left unfinished." Yet she knew that one person's courage would not suffice. Finding that answer would also require a lawful investigation and truthfulness from others.

When Chandan came home that night, he found Naina looking at the police papers. "Didi, will the police question you again?" he asked. "If they do, I'll tell them what I know." Chandan remained silent. "Do you remember anything about Nareshji?" Naina asked. "I saw him at the warehouse sometimes. What else would I know?" Naina looked into his eyes but did not press him. Fear was visible on his face. Whether it came from his debt, Manoj's threats or something else was still unclear.

Late that night, Abhay telephoned Naina. "Inspector Sujata said clearly today that the investigation is continuing. I'll write nothing beyond that," he told her. "I'm afraid," Naina said, "but I'll stand beside Nareshji's family." "Standing beside them also means refusing to abandon the path of evidence," Abhay replied. For a while neither spoke. A man had died beside the canal. Somewhere among papers, witnesses and difficult questions lay the answer to his death. Reaching it would take time—and now every passing day would weigh heavily on one household or another.

PART THREE

HATRED AND BETRAYAL

Chapter 25: The Condolence Meeting

From early that morning, people had been coming and going outside Naresh Mandal's home. There was no grand gate, only an old iron door, one leaf of which had bent slightly out of shape at the bottom. Beyond it lay a small courtyard, with a raised tulsi shrine on one side and a bucket full of water on the other. Women from the neighbourhood sat upon a mat spread across the courtyard. Some spoke in low voices; others silently watched Rekha Mandal's face. Rekha had not slept all night. Her eyes were red, yet whenever a visitor asked what had happened, she answered in a clear voice, "He was supposed to come home. He never came." Naresh's wife, Seema, was inside the room, looking after their son. Every so often the child glanced towards the door, as though his father might return from work as he did every day. Rekha urged her sister-in-law to eat, but the plate placed in Seema's hands remained untouched for a long while.

Naresh's father, Harinarayan Mandal, sat at one end of a charpoy. He held his old spectacles, wiping them again and again. His son's death was not merely a terrible piece of news for him: Naresh had been the household's principal source of income. Rekha's education, his father's medicines, Seema's household expenses, the child's school fees, the monthly groceries, the rent—every obligation had been met from that salary. The old father said, "When the boy went out in the morning, he told me he'd come back early in the evening. I kept watching for him." No one had an answer to give him.

Rekha brought out an envelope. It held the electricity bill, receipts for medicines and slips recording credit at the shop. Her father gave it a sidelong look. "Will you have to manage all this now?" Rekha slipped the envelope beneath the end of her sari and said, "Whatever there is now, I'll take care of it." The sentence was brief, but it carried a weight that not everyone sitting in the courtyard could comprehend.

That afternoon Rekha's neighbour Sarita arrived with an old notebook. "Some of your brother's loans are written down here," she said. Rekha started. Sarita quickly added, "Not money he owed me. I borrowed it from him. I had to pay my daughter's school fees, and he gave me two thousand rupees without asking a single question. Now it's time to repay it." Rekha opened the notebook. In his small

handwriting, Naresh had recorded: 'Sarita's daughter: school fees; look into it next month.' Rekha said, "You must have needs at home as well. Keep it for now." Sarita replied firmly, "No. My daughter is studying because he helped her. Now I must honour my debt." This was the first money to return to the house of mourning, not as charity but as the consequence of Naresh's honest dealings.

Another neighbour, Gangaram, asked Harinarayan as he handed him his medicine, "How much did Naresh Babu earn each month?" Rekha was in no state to reply. Gangaram said, "I think the people of the neighbourhood can arrange a month's rations." At first his father refused. "I don't want collections in the name of my son's funeral rites." Gangaram answered gently, "Not a collection for funeral rites. Just as your family stood beside others in their troubles, people will stand beside you now." Rekha intervened. "Whatever is spent from now on will be recorded. We will accept people's affection, but we will not go begging before anyone." This much she had learnt from her brother's orderly life: even in grief, an account has its dignity.

When Naina reached the turning into the lane, she met two colleagues from her office, Kusum and Mahesh. Kusum said, "Yesterday Ratan Babu told all the employees to attend the condolence gathering." Naina replied, "I've come of my own accord, not because the office told me to." Kusum was silent at first; then she said quietly, "That's true. But everyone is afraid. The employer's signature is still on our employment papers." Naina understood her anxiety. It was easy to describe resigning as a moral decision; she knew from daily experience how hard it was to keep a household going without wages.

Entering the courtyard, Naina sat beside Rekha. Rekha grasped her hand and asked, "Didi, had Bhaiya quarrelled with someone at the office?" Naina did not rush to answer. "I never saw him quarrelling. He had raised questions about certain accounts and original documents. He wanted written answers." Rekha asked again, "Were those questions so serious that Bhaiya could never come home?" Naina said, "I don't know. I've told the police what I saw. If anything else comes back to me, I'll tell them that too."

One of Rekha's maternal aunts murmured, "What will all this questioning achieve? The body has come home." Rekha turned towards her. "Mami, shouldn't we know whether Bhaiya died in an accident or was killed? And if he was killed, why?" The aunt hid her face in the end of her sari. For a few moments no voice rose in the courtyard.

Abhay arrived a little later. He carried no camera, only a small diary. He stopped at the gate and first asked Rekha's permission. "I've come not for a news report but to share in your grief. If you think it right, we can talk later." Rekha said, "Please sit. Write one thing: Bhaiya never misappropriated anyone's money. All his life he kept accounts." Closing his diary, Abhay said, "That is your belief. We also need to gather the documents with which it can be verified. Without checking, I will pronounce no one guilty and no one innocent."

Sitting near Rekha, Abhay said, "I'll report only what the police disclose about the investigation. Your family's private affairs will not appear in the news." Rekha replied, "My brother's name will appear in the report, but do not attach to that name the things he never did." Abhay closed his diary. "When a man dies, he has no opportunity to defend himself. A journalist must be doubly careful at such a time." After a brief pause Rekha asked, "Will you people be able to find the truth?" Abhay answered, "We can ask questions and examine documents. The investigation and the court will reach the final decision. But we won't allow the questions to be silenced." For the first time Rekha heard an answer that made no show of promising the impossible.

Outside the gate two young men were talking. One claimed that Naresh himself had taken some money; the other said that powerful people had had him killed. Their listeners added conjectures of their own. Naina stepped outside and said, "If any of you have something you saw or heard as a matter of fact, tell the police. Don't invent whatever stories you please about a dead man." The first young man grew embarrassed, but the second asked, "Then you tell us what happened." Naina answered plainly, "I don't know. There's no shame in saying you don't know what you don't know." At that moment she understood that the pain of a condolence gathering came not only from tears: judgements uttered without evidence could wound as well.

Just then a car arrived from the organisation. Ratan Singh stood at the gate with his associate Manoj. Ratan was dressed in a spotless white kurta. Entering the courtyard, he touched Harinarayan's feet and said, "I feel this loss as though it were in my own family. Naresh worked with me for many years." Removing his spectacles, Harinarayan said, "Then tell me what had been troubling him. He wouldn't say anything at home." Ratan's eyes lowered a little. "Accounts work always brings pressure. But I had no idea such an accident would occur."

Naina flinched at the word 'accident'. Why was Ratan repeating that one word, even after the medical suspicions and the police investigation? She made no accusation, merely kept his words in mind. Rekha said directly, "The police are investigating this as a murder. Why do you call it an accident?" Ratan answered, "I haven't seen the final report. I merely repeated what I'd heard." Manoj kept looking towards the gate.

Ratan offered financial assistance. "The office will give the family a sum of money." Rekha asked, "And my brother's outstanding salary and his other entitlements?" Ratan said, "Yes, we'll go through the accounts." Rekha replied, "We want a written statement of those amounts. And answers to my brother's written questions as well." This time Ratan did not answer at once. "These are matters for later, not a time of mourning." Rekha said softly, "For me, that later time will never arrive. The household's expenses begin today."

The offer of a donation from Ratan brought a frown to Harinarayan's brow. "If you want to help, give us a written account. My son's wages are one thing, compensation another, and your donation something else," he said. Ratan was momentarily disconcerted. "Babuji, what need is there for paperwork at a time like this?" Rekha replied, "My brother raised questions in that office precisely because of paperwork. Now we will accept nothing without it." Ratan was silent for an instant, then said, "Very well. The office will send the details." Manoj stood by the doorway listening. For a moment a certain stiffness appeared on his face; then he went towards the car.

After Ratan left, Rekha's aunt said, "They're offering so much assistance. Accept it. That's how the world works now." Rekha replied, "I'm not refusing help. But if wages owed to him are called charity, the value of the work Bhaiya did will be diminished." Sarita took the aunt's hand. "Leave it. The girl understands what she's saying." Rekha resolved that the following week she would open a separate ledger: one for the wages due to her brother, her father's medical treatment and the family's regular expenses. Making such minute arrangements amid mourning seemed cruel to her, but necessity does not wait upon anyone's grief.

After Ratan's departure, quiet slowly returned to the courtyard. Kusum came over to Naina. "Rekha is very brave," she said. Naina replied, "Call it courage or compulsion. When the mainstay of a home is gone, everyone else must learn a great many things in a single day." Kusum opened her purse and took out some money. Joining her palms,

Rekha said, "Not now, Didi. If there's a need I'll tell you. All I want is the truth."

By the end of the day Rekha was exhausted, yet she gathered her papers and put them carefully away.

In the afternoon Inspector Sujata arrived with two constables. On entering the house, she asked those waiting for news to remain outside. Rekha showed her a notebook Naresh had written in. It contained household expenses, names associated with the office and questions scattered among the entries. Sujata examined the pages one by one. Some questions appeared to concern Naresh's official responsibilities, but the notebook was not, by itself, evidence of murder. She asked Rekha, "Where did your brother usually keep this notebook?" "Beside his bed, under the pillow." "Do you remember any other ledger, phone or paper?" "His phone never came home. That's what worries me."

Sujata arranged for photographs of the notebook's pages to be preserved according to procedure and for the necessary records concerning the original notebook to be made. She explained to Rekha how difficult it would be to remain patient for as long as the investigation took. "I won't give you false hope," she said. "But whatever evidence is found will be examined. No conclusion will be written under anyone's pressure."

Inspector Sujata asked Rekha about the sequence of the notebook's pages. "Did your brother write all this at home or at the office?" Rekha answered, "Some of it he wrote at night after dinner. He used to say it wasn't right to bring the office's original ledger home. He would write down his own questions separately." Sujata looked through the pages. In places there were only dates and sums, in others question marks. She said, "This may suggest directions for the investigation. But a person's name appearing here doesn't prove that person committed a crime." Rekha nodded. The sight of her brother's handwriting brought tears close again, but this time she steadied herself.

Sujata surveyed the house. Curious people had gathered near the gate; some were trying to photograph the courtyard with their phones held aloft. She told the constable that no photographs were to be taken inside without the family's permission. Rekha said quietly, "I lost my mother long ago. Now all I have left is my father. A photograph of Bhaiya's body has been circulating outside. Every night, as soon as Father closes his eyes, he sees it." Sujata replied, "No one's death is a spectacle for the

public. If you experience any threat or pressure, inform us directly." Rekha listened closely to that small undertaking.

Outside in the lane a few young men watched Ratan's car and talked. One said, "Such an important man has come; now the matter will die down." Another answered, "Does the arrival of an important man put an end to questions?" Abhay heard both remarks but did not put them in his report. Without turning conjecture into fact, he could still understand how deep the crisis of trust ran in the town.

Towards evening Naina went with Rekha into the kitchen. The stove had been lit only a little over the past few days. Neighbouring women had prepared meals for them. As she served rice onto a plate, Rekha said, "Bhaiya used to say that behind every account you must see a person's face. Not just the figures." Naina stopped. Naresh had practised that principle at the office too: behind many receipts lay the hard-earned money of young women like Poonam.

Rice and dal were served in the kitchen, but Rekha could swallow no more than two mouthfuls. Naina helped wash the dishes afterwards. Rekha said, "These days most people who come here make grand speeches. No one asks whether Father took his medicine last night." Filling a glass with water, Naina said, "I'll come again tomorrow. Tell me if you need medicines brought." Rekha took her hand. "You worked with Bhaiya. That makes you one of our own. But you too may find yourself in danger." Naina answered, "I won't conceal what I know. I make no claim beyond that."

On the way home Naina paused at a fruit stall. The vendor had known Naresh. Suddenly he said, "That gentleman bought oranges here two days ago. He said they were for his father." Naina listened attentively even to this small detail. Naresh's life had consisted of much more than the dates and times to which the police documents would reduce it. He had been an ordinary man who bought fruit for his father, set aside money for his sister's school fees and hoped to return home every evening. Naina felt that finding an answer to why such an ordinary life had not been protected was not solely the police's responsibility; it was also a responsibility of society's memory.

Returning home, Naina saw the driver of a private bus calling out to passengers. Ordinary life in Navgarh had resumed its pace. Shops had opened, vegetables were being sold, offices were closing. Yet inside Naresh's house, time remained caught on the night he had failed to return. Naina resolved to remember not the horror of his death alone,

but the questions Naresh had raised. She would not let a man's death remain nothing more than a rumour or a newspaper headline.

Chapter 26: The Burden of Blame

The following day, employees stood reading a notice posted at the main gate of the Nai Disha Employment Centre. It announced that, following the death of Naresh Mandal, an internal review would be conducted of the accounting department's records, and that no employee was to open old files without permission. Naina read the notice twice. Documents that had been essential to the inquiry until yesterday were now being kept beyond the employees' reach. She asked Kusum, "Whose signature authorised this notice?" Kusum replied, "It came from Ratan Babu's office. Kiran Madam said everyone would have to obey it."

Silence hung over the office. Flowers lay on Naresh's desk, but the drawer was locked. Mahesh said, "Now don't ask about accounts or look at old receipts. No one will escape the consequences." Naina replied, "If this is a police order, we must obey it. But concealing facts merely because the owner says so is not right." Mahesh said anxiously, "Didi, please don't speak so openly. I have two children at home." Naina fell silent; Mahesh's fear was not unfounded.

Reading the notice at the gate again, Mahesh asked, "If the old register is locked away, how will customers get their money back?" Kusum answered, "There should at least be copies of the receipts in the office." Naina said, "Anyone holding an original receipt should keep a copy of it themselves. Customers need written answers, not just assurances." A few applicants had reached the gate by then. Their appointed joining dates had passed; some found that the telephone numbers no longer worked, while others had had their training cancelled. The notice left them bewildered. Mahesh told them to wait, but Naina advised them to note down their application numbers.

A young man named Dharmendra had come with his mother. She wore a small silver nose-ring and carried a cloth bag. "I sold a goat to deposit the money for my son's appointment," she said. "Now they say the accounts are being examined. Will my goat come back to me at once?" No one could answer her. Kiran came to the doorway and said, "Arrangements will be made. Don't create a crowd." The mother replied, "I haven't come to create a crowd. Just tell me when my son will begin work." Naina understood that behind every receipt issued by the office lay some real sacrifice made by a family.

At ten o'clock Ratan called a short meeting of the staff. Kiran sat at his right. "Our organisation is passing through a difficult time," Ratan said. "Naresh's death is tragic. But certain people are taking advantage of the occasion to damage the organisation's reputation." He searched the employees' faces. "Certain sums in the accounts department do not tally. Whatever the investigation finds will come to light."

"Didn't Naresh Babu himself want an inquiry?" Kusum asked. Ratan's voice hardened. "I won't speak insultingly of a man who is dead. But questions of irregularities did exist. First the accounts must be reconciled, then a decision can be made." With that he signalled that the meeting was over. Naina did not get up. "Will the employees receive a written statement of these discrepancies? And when will Nareshji's family receive details of the money promised to them?" Kiran intervened. "Naina, these questions will be answered through the proper channels. Everyone should return to work now."

After the meeting Kiran called Naina aside. "How many times have I told you not to question things in front of everyone?" Naina replied, "I heard accusations being made against Nareshji. He can no longer speak for himself." In a tired voice Kiran said, "Sometimes saving the office is a responsibility too." Naina answered, "Let the office be saved, but not by laying the blame upon an innocent person's name." Kiran was silent for a few moments. She herself sensed that Ratan's words were about more than examining the accounts: the direction in which blame would fall was being fixed. Yet she was caught in the web of her position, her salary and concealed personal relationships.

Coming out of Kiran's room, Naina saw Kusum standing alone at the receipt window. Two new applicants were trying to pay their fees. Kusum said hesitantly, "Management says we haven't stopped taking new applications." Naina replied, "Questions about verifying appointments remain unanswered. If the services and conditions are unclear, it isn't right to accept money." Kusum's voice trembled. "I'm not the owner, Didi. If I lose my job, it'll be difficult to pay the rent at home." Understanding her difficulty, Naina said, "Then ask for a written order. Once you have the order on paper, it will be clear who made the decision."

That evening the employees held a small meeting of their own. Mahesh wanted them to demand clear terms for their wages and work together. Kusum was frightened, but when one employee said he still had not been paid for overtime worked the previous month, the others

began to speak as well. Naina said, "Our purpose isn't to have the organisation closed down. But the accounts of work done must be truthful." The employees decided to submit a collective written petition rather than make individual protests. It accused no one of a crime; it simply demanded clarity about wages, application fees and the status of appointments.

That afternoon a short statement by Ratan appeared in a town newspaper: an internal investigation into financial irregularities at the organisation was under way. Reading its words, Abhay told his editor, Manjari, "Naresh's death and discrepancies in the accounts are two separate matters. If the organisation hints, without proof, that Naresh was at fault, his family will suffer terribly." Manjari replied, "Answer with facts. Print Ratan's statement as it is, but ask permission to obtain the family's response."

A neighbour brought Rekha a copy of the newspaper. She read its first line, then folded the paper. "The very accounts Bhaiya wanted to reconcile—are they now going to blame Bhaiya for those discrepancies?" Her father asked, "What does it say?" Rekha did not answer. Harinarayan took the newspaper; the letters swam before his eyes. "My son never brought a single paisa home apart from his wages," he said. "If he did wrong, show us the evidence. Otherwise, why this insult?"

Abhay spoke to Rekha by telephone. She said plainly, "I don't want to make a statement before a crowd. My grief isn't an exhibit. But write that the family demands an impartial investigation." Abhay copied her words into his diary exactly as she had spoken them. He could not accept anyone remaking another person's memory to suit a news report.

After reading the report, Rekha summoned her brother's old colleague Lakshman. He had retired, but had worked alongside Naresh for years. He said, "If an error is found in the accounts, it is right to investigate. But it isn't right to declare a dead employee responsible and close the case." Rekha asked, "What should we do?" Lakshman said, "Keep copies of every letter you submit, write down the outstanding payments and give all the documents to the investigating officer. Make no statement about a document you haven't seen." Rekha wrote his advice down. She welcomed counsel that offered a course of action instead of anger.

"Will our son's good name be saved?" Harinarayan asked. Lakshman answered softly, "Protecting a reputation begins with establishing the truth. You don't need lies to defend a name." The old father remained

silent for some time. Then he said, "I can't read the papers, but I knew my son. He would wake in the night to check an error of even half a rupee." Rekha placed her hand upon her father's. She was ready to ask questions in Naresh's defence, but not to write the police's conclusions out of her own imagination.

Chandan returned home that evening unusually quiet. Saraswati Devi asked, "What's happened to you? You haven't even eaten your rice properly." Chandan replied, "There wasn't much work." Naina noticed a scratch on his hand. "Where did you get that?" "Caught it on a vehicle gate." Naina asked, "Do you still go to that Manoj Sah?" Chandan looked away. "Sometimes I have to. I still owe him money."

Naina knew Chandan was troubled not only by his search for a job but by the pressure of debt. Since the cancellation of his competitive examination had upset the family's financial calculations, he had begun to carry a burden greater than his years. Naina said, "We'll sit down together and examine the debt. But don't do anything you'll have to regret for the rest of your life." Chandan replied, "Work is never as clean on the inside as it looks from the outside." Naina was startled. "What do you mean?" "Nothing." He got up and left.

Chandan took out his old examination admit cards and looked at them. For those pieces of paper alone he had travelled to a distant town three times—to submit the form, to have an error on the admit card corrected, and to sit the examination. After it was cancelled, the coaching fees had not been refunded; the landlord of his rented room demanded unpaid rent; his friend Vijay had begun answering the phone less often. Vijay's own home was in difficulty, but Chandan had come to regard his loneliness as a humiliation. Once Vijay had told him, "We'll sit the examination again, or find some other work." Chandan had answered, "Let me first get free of the old debts." Now he felt the bitterness of his own words.

At a demonstration by examination candidates, Savita had delivered a short speech: "Investigate the leaked question paper and punish those responsible, but stop calling every candidate a thief." Chandan had attended the meeting but left halfway through. What was said on the platform sounded right, but he did not even have enough money in his pocket for the bus fare. It was in this helplessness that Manoj's offer had seemed the only opportunity available to him. Now he was beginning to see that an opportunity and a trap can sometimes come wrapped in paper of the same colour.

That night Manoj telephoned Chandan. Chandan went out to the veranda. His voice was low, but Naina could make out the words ‘old vehicle’, ‘delivery challan’ and ‘canal’. When the call ended, she asked, “Why were you talking about the canal?” Chandan replied, “Goods go by that route. He was asking whether the bridge was closed.” Naina asked again, “When did you go along that road?” Chandan avoided the question. “Didi, I'm tired.”

After the telephone call Chandan went out onto the street. Two lanes later he had the feeling that someone was following him. He turned: it was a young milk-seller on a bicycle, riding home with his empty cans rattling. Chandan felt ashamed of his fear. But the grounds for that fear were not altogether imaginary. Twice before, Manoj had told him that there was no need to ask questions about written delivery challans. Chandan's phone contained some messages about those consignments. He considered deleting them, then slipped the phone back into his pocket. It was already hard enough to remember everything; if the messages were erased, establishing the truth would become harder still.

Meanwhile Savita was meeting fellow examination candidates to prepare a memorandum. She wanted the findings of the inquiry into the leaked question paper to be made public, a clear timetable to be issued for the rescheduled examination, and candidates to be spared repeated travel expenses. Her fellow candidate Devendra said, “People with money can go to another town and prepare there. We can't even recover the coaching fees we've already paid.” Savita replied, “We're asking for no special favour, only a fair opportunity.” Gradually people were also beginning to discuss how Ratan's organisation collected money in the name of just such opportunities.

Abhay discussed the next instalment of his report with Manjari. She said, “Where application fees and payments under contracts appear connected, don't jump straight to a conclusion of corruption. First check the dates of the contracts and the payments actually made.” Abhay answered, “An accusation published in a newspaper affects people's livelihoods and reputations. I'll give space to Rekha's complaint, but I'll also request the company's written response.” He decided not to yield to the temptation of going to press so quickly that Naresh's death would be presented as proof of every irregularity. Readers needed clear questions, not invented answers.

After the office closed, Ratan summoned Manoj for a brief meeting. “Have you reconciled the vehicle challans?” he asked. Manoj replied,

"Some old papers are still at the warehouse." Ratan said, "Any officer who asks must be given the documents required by law. But no employee is to make a statement on his own initiative." Manoj laughed. "People will be too afraid to speak." Ratan was displeased by that answer. "What if fear sends someone straight to the police instead?" Manoj fell silent. Each of them was concealing the reasons for his own fear, while Naresh's empty chair was still there in the office.

Elsewhere, Sujata was checking the state of the employment organisation's accounting records. There were discrepancies among certain registers, signatures and dates on which sums had been deposited. She told her assistant, "We're not going to take Ratan's public allegation as fact. Naresh's death does not, by itself, prove that his accounts were either right or wrong." The assistant asked, "Chandan Mishra's name appears in some vehicle records." Sujata said, "Then first establish the limits of his work. A driver's name appearing on a record does not prove involvement in murder."

At home Ratan folded the newspaper and put it down in front of Vibha. She asked, "Was it right to cast accusations on Naresh's family?" Ratan replied, "I haven't named anyone." Vibha said, "You may not have named him, but everyone in town understands whom the allegation concerns." Raising his voice, Ratan said, "You don't understand business matters." Vibha answered calmly, "Perhaps I don't understand business, but I understand when a dead man's name is being sullied." Ratan got up and left. This was far from the first time Vibha had found a door closed upon her questions in her own home.

As she served her husband dinner, Vibha asked, "Why don't you simply give Naresh's family a written statement of the sums they are owed?" Ratan put down his spoon. "Are you going to investigate the office at home now too?" Vibha replied in an even voice, "I'm asking about this household. When you make donations in the family's name, I have a right to know how they are accounted for here." Ratan frowned. "My name is being dragged through the mud everywhere. Are you listening to other people's talk as well?" Vibha said, "I ask questions about what I see." At that, the servant set down the dishes and silently left the room.

When Ratan returned to the room that evening, Vibha was looking at an old statement of deposits and withdrawals on the table. She had found some strokes resembling copies of her signature, but she was not completely certain. She set the sheet aside. "I'll ask the bank for a

certified statement in the morning," she told herself. Kiran's name appeared on Ratan's phone. Vibha noticed it but asked nothing. She did not wish to proclaim suspicion as truth; yet she could no longer simply close her eyes.

That night Harinarayan sat before an old ledger at Naresh's home. Rekha put a cup of tea beside him. Her father said quietly, "If you're afraid, we'll go away to your uncle's village." Rekha shook her head. "We can go to the village, but the blame put upon Bhaiya's name will remain here. I'll let the investigation run its course."

That day Sujata sent two written requests relating to the office's suspect accounts. One sought copies of old approval documents; the other sought the sequence of vehicle delivery challans. She said that employees' statements had to be checked against the papers. The inquiry into the cause of Naresh's death was proceeding separately; even answers to the accounting questions would not automatically establish a conclusion about his death. She considered it essential to maintain that distinction. She made clear that the replies would allow dates and sums to be cross-checked during the inquiry.

Sitting in her room, Naina read the office notice once more. Its language was restrained, but it held the seed of an accusation which, if spread without rebuttal, could wound Naresh's family a second time. She decided that when the officers questioned her again, she would distinguish clearly between Naresh's written questions, Ratan's promise of an answer within seven days, and what had been said at the meeting. She would not speak of anything she had not seen. It was unacceptable to her that the burden of blame should be placed upon anyone's head on the strength of conjecture.

Chapter 27: Chandan's Silence

In the early morning Saraswati Devi stood by Chandan's bed. He had awakened repeatedly throughout the night. His telephone lay beside the pillow, but as soon as morning came he switched it off. Saraswati asked, "Son, haven't you got a fever?" Chandan said, "No, Ma. I couldn't sleep." His mother touched his forehead. His body was not hot, but there was fear in his eyes.

There were rotis left from the previous day and some potato curry in the house. Naina was making tea in the kitchen. Chandan came inside and sat on a chair. Naina put a plate before him. "Will you go to work today?" "I don't know." "Did Manoj call?" Chandan started. "Why are you asking?" Setting down the tea, Naina said, "You've been restless ever since that call last night. If you're in some difficulty, tell me."

Instead of questioning him further, Chandan's mother placed an old bag before him. "The books you bought for your studies are gathering dust under the bed. Don't sell them. When the examination is held again, you'll need them." Chandan opened the bag. In a book of general knowledge in Maithili, he had written the answers to practice questions in a neat hand. He remembered the old days—waking at dawn, sitting on the roof to study, asking Naina the difficult questions. Now an hour or two could scarcely pass without a call from Manoj. His mother said, "If you've given up studying, so be it, but don't close the door of your mind." Chandan looked towards her and remained silent.

That day he wanted to meet his friend Vijay from the neighbourhood, but he reached the turning in the road and came back. Vijay had recently found work at a small pharmacy. An unnecessary envy rose in Chandan: Vijay worked steadily even for low wages, while he himself, tempted by the prospect of more money, had landed in what predicament? Then he understood that the stability of Vijay's employment was not responsible for his own mistake. The real difficulty lay in his own decisions and Manoj's pressure. He went to the doorway once more, but this time did not step outside.

Chandan stared at his plate. He remembered how he had prepared for the examination for two years. Neighbours had said, "Once he gets a government job, the household will recover." On the day the question papers were opened in the examination hall, he had sat there confident

in the work he had done. A few weeks later there had been talk of a leaked paper, and then the examination was cancelled. Coaching, bus fares, books, applications—when the little expenses were added together, a great deal of money had gone. None of it could be recovered. All he had left were worry about home and the bitter experience of his own failure.

When he had first borrowed the money, he had imagined that he would do haulage work for two or three months and then sit another examination. Manoj's men had said the job involved carrying construction materials and goods from the warehouse. The first trip was straightforward. On the second, the name printed on the sacks differed from the name on the delivery challan. When Chandan asked, the driver said, "We do only as much as we're told." Chandan had fallen silent then. But silence did not remove his suspicions; they accumulated inside him.

On the first night, the delivery had seemed ordinary to Chandan. The truck held bricks and iron pipes. Manoj had paid the freight money immediately. On the second occasion there were sealed crates, which Chandan did not open. On the third night he heard bottles clinking and asked a question. Manoj told him, "You're paid to drive, not to decide." From that night the suspicion settled in Chandan's mind. But the interest on his loan was due at the end of the week. Each time he told himself: this will be the last consignment. What had seemed a small source of support on the first day gradually deprived him of the freedom to make his own decisions.

Chandan paused while applying medicine to the scratch on his hand. The wound was almost healed, but he could still recall the look Manoj had given him that night. While crossing the canal bridge, Manoj had answered a telephone call; Chandan had heard the words 'I've arrived' and 'Wait'. He could not be certain how this related to the incident that day. Fear began to fill the empty places in his memory with pictures of its own. He stopped himself: he would say the words he had actually heard, and identify conjecture as conjecture.

Naina did not go to the office that day. After Naresh's death, the employees had been given half a day's leave. She sat down with the household account book. "How much of your debt is still outstanding?" At first Chandan said, "Nothing much." Naina opened a blank page of the ledger. "I haven't sat down to count your mistakes. We can help only when we understand the accounts." Slowly Chandan named three

obligations: a debt incurred for coaching fees, an instalment on a motorcycle, and an advance received from Manoj.

"Why an advance from Manoj?" Naina asked. "Against the driving work." "How much?" Chandan gave the amount. Naina realised at once that it was not an ordinary advance against daily wages. "Why did he give you so much at once?" Chandan said, "I promised to work a few nights first." "Doing what?" Chandan's hand began to tremble.

Before he could answer, Saraswati came in. "What accounts are you two making?" Naina closed the ledger. "Household expenses. Ma, please rest for a little while." Her mother studied both their faces. "You're hiding something, aren't you?" Chandan said quickly, "No, Ma." But there was such panic in his voice that Saraswati remained standing in the doorway for a long while. At last she said, "I know we are short of money. But we need people before we need money." She went away.

His mother's words lodged somewhere deep within Chandan. He got up and closed the door. "Didi, if I tell you something, will you promise not to be angry?" Naina replied, "The truth may make me angry, but first I'll listen. If a crime has taken place, we won't conceal it." Chandan remained silent for a very long time. Then he said, "That night I drove Manoj in the vehicle."

Naina's hand became still upon the ledger. "Which night?" "The night Naresh Babu didn't come home." The bell of a rickshaw outside could be heard in the room. Naina wanted to understand every word distinctly. "Where did you pick him up? Where did you drop him?" Chandan said, "From the road behind the warehouse. Manoj was with two men. It was an old vehicle. I was told to drive as far as a turning beyond the canal bridge."

"Was Naresh Babu in that vehicle?" Naina asked. Chandan answered at once, "I didn't see him. I saw Manoj and two men in the vehicle. There were goods in the back. When a sack slid down, Manoj wouldn't let me touch it." He showed her the scratch on his hand. "I didn't get this from the iron gate. I was hurt while handling the load." Naina drew a deep breath. "So you lied to me." Chandan lowered his eyes. "I was afraid."

"What time was it?" Naina asked. Chandan gave an approximate hour of the night. "Did you look at the clock?" "I saw the time in the vehicle. I can't be sure of the exact minute." "Whose vehicle was it?" "It belonged to Manoj's people. I remember part of its number." Naina

fetched a sheet of paper. “Write down as much as you remember. Leave blank whatever you can't remember.” Chandan asked, “Will you give this to the police?” Naina replied, “The police will determine how important this information is. Our duty is not to hide the truth.”

Naina wrote down the incomplete vehicle number and asked, “Which way did you go after stopping the vehicle?” Chandan said, “I came back towards home. I didn't see whether they went on in another vehicle.” “Were there streetlights?” “One light near the bridge was out. I could see a little by the other one.” Beside the date Naina asked, “When you left the warehouse, did you hear anyone speaking?” Chandan shook his head. “Manoj told someone ‘clear road’. I didn't hear a name.” Naina wrote ‘Chandan's account’ beside every answer. Testing the evidence was the police's work, but accurate recollection might help.

“Didi, if I tell them everything,” Chandan asked, “Manoj will say I'm lying.” Naina replied, “Then the police will examine both versions. I'm not asking you to learn a story by heart. Don't try to fill a gap in your memory with something you don't recall.” Chandan asked again, “Will you save me?” Naina paused. “I'll stand beside you and arrange legal help, but I won't lie to protect you from the consequences of whatever wrong you've done.” There was a sister's love in her answer, but no promise to hide a crime beneath that love.

Chandan went pale. “Manoj will kill me, Didi.” Naina said, “Then we'll tell the police clearly about that fear as well. I won't promise a degree of courage or safety that isn't in my power to provide. But keeping silent won't make the danger disappear.” Chandan said, “I didn't see anyone kill Naresh Babu. It's true I drove the vehicle that night. I don't know what was in it.” Naina replied, “Say you don't know what you don't know. Don't conceal what you saw.”

Chandan admitted one more thing. “A few weeks earlier, I heard bottles clinking in one consignment. One of Manoj's men told me to keep quiet. I realised the goods might be connected with liquor. Even then, I couldn't bring myself to give up the job.” Naina looked at him. “You were under pressure, but the decision was yours. If you'd left earlier, you might not be in this much trouble.” Tears came to Chandan's eyes. “I thought I'd leave once I'd paid off the debt.”

At that moment Naina recalled Savita's agitation. For young men who dreaded facing their families after the cancellation of a competitive examination, the temptation of easy money could be powerful indeed. Yet she did not offer this thought as a defence of Chandan's mistake.

Poverty did not confer permission to commit a crime. Nor was the wrongdoing of those who exploited the desperation of the poor any less serious. Both truths stood before her together.

At midday Abhay telephoned. At first Naina did not wish to answer, but Chandan himself said, "Abhayji is someone we can trust. Ask his advice." Naina picked up the phone. Hearing her voice, Abhay asked, "Is everything all right?" Naina said, "Chandan has some information. He drove a vehicle connected with Manoj that night. I want his statement to be taken through the proper legal procedure." Abhay did not immediately bombard her with questions. He said, "Not for a news report. First contact Inspector Sujata. Raise the matter of Chandan's safety too, as far as that's possible. I won't write any report about this now."

Hearing Abhay's voice, Chandan grew a little calmer for the first time. But then his phone rang. Manoj's name glowed on the screen. Chandan stared at it. Naina said, "You don't have to answer. Preserve the time of the call." The ringing stopped. A moment later a message arrived: 'We need to settle the accounts for yesterday's work. Answer the phone.' The words were ordinary, but Chandan's fear was not. Naina told him not to delete the message.

The moment Manoj's message appeared, a shiver passed through Chandan's body. He said, "Once at the warehouse he told me that people who ask too many questions don't get work. I laughed it off then. Now I understand what he meant." Naina did not take his phone from him. "It's your phone, and you're the one who must preserve the messages. I'll just note down the time and the words in my notebook." Chandan looked at the screen again. For the first time, he saw that every message on his phone need not merely be something to fear as possible evidence against him; it might also help establish the truth.

Following Abhay's advice, Naina asked about Sujata's office hours and the procedure connected with the first information report. She also told Chandan that at the police station there was no need to repeat anyone else's story; recounting his own actual experience would be enough. A second fear rose in Chandan: what if the police disclosed his name in front of Naresh's family? Naina said, "That family deserves justice. If your information is useful, then giving it will help that justice. When and how the family is told will have to be decided in the circumstances of the investigation."

That evening Saraswati was told everything. At first she stared at Chandan's face in astonishment. Then she sat down upon the charpoy. “I told you we need people before we need money,” she said softly. Chandan sat at his mother's feet. “Ma, I made a mistake.” Saraswati placed her hand upon his head, but said, “Admitting a mistake won't wipe away its consequences. Tell what you know.”

At his mother's words Chandan took out an old receipt. It bore no signature of Manoj's people, only the name of the place where the goods had been unloaded. “Should I keep this?” he asked. Naina said, “Preserve every paper exactly as it is. But this one receipt won't decide any accusation against anyone by itself.” Chandan carefully placed the receipt in an old envelope. A paper he had once thought of throwing away as worthless was now something he preserved as a mark of time.

That night Naina set down Chandan's account in order: the road behind the warehouse, three men in the vehicle, a turning beyond the canal bridge, the approximate time, the incomplete number, and the instruction not to touch the goods. She did not write the word ‘murder’ beside any of these details, because Chandan had seen no murder. His information was important, but only investigation could clarify what it meant.

Chandan read the account his sister had written. One date seemed wrong to him. Naina corrected it immediately. “Correcting an error doesn't diminish the truth,” she said. Chandan nodded slowly. Naina recorded the time and number of the phone contact separately.

Chandan stood near the doorway. “Didi, will the police arrest me?” Naina replied, “That is for the police and the legal process to decide. I won't give you false assurances. If you have done something wrong, you'll have to answer for it. But we won't run away from telling the truth, preserving evidence or obtaining legal assistance.”

At dinner there was as much rice on Saraswati's plate as on any other day, but she could not put a single mouthful into her mouth. “We are poor,” she said, “but I don't want food in this house earned from work that costs someone their life.” Chandan bowed his head. “Ma, I haven't killed anyone.” Saraswati replied, “Let what you say be made clear in the investigation. But if you suspected something, why did you continue with those deliveries?” Chandan had no elaborate explanation. “There was debt, there was fear, and the money was better.” Saraswati's eyes filled. “More money and less sense—when those two come together, a home is ruined.”

After the meal Naina wrote a brief account in her notebook of what had passed between brother and sister. Saraswati warned them not to go out of the house alone in the dark. Naina said, "I'll go to the police station with you in the morning, Chandan. Ma, I'll keep you informed." Saraswati asked, "Should I come too?" Chandan said hurriedly, "No, Ma, stay at home." Naina replied gently, "First we'll speak to Sujataji. If it's necessary, you can come. It isn't right to keep anyone in the family in the dark."

For some time they were both silent. Outside a motorcycle passed along the road, its sound fading into the distance. Chandan was still afraid, but for the first time his silence had broken. Naina understood that the family's troubles would now grow deeper. The decision to meet Sujata in the morning had been made. After that decision, each member of the household would have to summon a courage of their own.

Chapter 28: Vibha's Suspicions

Early that morning Vibha Singh sat on a wooden bench in the veranda reading a letter from her parents' home. Her sister Sumitra had written about enrolling her son in school. At the end of the letter was an ordinary question: 'Are you all well?' After reading it Vibha sat for a long time with the paper in her hand. There were servants in the house, meals were prepared on time, and a car was at her disposal; yet she could no longer answer that question clearly. Since Naresh Mandal's death and the dispute at the office, Ratan's behaviour had changed. There were more telephone calls than before, less conversation, and furtive departures in the night as he opened a door and went out. At first Vibha had thought it was the pressure of work. But when she saw her own name among the papers on the table yesterday, the first crack had appeared in that trust.

Vibha had a joint bank account in her name, opened shortly after her marriage. In the beginning it had been used for household expenditure, but for the past few years most transactions had taken place on Ratan's instructions. Vibha looked at the monthly statements from time to time. After Naresh's condolence gathering, she had noticed something resembling her signature on a document in an envelope sent from the office. The envelope contained papers relating to payments for construction materials. She had initially assumed the papers had been delivered to the wrong place and set them aside. Now she took them out again. The amount was not unusually large for a contractor, but she needed to understand why the transaction appeared to be connected with the household account.

She slipped a small bunch of keys into her pocket and set out for the bank. When the driver asked whether to bring the car round, Vibha said, "I'll go by rickshaw today." She wanted to attend to the bank without anyone knowing about it or engaging in needless discussion. Yet her wish for privacy was not a desire to conceal wrongdoing from her husband; she wanted to learn the truth about business conducted in her name. On the way she saw a crowd of pupils outside a school. Some mothers were leaving their children there before going to work. Vibha remembered her own mother's words: education teaches a woman the

meaning of her signature. Now she was setting out to learn the meaning of hers all over again.

There was a queue of customers at the bank branch. Vibha submitted her application in turn. An officer recognised her. Smiling, he said, "You've come all the way from Ratan Babu's house? If you'd telephoned, we'd have sent the papers over." Vibha answered plainly, "These are papers for my account. I want to see them myself." The officer immediately offered her a chair. Vibha replied, "The people in the queue have already been waiting for their business to be attended to. Call me when my turn comes." Her reply embarrassed the young man at the counter a little, but he continued to explain the proper procedure for obtaining the documents.

Once she had the account statement in her hands, Vibha checked the dates. There had been two large payments within three months: one to an organisation connected with Virendra Rai and the other to a service committee. She had heard both names before, but could not recall authorising either payment. She wrote an application for a copy of one cheque. The officer said, "It will have to be obtained from the records department. That will take some time." Vibha replied, "Give it to me according to the rules. I'll wait." She accused no one of a crime. She understood that the withdrawal of money from an account did not, by itself, establish anyone's guilt. But she could not simply disregard the question of whether the authorising signature was hers.

Before she left, the officer asked, "Do you think it necessary to tell someone at home?" Vibha paused for a moment. "Whether I tell anyone at home is my decision. I have the right to see the bank's records, don't I?" "Certainly," the officer answered. He gave her an acknowledgement of her request. Vibha placed it not with Sumitra's letter but in a separate bag of her own. As the rickshaw wove repeatedly around traffic on the way home, she felt a strange calm in that ordinary journey. She had chosen her own route, not one prescribed by her husband or any member of the household staff.

Sitting in the rickshaw, Vibha remembered the day she had first earned money. Before her marriage she had taught in a school for a while. She used to record pupils' fees, purchases of books and small household expenses in her own notebook. After the marriage Ratan expanded his business and Vibha occupied herself with managing the home. At first she used to ask about the business accounts; later Ratan would say, "Leave all those worries to me." Vibha had understood this as

a kind of comfort. Now she realised that the habit of not asking questions grew gradually. Trust could never mean abandoning responsibility.

After she reached home, Ratan telephoned. "Where have you been?" he asked. Vibha said, "To the bank." "What for?" "To request the statement for my account." There was silence for a few moments at the other end. Then Ratan said, "The accounts department looks after all that. Why do you need to?" Vibha answered, "The account is in my name. I will look at what I'm entitled to see." Ratan raised his voice. "Can't you see what's happening at the office? Every single person is going around with questions." Vibha said, "I've raised a question inside our home, not made an accusation. We'll speak this evening." She ended the call.

That afternoon, opening an old trunk, Vibha found photographs from the early days of her marriage. Ratan was smiling simply in those photographs. In those days they had not had a large house: they lived in a rented two-room dwelling, with a small business and many plans for the future. Vibha had sold her jewellery to help Ratan raise the advance payment on his first shop. Back then he used to tell her every night what he had earned and what he owed. She did not doubt the happiness she had known in those days. But those memories could not answer today's questions. The fact that a person had once given affection did not automatically make his present actions true without examination.

Lakshmi, who worked in the house, came to call her for lunch. Lakshmi had been employed there for the past two years. She said, "Madam, Babuji has asked for his lunch to be sent to the office again today." Vibha asked, "Through whom?" "Kiran Madam's man will come for it." Vibha said in an ordinary voice, "Very well. Send it as you do every day." She did not think it right to share her suspicions with Lakshmi. The working woman came to the house to earn her wages, not to bear the burden of private matters between an employer and his wife. Yet it troubled Vibha that Kiran's name surfaced so often in the household's decisions.

Before leaving after setting down the plate, Lakshmi said, "Madam, my daughter needs new books for her studies this month. It would help if I could have an advance of two days' wages." Vibha did not immediately promise the money. "I'll look at the accounts and tell you by this evening. Any wages already due must be paid first," she said. Lakshmi went away smiling. It stung Vibha that she could be so clear

about another family's work and money, yet still hesitate to question transactions made in her own name. She resolved to stand by the decision she had already taken.

In the afternoon Vibha went to the office. Naina was checking the applicants' register at the reception desk. Seeing Vibha, she rose. "Have you come to see Ratanji?" Naina asked. "Yes, but first I wanted to ask about some old papers from the accounts department," Vibha said. Naina replied, "The documents are being examined after Nareshji's death. I can tell you what I'm authorised to disclose. For anything else, it would be better to submit a written request." Vibha looked closely at Naina. The young woman's voice held neither excessive deference nor eagerness to please the employer's wife. She asked her only about the available procedure for obtaining information on payments made in her name.

Naina arranged for Vibha to meet the person in charge of the accounting records. Mahesh said that, in Naresh's absence, some files had been set aside because of the police investigation, but written applications could still be submitted. Vibha made an application. She wrote plainly, "I require evidence of which payments were recorded as authorised in my name." Handing her an acknowledgement, Mahesh said quietly, "My authority is limited. But the process of providing copies of documents that are available cannot simply be stopped." Vibha understood his point. People were there to earn their living; it was not fair to expect the same courage from every employee.

As Mahesh opened the applications register and entered the date, he said, "The identity of the person whose name appears on the account papers also has to be verified." Vibha asked, "Do you maintain serial numbers for the old letters of approval?" Mahesh said, "That's the rule, though some papers come from other departments." Vibha replied, "If it's the rule, it should be followed. Where something is unavailable, state that clearly in writing." Naina overheard part of the conversation from a distance. It seemed to her that the owner's wife was now asking for the same fundamental thing Naresh had asked for repeatedly: a written answer.

Coming out of her room, Kiran saw Vibha. For a moment her expression changed. Then she smiled. "You've come without letting us know? Ratanji is out." Vibha said, "I know. I've come about some business of my own today." "Anything special?" Kiran asked. "Account papers," Vibha answered. The corner of the file in Kiran's hand bent. She

said at once, "Nareshji used to look after all those matters. There's an investigation going on now." Vibha asked, "So was everything in order before Nareshji died?" Kiran hesitated a little. "I can't give you a complete answer about that." Vibha said, "Then I don't want an incomplete one now. We'll speak after the correct papers are available."

As Vibha descended the office stairs, she recalled certain details of Ratan and Kiran's conduct in earlier years. At birthday dinners at home, Kiran would organise the reception of guests and Ratan would praise her efficiency. For all those years Vibha had seen such conduct merely as a sign of a capable employee. Now she did not wish to turn every old incident into proof of wrongdoing. But she had a right to know where the boundaries of their relationship lay. The trust within a household cannot be sustained by outward propriety alone.

At the bend in the staircase Kusum greeted Vibha respectfully. Vibha asked, "Do you all receive your wages on time?" Kusum was thrown into confusion. "They're a few days late sometimes." Vibha asked, "And this month?" "We haven't received the full amount yet." Vibha made no promise that everything would be put right by morning. "Submit a written application about it. I'll raise the question too," she said. On Kusum's face were both disbelief and hope. As Vibha left through the gate, she began to understand how financial confusion within a large house could reach the homes of people dependent on the smallest salaries.

When Ratan came home that evening, dinner had been laid. Vibha did not wish to quarrel over the evening meal. "I need to speak with you for ten minutes after dinner," she said. Ratan replied wearily, "What about now?" "Two payments from my account, and approvals recorded in my name at the office." Ratan laid his spoon on the plate. "Virendra's contract is linked to an old investment by the family. The accounts department may have entered the name by mistake." Vibha said, "If it's an error, the papers can be corrected. We need to see the original records." Ratan said, "You don't trust me when I tell you?" Vibha replied very softly, "Why should information have to be concealed in order to preserve trust?"

Ratan pushed back his chair and got up. "Must I hear at home every bit of what people are saying outside?" Vibha replied, "I'm not asking what people say outside. I'm asking about what was done in my name." Ratan said, "Naresh's death has driven everyone out of their senses." Vibha did not remain silent at this. "Naresh's death is the death of a

human being. Don't use it as an excuse to avoid questions about my account." With that she went out onto the veranda. Ratan stood where he was for a while, then took his phone and shut himself into the upstairs room.

Vibha did not follow him. As she cleared the dinner plates, she saw that Ratan had left half his meal. At such times in the past she would have gone at once to pacify him. Today she thought that calm was necessary after a quarrel, but calm did not mean withdrawing her questions. She placed a copy of the papers in a separate file. Beside entries whose dates were unclear she drew question marks. That small task brought some order to her mind.

On the veranda Vibha telephoned Sumitra. Her sister asked, "Are you well?" Vibha replied, "There are things that aren't clear. I don't want to quarrel with anyone. I need to understand transactions made in my name." Sumitra said, "Keep copies of the documents that belong to you. Don't blame anyone in haste, but learn what your signature means." Vibha laughed. "You've said again what I heard at the bank today." Her sister asked, "Will you come home?" "Not yet. First I'll try to settle matters within my own home." After putting down the phone, Vibha drew a long breath.

At Sumitra's words, Vibha remembered a promise made in the first days of her marriage. Ratan had said that neither of them would resort to lies in front of anyone. A person cannot always keep every promise, but the memory of a promise can give someone the courage to ask questions. Vibha told her sister, "I'm in no hurry to quarrel. I'll keep what the bank tells me separate from the office's answer. Then I'll speak to Ratan again." Sumitra listened and said, "That's the right order." Vibha ended the call and remained on the veranda a little longer.

At about ten that night Ratan's phone rang in the upstairs room. Passing the doorway, Vibha heard him say Kiran's name. Ratan spoke in a low voice. "We'll talk about this at the office tomorrow. You have the papers, don't you?" Vibha could not hear the reply from the other end. She did not stand listening. Returning to her room, she filed a copy of the bank's acknowledgement, wrote down the date and closed the drawer. The mere fact that her husband had spoken to someone on the phone was not proof of betrayal. But after the questions she had raised that evening, such urgency concerning papers only deepened her suspicions.

Standing before the mirror in her room, Vibha looked at her face. Outwardly nothing had changed: the sindoor in the parting of her hair, her plain sari, the glass bangles on her wrists. But inside her the voice of questioning would no longer be silenced. She asked herself, "What if the papers prove false?" No answer came at once. Marriage bound the standing of husband and wife together; but accepting harm to other people or the misuse of her name in order to preserve that standing was no solution. That night she resolved not upon a judgement, but upon gathering facts.

The next morning the bank branch telephoned to say that the next steps could be completed to obtain the requested copy of the cheque. Vibha wrote down the time. For the first time she understood that exercising her financial rights within marriage was not a declaration that she wished to destroy her home; it was the minimum condition for truth to exist within it. She had loved her husband up to this day. She could not say that love had now utterly vanished. But love could not oblige her to accept indefinitely unexplained expenditure entered in her name. Outside the window people were hurrying to work along the street. Vibha wrote down her next tasks: 'Copy from the bank. Reply from the office. Then a decision.'

Chapter 29: Kiran's Confession

That morning Kiran was heating milk in the kitchen of her home. Dinesh sat on a charpoy in the veranda, turning the pages of a newspaper. They lived under one roof, yet for the past few months their conversations had been confined to expenses, electricity bills and the key to the door. Kiran sometimes reached the office before Dinesh was awake; she returned late in the evening. Earlier Dinesh had been occupied with his small contracting business. As that work declined, he spent more time at home and the distance between them became unmistakable. Handing him his morning tea, Kiran asked, "Will you go to the market today?" Dinesh replied, "I will. But first we need to talk."

Kiran lowered the flame beneath the stove. "Now?" "When else?" Dinesh asked. "At night you say you're tired; in the morning you're late." Kiran's hand stopped. Dinesh went on, "When are you going to tell me about the loan application submitted in my name?" Kiran was startled. The application had been prepared three weeks earlier through a supplier to the office; she had thought Ratan would arrange the pending payment. Some paper had been given to Dinesh for his signature, but he had not been able to read its full details. "I was going to tell you," Kiran said. Dinesh gave a bitter laugh. "Going to—when? After a letter arrives from the bank?"

Kiran came into the sitting room and sat down. "I still don't fully understand all the papers. Payments have been held up at the office." Dinesh interrupted. "What has the office's money to do with a debt against our home? You cannot take risks without my consent." Kiran said, "The papers were given to you for consent." "But was the nature of the transaction ever explained?" Dinesh's question was exact. Kiran had no complete answer. She acknowledged that she had been careless about a matter affecting the financial security of their home.

Dinesh had never thought Kiran's employment an affront to his dignity. Quite the contrary: in the early months he used to take her to the office himself. But after his business suffered losses the previous year, some acquaintances had mocked him: "So now your wife runs the household." Dinesh had laughed the remarks away, but their thorns remained lodged within him. Kiran had made little effort to understand his silence. Amid that misunderstanding, Dinesh's self-respect and

Kiran's aspirations had each sought a direction of their own. The circumstances prepared the ground for their relationship to fracture, but could not justify anyone's deceit.

Dinesh took an envelope from the papers beside the charpoy. "Here are the details of calls from the office. How often does Ratan Singh telephone at eleven at night? For a matter of work, someone calls once or twice, not every day." Kiran said, "He's my employer. Sometimes office work has to be done at night." Dinesh replied, "I know that. But I want a clear explanation of the night calls and meetings on holidays." Kiran lowered her eyes. Dinesh kept his voice under control, though his hands were trembling.

Dinesh and Kiran had married some years earlier with their families' consent. At first they lived in a small room. When his business was doing well, Dinesh had encouraged Kiran to finish her education. She trained in accounting and office administration. Her salary began to cover the regular household expenses. Ratan first praised her competence, expressed confidence in her before the employees, and entrusted her with the responsibility of managing the office through difficult times. Now, looking back, Kiran wondered when personal intimacy had grown amid that recognition.

The relationship had not begun with any grand declaration. One day Ratan gave Kiran an advance to pay for her father's medical treatment; a few months later they travelled together on office business; one evening they talked for a long time after work. At the time Kiran felt neglected, while Dinesh had become withdrawn because of his failing business. She took her husband's silence for indifference. Ratan's attention seemed to confirm her own worth. But it was she who had crossed the boundary between attention and trust. Circumstances alone had not made that decision; Kiran's own wishes and responsibilities were involved.

Kiran remembered one particular evening. Ratan had told her, "I won't find anyone in this office whom I can trust as much as you." She had repeated this at home to Dinesh. Laughing, he had said, "Then ask for proper wages for all that hard work too." Kiran had been angry at the time. She had felt her husband could not bear to hear her praised. Only later did she understand that there had been financial caution in his remark as well. But in her search for a sense of importance she had dismissed that caution as indifference.

"Tell me directly," Dinesh asked, "is there something between you and Ratan Singh beyond your relationship at the office?" Kiran drank

some water first. A single lie might have averted the quarrel for the moment. Perhaps Dinesh would have been reassured; but then she would have needed another lie. She raised her eyes and said, "Yes. I have had a relationship with him outside my marriage." Dinesh put the envelope in his hand on the table. Outside the house a vegetable vendor was calling out; suddenly, within the room, the voice seemed very far away.

"How long?" Dinesh asked. Kiran told him. "The lies I told at home were wrong." Dinesh said, "Wrong? You lived in my home and made a fool of me every day." Kiran did not immediately defend herself. Dinesh asked, "Have you decided to leave me and live with him?" Kiran said, "I have made no such decision. But things cannot go on between us as they have been." Dinesh said bitterly, "So you wanted the comforts of two homes?" The words hurt Kiran, but she knew the question sprang not from anger alone but from shattered trust.

Dinesh rose and went into the inner room. Their wedding photograph hung there. He did not take it down. Sitting on a chair, he stared for a long time at an empty space. Kiran reached the doorway but did not enter. "I take responsibility for what I've done," she said. Without turning, Dinesh replied, "It's difficult to know what the word responsibility means just now. Regretting something doesn't erase its consequences." Kiran said, "We'll decide clearly between us whether I should leave this house. But first we must understand the loan papers."

All at once Dinesh asked, "Does Ratan Singh know about the loan in my name?" Kiran replied, "Yes. It was he who said the arrangements would be put right in a few days." Dinesh stood up. "Then I'm going to see him." Kiran stepped forward. "Don't go in anger. Matters could become worse." Dinesh said, "My life is already in ruins." Kiran replied, "Whatever questions you ask, demand written answers supported by papers. Raising a commotion won't bring evidence." Dinesh stopped. "Have you got the papers?" Kiran nodded. "Some of them. The rest are at the office."

Outside in the courtyard a neighbour's child came to retrieve a ball. Dinesh opened the door and handed it back. The child ran off laughing. Turning towards Kiran, Dinesh asked, "Do you remember how many plans we made for our life together?" Kiran nodded. During the first year of their marriage they had begun saving to buy a home. Later those savings had diminished because of business losses. Dinesh said, "If we now live separately, we'll have to make household expenses and responsibility for the debts clear, separately. I won't let the punishment

for this broken relationship be inflicted through a debt incurred without someone's knowledge." Kiran sensed the depth of his pain in the practical steadiness of his voice.

Kiran reached the office late that day. At reception Naina was answering questions from applicants. Kiran merely asked, "Is Ratanji in his room?" "Not just now," Naina replied. Kiran shut the door of her room from inside. In the top drawer of her desk were a draft of the household loan, Virendra's service contract and some payment approvals. She turned the pages. In several places her name appeared only in her capacity as office manager, but in two places there were approvals of decisions she did not remember having properly checked. Personal betrayal and financial risk now lay together on the same desk.

Opening an office letter on the table, Kiran saw that Naresh Mandal had sent questions about certain payment approvals before his death. The letter mentioned Kiran's name too. Naresh had not accused anyone of personal wrongdoing; he had asked who had authorised the orders under which particular sums were paid. Another current of guilt rose within Kiran: she had repeatedly told the very employee who questioned the meaning of those papers to remain quiet. She remembered that if Naresh's questions had been answered clearly, confusion in several places might have been resolved long ago.

Ratan called around midday. "Vibha went to the bank. What did she find out about the papers?" he asked. Kiran replied, "I don't know. Ask her yourself." Ratan was displeased. "I'm asking because you deal with the office records." Kiran answered, "Written answers will be provided about office records. Don't put me in the middle of your domestic affairs." Ratan was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Naresh is gone. Now all the responsibility may fall on you." A strange chill ran through Kiran's chest. "You too will be responsible for the orders you gave," she replied.

Meanwhile Dinesh telephoned his maternal cousin Ravi. "Can I stay with you this evening?" Ravi asked why. Dinesh said, "There's been a quarrel at home. I can't explain it all now." Ravi said, "Come along. But don't do anything rash." Dinesh took two changes of clothes from the cupboard at home. Their old wedding photograph still hung on the wall. He paused as he lifted the bag. It did not seem right to take a final decision about his marriage immediately; yet staying under the same roof that night was unbearable too.

After ending the call with Ravi, Dinesh thought of visiting his friend Narayan, who knew about legal and financial paperwork. Then he changed his mind. It would not be right to spread the news of his marriage through the marketplace. Applying for the bank papers through the proper process and, if necessary, seeking professional legal advice seemed a more reliable course. It would have been easy, in anger, to stand outside Ratan's house shouting abuse; the consequences could affect his employment, reputation and even expose him to possible criminal charges.

That afternoon Vibha came to see Kiran. At first Kiran could scarcely summon the courage to open the door. Vibha came in and sat on a chair. "I need details of two payments from my account," she said. Opening a file, Kiran showed her some papers. "Here is a copy of the approval. An application has been made for the original records." Vibha asked, "Did you prepare this approval?" Kiran replied, "I saw the draft. The final authorisation was sent on Ratanji's instructions." After a pause Vibha asked, "Can you look into my eyes and tell me everything?" Kiran's face flushed, then grew pale.

Vibha continued, "I haven't come here to humiliate you. I want clarity about my name and my property." Kiran said, "You have a right to obtain copies of whatever documents are available." Vibha nodded. "And about our homes?" That question silenced Kiran. After a few moments she said, "I've done wrong. I've had a personal relationship with him." Vibha closed her eyes. The fear she had carried had now taken the shape of words before her. She did not scream. She held tightly to the arm of the chair behind her. "Why couldn't Ratan tell me this himself?" Her voice held more weariness than hatred.

Kiran answered, "I cannot answer for him. But I believe I must answer for myself." Vibha said, "Did you never find time to realise that another person's home is a home too?" Kiran lowered her eyes. "I did. I chose to ignore it." Vibha stood. "Give me the correct documents for payments made in my name. The pain of the personal relationship is one thing; financial deception is another. I won't gather both into a single act of forgiveness." She opened the door and went out. Kiran made no attempt to stop her.

After Vibha left, Kiran stood by the window. At the gate Naina was offering a chair to an elderly applicant. The ordinary business of the office went on, but to Kiran every familiar thing had become strange. She set aside her salary slips, leave applications and old appointment

letter. If documents were demanded during the investigation, she would supply accurate records and put no false accusation upon anyone else to defend herself. This decision did not erase her wrongdoing, but it offered a first means of preventing further wrongdoing.

Dinesh arrived at the office that evening. Seeing him near Kiran's room, Kusum asked in surprise, "Shall I call someone?" Dinesh said, "Tell Kiran I've come." Kiran stepped outside. In a subdued voice Dinesh asked, "Where is Ratan?" "In a meeting," Kiran replied. "I'm going to question him." Kiran said, "You're free to do that. But don't draw yourself into a crime through a quarrel." Dinesh muttered bitterly, "Does the word crime sound right coming from your mouth?" Kiran said nothing. Dinesh walked out through the office gate. He decided first to obtain copies of the loan records, then demand a written answer from Ratan.

That night Dinesh reached Ravi's home. Ravi served him dinner. For a long time Dinesh said nothing. Then he said only, "I can no longer trust the person with whom I built a home." Ravi asked, "Has something happened that makes you want to hurt yourself or kill someone?" Dinesh shook his head. "No. I'm angry, but I won't do such a thing." Ravi said, "Then rest tonight. Think about it calmly in the morning." Dinesh went to bed, but with his eyes closed he kept seeing different moments: Kiran's first salary, their shared utensils, their wedding day, and today's confession.

In Ravi's home Dinesh remembered his elderly maternal uncle in the village, who used to say after every quarrel, "Pour oil on a fire and no house will survive." Dinesh was in no mood to hear anyone's words of blessing. Nevertheless, he understood that violence committed in anger would not diminish his humiliation. He sat with Ravi and made a list of the loan papers. "To settle the financial questions I'll have to speak with Kiran," he said. "I'll take time to decide what to do about the relationship." Ravi agreed without offering a sermon.

Kiran was left alone in her home. The vegetables half-cooked that morning were still in the kitchen. She did not reheat them. She saw Dinesh's empty cup on the table; suddenly even a small object had acquired meaning. She did not answer Ratan's call. In a separate notebook she wrote the dates of the written instructions she could recall from the office registers. The task did not lessen her guilt, but instead of adding further lies she could at least preserve the facts. She made no

personal decision about Ratan yet; but she could not take back the truth she had spoken to her husband and to Vibha.

In a corner of the courtyard stood a guava tree planted at the time of Kiran's wedding. Every year Dinesh pruned its branches. This year it had borne little fruit, but he had never proposed cutting it down. Kiran went and stood beneath it. She did not feel like comparing her life with a tree; she simply remembered that, year after year, a home was built through the shared effort of countless small acts. A long succession of lies had damaged that cooperation. The damage could not be repaired merely because someone said it should be repaired or wished it so.

An old message from Ratan remained on her phone: the office trip would take longer, so she should give some excuse at home. Kiran read the line. At the time she had thought it a small deceit. Now she saw how each excuse had prepared the way for another. She did not delete the message. To understand her own actions in their order, it was necessary to preserve the old truth. She had not yet decided whether to show it to her husband immediately or provide it later in connection with the relevant legal matters.

Before the following dawn, a message arrived from Dinesh: ‘I'll live separately for a few days. Send me all the loan papers. I'll say what I have to say without quarrelling.’ Kiran wrote back, ‘I'm gathering the papers. I won't conceal what I know.’ After sending it, she gazed at the screen for a long time. At the office she would have to face more questions from others; at home she would have to live with the consequences of her decisions. Admitting the extramarital relationship was only the first act. Confronting the broken trust had barely begun.

Chapter 30: Doubts about Love

The following morning, although daylight had entered Naina's home, Saraswati had not lit the stove. She had remained awake long after Chandan's confession the night before. When Naina rose and went to the kitchen, she found her mother sitting beside the doorway, gazing towards the tulsi shrine. Naina asked, "Did you sleep well?" Saraswati shook her head. "Who can sleep? We must now face the consequences of what your brother has done." Naina sat beside her. "Today we'll meet Inspector Sujata. He'll tell her what he knows. We won't reach conclusions about the rest on our own." Saraswati asked, "Will Abhay go with you?" Naina answered, "He'll show us the way to the station. Chandan will make his own statement."

When Chandan came out, his eyes were swollen. He slipped his phone into his pocket and stopped at the doorway. Naina said, "Have some breakfast. Fear looks even larger on an empty stomach." Chandan ate two mouthfuls of roti and drank some water. Touching his forehead, Saraswati said, "Admit what you've done wrong. But don't take upon yourself, out of fear, something you haven't done." Chandan held his mother's hand and asked, "If the police take me into custody, what will you do?" Naina answered, "First we'll do what is necessary. We'll seek competent legal advice. We won't abandon you, but we won't lie either."

Abhay was standing outside the police station. The previous night he had told Naina that he would not write a news report about this visit. On seeing him she immediately asked, "Are you really not going to use any of this for journalism?" Abhay was taken aback. "I won't publish your family's private statement without permission. But if something becomes public in the police's official records, I may have to consider whether it's newsworthy." Naina said, "I can't bear to hear about anything else now. Chandan's life is in danger." Abhay replied, "His safety comes first. Being a journalist and standing beside you are not the same thing; I understand the boundaries of both." Naina searched his answer for reassurance, but the words seemed harsh to her.

Inspector Sujata had set aside time to meet Chandan. First she asked his name, address and general details of his work. His throat was dry. Naina waited outside. Sujata made clear that, if his account raised questions against him, he would be informed about his lawful rights and

legal advice. Chandan said, "I didn't see anyone kill Naresh Babu. But that night I drove Manoj in a vehicle." Sujata recorded separately the time he described, the route and the details of the people in the vehicle.

During the questioning Chandan repeated that he remembered only part of a number. Sujata did not press him to remember the entire number. "Tell me only what you're certain of. If you remember anything later, you can tell us separately." Chandan described what he had seen of the light at the canal bridge and the turning. He also made available details of the messages on his phone at about the relevant time that night. Sujata said, "This information may be important. But we need other evidence before drawing any conclusion from it." For a moment Chandan's eyes filled with tears. "Manoj told me to keep quiet," he said. Sujata asked for the actual words of the threat and the time it was made.

Outside, Naina kept watching the clock. Abhay sat some distance away. The papers for the next instalment of his report lay in his bag. He did not take them out. Naina asked, "What kind of journalist are you, that even when you see a family in distress, you're thinking about writing about it?" Abhay said, "The kind who doesn't want to remain silent about crimes that concern the public. But I'm not writing the details of this today." Naina replied, "Do you understand when a human being becomes a character in your report? My brother isn't a newspaper headline. He's part of my home." Abhay fell silent.

Within that silence they both remembered an earlier meeting. Abhay had first seen Naina reading a poem at a school programme. Neither could then have imagined the difficult questions the future held. After years apart, different occupations and family responsibilities, they had met again. Abhay respected Naina's candour; Naina admired his courage in writing against injustice. Now those very qualities stood before them as a source of conflict. Naina wished Abhay would regard her simply as one of his own and put aside every risk. Abhay understood that the public significance of truth could not be separated from the suffering of those one loved, but neither did the two always take the same form.

Having completed Chandan's statement, Sujata sent him outside. The moment Naina saw his face she asked, "Did you tell her everything?" Chandan nodded. "I told her what I saw. I remembered one more thing, but I wasn't certain, so I told her that too." Naina breathed more easily. Sujata asked them to continue cooperating with

the investigation, to preserve the necessary contact information and to report any threat immediately. She made no advance announcement about whether Chandan would be arrested. As he came outside, Chandan could hear the ordinary bustle of the street for the first time.

Outside the station Chandan noticed the number on a police vehicle. He began trying to compare it with the numbers associated with his old night deliveries, then stopped himself. He had already given his statement about the half-remembered number from the night at the canal. Adding new conjectures would not make the truth any clearer. Naina asked, “Did something else come back to you?” Chandan said, “No. I've told them everything I know now.” Naina said, “All right. Rest for the moment.”

As they left the station, Abhay tried to walk with them. Naina said, “I'll take Chandan home. You go on with your work.” Abhay asked, “Can we meet this evening?” “I don't know,” Naina replied. “I have to look after my family now.” Abhay said, “What if I help?” Naina answered sharply, “Helping doesn't mean turning it into news.” This time Abhay offered no defence. “All right. I understand what you're saying.” They took separate paths. Chandan asked his sister, “Have you two quarrelled because of me?” Naina said, “Not because of you. Because of the fears we each carry.”

As soon as they reached home, Saraswati took Chandan's hand and asked, “Did you leave anything out?” Chandan said, “I told them all I know.” His mother put rice on the stove. The ordinary work of the household began again, but its old carefreeness did not return. Naina went into her room. A book Abhay had given her lay on the table—an old collection about news writing. Inside was a short sentence in his handwriting: ‘Have patience enough to understand what you see.’ Naina closed the book. Now she was reading the words as something meant for herself too.

That afternoon Naina received a call from her maternal uncle, Ramprasad. Word of Poonam's case and Chandan's visit to the police station had reached the family. Her uncle first asked after her mother's health, then said, “Why is that journalist Abhay always coming so close to you?” Naina answered, “He's an old friend. He helps us in difficult times.” Her uncle asked, “You know what caste he belongs to, don't you? If talk of such a relationship comes up in the family, what will people say?” Naina flared at the question. “You can ask me about Chandan and

come to see Ma. But don't measure the worth of a friend's work by asking about his caste."

Her uncle did not fall silent. "I want what's best for you. You need to understand society's proprieties." Naina said, "Propriety isn't only a matter of where a person was born. Someone who stands beside us in trouble deserves respect as well." Her uncle said, "You're angry just now. We'll talk later." The call ended. Naina stared at her phone for a long time. She had differences with Abhay, but she could not agree to belittling him because of his birth. She already knew the value of the right to make her own decisions; now she would have to assert that right within her family too.

After the call, Naina took a letter from her father's old trunk and read it. After she had completed her education, her father had advised her to make her own decisions. There was no sermon about caste or lineage on the page, only words about honesty and work. Naina thought that family honour should never mean showing contempt for anyone. Her differences with Abhay would be resolved by answering the questions his journalism raised; the caste issue her uncle had brought up was another injustice altogether. It would be wrong to mix the two matters together.

When Abhay reached his office, Manjari was examining a draft. She asked, "I've heard Chandan went to the police station. Will you write about it?" Abhay replied, "He gave the information in a personal capacity. Without official confirmation and responses from the relevant parties, I won't name him." Manjari nodded. "Freedom of the press shouldn't conflict with human safety. But don't lose sight of the questions of public interest." Abhay said, "It took me too long to understand that a friend's trust and a journalist's relationship with a source are different things." Manjari said, "Then clear your own mind first. The report must be true, but when and how it is written matter as well."

Meanwhile Abhay's father telephoned. The water pump on the farm had broken. "Will you come home on Sunday?" he asked. Abhay replied, "I'll try." His father said, "Your mother has been asking about Naina's mother. Is she keeping well?" Abhay answered, "There's trouble in the family. I could do only a little to help today." His father was silent for a while. "When you feel close to someone, make room to listen to what they have to say. Don't cut people short in your hurry to do your work."

In that ordinary advice from his father, Abhay heard an answer to the day's bitter conversation.

In the evening Naina went to a shop to buy Saraswati's medicines. She met Savita outside. Savita asked, "Did you read Abhayji's report? The examination candidates' demands have been printed properly." Naina said, "He's very careful about his work." Savita laughed. "Your voice sounds heavy. Is everything all right?" Naina replied, "There are too many questions at home." Savita said, "In the agitation too, people say: write now, speak now. But a person's private crisis has its own time." Naina and Savita walked together for a little while. Their work was different, but the difficulty of choosing the right moment for a decision was much the same.

Savita took out the candidates' memorandum from her bag and showed it to Naina. There were many signatures on the paper, but some people had been unable to find the courage to write their names. "Some say the examination will be cancelled again; others say they'll lose job opportunities if they give their names," Savita explained. Naina replied, "Chandan is caught in that kind of fear too. But his trouble has now become much more serious." Savita asked, "Tell me if you need help." Naina said, "For now I have necessary things to do at home. I'll remember your kindness."

As evening fell Abhay sent Naina a short message: 'I didn't listen to everything you said today. I'm sorry. I won't publish Chandan's statement. If official facts emerge from the investigation, I'll first consider the limits imposed by sensitivity and the law. I want to talk with you, not argue.' Naina read the message. She did not answer at once. Abhay was acknowledging his own limits. For the first time she understood that small but important thing clearly.

After dinner Naina and Saraswati sat in the veranda. Chandan had opened a book inside, but he could not concentrate. Saraswati asked, "Did Abhay call again?" Naina replied, "He sent a message." "Do you have something to say to him?" "I do, but my mind isn't calm yet." Stroking her daughter's head, her mother said, "Love isn't merely conversation for happy days. In hard times you have to see whether two people can listen to each other's fears. But don't abandon your judgement." Naina was silent for a while as she listened.

During the past few months Abhay had made Naina no grand promises. He had simply been present when needed—with Poonam's family, at Naresh's home, on the way to the hospital. Naina had taken

that presence as the beginning of love. Now she had to ask how far that presence could extend beyond curiosity for a news story. Abhay, for his part, had to understand that while discharging his duties as a journalist he could not turn the suffering of those dear to him into an anonymous crowd. Each was stubborn in defence of a truth of their own; yet love was not hearing only half of the other person's truth.

Saraswati told a story from her youth. "Before I married your father, many people said many things. The family's circumstances, earnings, relatives—everyone raised questions. But we both spoke plainly about what we believed. Later there were difficulties, yet we never wanted to conceal things from each other." Naina asked, "Is it possible to tell each other everything?" Her mother replied, "Not everything on the same day. But what matters cannot be postponed for ever." In this Naina glimpsed a way towards her next conversation with Abhay.

At last Naina wrote: 'I need some time today. I've read your message. We'll talk, but first let me attend to the situation at home.' Abhay did not reply immediately. Late at night came only this: 'All right. Tell me if you need help. I won't come to your home unless you ask.' Naina put down the phone. There was no pressure in the reply. Outside the window the sky was not uniformly dark; lamps were burning in some houses. Within her own home she resolved to raise again the following day the question of Chandan's studies and lawful employment. Saving a home meant not only keeping away from crime but finding a new arrangement for a life that remained possible.

Meanwhile Chandan sat in his room and took out an old copy of his examination admit card. He calculated in his mind: if he found lawful work, repaying the debts would take longer, but he would no longer have to travel the canal road in fear night after night. Naina came in to give him some water and saw the admit card. "Do you want to study again?" she asked. Chandan said, "Let me get out of this trouble first. But I won't throw the books away." Naina attached importance even to that small decision.

The next morning Abhay wrote on the first blank page of his diary: 'For news, evidence of what I know; for a relationship, responsibility for what I say.' The page was not intended for anyone else to see. Meanwhile Naina answered a call from Poonam's mother. She wanted to know how far the search for her daughter had progressed. Naina did not mention her private differences. "The investigation is still going on. I'll tell you when we have information we can rely on," she said. Even amid her own

family's fears she could not forget Poonam's family. Life's work had not stopped because love had come under doubt; one by one, the questions continued to demand their answers.

Chapter 31: False Accusations

Naina's phone kept ringing that morning. She had silenced it before going to sleep the previous night. When she opened her eyes and looked, she found eighteen messages—from Savita, Reena, Mahesh at the office, and two unfamiliar numbers. One contained nothing but a question: "Is this true?" Another carried an image made to look like a newspaper cutting. Beside Naina's photograph, a notice alleged that an employee of Nayi Disha Employment Centre had been cheating examination candidates by collecting money from them, and that the police were looking for her. At the bottom were a forged signature and the institution's emblem. Naina enlarged the image. Her photograph had been taken in her first week of employment at the centre. She had never seen the rest of the document before.

Saraswati Devi was making tea in the kitchen. Seeing her daughter's face, she asked, "What has happened?" Naina showed her the phone. Saraswati put on her glasses and read. "What is this supposed to mean? They're accusing you of taking money?" "Ma, I haven't taken a single paisa from anyone." Saraswati's voice hardened. "I know that. But who is going to silence the mouths of those who don't?" Chandan came out of his room. The moment he saw the notice, he said, "This must be Manoj's people's doing. Because of me, all of you—" Naina stopped him. "No guessing yet. First let me find out where this document came from."

On the telephone Savita told her that the image had been posted at eleven the previous night in a group formed to protest against the cancellation of an examination. Within minutes it had spread to other groups. Accompanying it was the message: 'Those who set themselves up as leaders of the unemployed should account for their own dealings first.' Even people to whom Naina had once shown documents concerning complaints at her office had begun asking questions. "I've written in the group that nobody has established the source of the allegation," Savita said. "But my word alone won't stop it. Find out where else this sheet bearing your name is being circulated." Naina thanked her and asked her not to forward the original image any further.

Naina was due at the office before ten. That morning, however, the guard stopped her at the gate. "The manager has ordered that you speak

to Kiranji first." Nothing of the kind had happened before. Several employees stood outside the manager's room. They looked towards Naina and then returned to their work. Mahesh said quietly, "I don't understand it at all, Nainaji. If the police were really searching for you, a notice would have reached the office." Naina replied, "That's precisely what needs to be said in writing. Whispered conversations won't prove my innocence."

Kiran sat at her desk. Two registers lay open before her, but she was watching Naina's face rather than the papers. "All this is bringing the institution into disrepute," she said. Naina asked calmly, "What is bringing it into disrepute—the false allegation, or my presence here?" Kiran was momentarily disconcerted. "The owner wants you to make no public statement until an inquiry has been conducted." "An accusation against me can circulate publicly, but I mustn't defend myself?" "There is a proper way to present your defence." "Then please give me written notice of the document on which this accusation is based, and tell me what my employment status will be."

Naina remembered the papers she had been given on her first day at work. Her duties were to enter applications in order, check the numbers of deposit receipts, and direct applicants to the appropriate desk. She had never been authorised to accept cash. On the few occasions when someone had offered her money, she had explained the rules of the counter. Now she understood the significance of those small incidents. To stand by the truth, it was not enough merely to say, 'I am not that sort of person.' She would also have to establish the limits of her duties and the facts showing that she had observed them.

Ratan Singh entered a couple of minutes later. The lack of sleep showed beneath his eyes, though his clothes were as immaculate as ever. "Naina, I gave you an opportunity," he said. "Now our name has been tarnished." Naina answered, "I am grateful for the opportunity. But my appointment and the accounts of the work I performed are separate matters. A forged document is circulating under your institution's emblem. Will you yourself inform the police?" Ratan laid a palm on the table. "First I'll consult my lawyer. Go home. The office will send written instructions concerning today's attendance." Naina said, "I'll obtain a record of the work I've done—copies available under the rules, not original documents." Ratan offered no reply.

As she left the office, Naina saw two new applicants standing at the gate with identity cards in their hands. One young man asked, "Are you

Naina Mishra?" She said she was. "My elder brother says you took fifty thousand rupees from us." "When did you yourself give me the money?" The young man fell silent. His companion said, "I hadn't even come here then. Your name was in the group." Naina asked, "Does the person claiming to have paid have a receipt? A date?" The young man searched his phone for a photograph, but found nothing. "If money has been taken, make a written complaint," Naina said. "Check where the allegation came from. But don't pass judgement on me when you haven't even met me."

Abhay was at the newspaper office. A copy of the same image had reached the editor's desk. "You know this young woman?" the editor asked. Abhay answered truthfully, "Yes. We have known each other for years. I've also consulted her for information while reporting on the employment institution." "Then your personal connection must not influence your editorial judgement," the editor said. "If the accusation is false, that too can be reported, but we need confirmation from the police." Abhay agreed. The image was not published in the newspaper without verification.

Before calling Naina, Abhay remembered her message from the previous day. She had asked for time. He sent a short note instead: 'I've seen the document circulating under your name. The newspaper won't print it without verification. Tell me if you need help.' A little later Naina replied: 'Its source needs investigating. I'll submit an application to the police first. Please follow your own professional rules in reporting the matter.' Neither wrote anything further. Yet something of the previous day's bitterness eased in that brief exchange.

At the police station, Sujata Kumari had been examining the file on Naresh's murder. When Naina arrived, she motioned her to a seat. Naina showed her the times of the messages, the senders' names, and the image available on her phone. Sujata asked, "You work for this institution. Has any applicant ever given you money personally?" "No." "Has anyone lodged a written complaint making such an allegation?" "Not to my knowledge." Sujata explained that no official notice seeking Naina in connection with the case had yet been issued. "But the circulation of a document on social media is itself a matter that can be investigated," she said.

Naina submitted a written application. Along with asserting her innocence, she did not name any particular person as certainly responsible. She set out the facts she knew: the image had been

circulated at night; it bore the institution's emblem; the photograph was an old one; the source of the written allegation was unknown. Sujata acknowledged receipt of the application and told her that the relevant digital records must be preserved. "Don't delete any messages. But don't make another false image in your own defence, either. Write down when you saw what you saw." Naina noted the advice in her notebook.

Sujata also asked when and where the photograph had first been taken. "After my appointment, for a group photograph of the employees," Naina said. "Someone has since cut my face out of that picture and used it separately." Sujata recorded the details of the original photograph, its possible source, and the office's publicity materials. When employees' personal information is kept in office files, the possibility of those documents being misused also arises. But before investigating she named no culprit. What she needed was evidence, not an accusation.

After leaving the station, Naina did not go to the home of Naresh's sister, Rekha. Rekha was already bearing the weight of grief; Naina did not think it right to trouble her with this new slander. Near the old vegetable market, however, she met Madhavi Devi, who washed utensils in two homes and cooked in a third. Madhavi looked at her and asked, "What's the new misfortune now?" Naina briefly told her. Madhavi set her bag on the ground. "People's tongues move quickly. When my husband gave up drinking, we had a year of peace and everyone praised us. Then illicit liquor returned, and people began saying I couldn't manage my own home. It is someone else who commits the wrong, yet it is the woman who is questioned."

Naina stopped to listen. Madhavi continued, "Calling you innocent won't change a court's decision. But I say this knowing what I've seen of you: if the allegation is false, fight it in the proper way. Go home now. Look after your mother." Madhavi went on to her work. Naina realised that a damaged reputation was not merely a matter of prestige. It struck at one's livelihood, at the trust within a home, and at a woman's right to go out into the world.

At midday, a distant relative telephoned Saraswati. "Why did you send your daughter to such an institution?" Saraswati replied, "To earn a living. The things being written against her will be investigated. Don't declare her guilty before that investigation." Silence spread at the other end of the line. Saraswati herself was surprised to hear the firmness of her

voice. If a mother yielded to fear inside the house, the blows Naina received from the world outside would grow harder still.

Before evening Savita came to Naina's home with two young women from the examination protest group. No one took a photograph; no one issued a fresh declaration on social media in the name of putting out the fire. "Everyone in our movement is angry," Savita said. "The question-paper leak has destroyed their hopes of employment. Some people are using that anger to try to make every protester look guilty. We must learn to demand evidence." Naina replied, "What you say will protect me, but the applicants' genuine complaints mustn't be buried. The money the institution has collected needs investigating too." "We'll raise both questions together," Savita said.

That evening Mahesh called. "There's been a written instruction to hand in your office key," he told her. "They've asked you to stay away for a few days." Naina asked, "What does it say about my wages?" "Nothing clear on that." "Send me a copy of whatever notice there is, through the proper procedure. Don't risk your own job." Mahesh was silent for a moment. "While Naresh Babu was alive, he tried to make the receipt accounts clear. Now everyone is keeping quiet." Naina did not answer. She knew that fear for his livelihood lay behind Mahesh's silence too.

That night Chandan sat in his room looking through old conversations on his phone. There had been several calls bearing Manoj's name, but he had not answered them. "Didi, what if my name is spread around like this too?" he asked. "You are responsible for your own actions," Naina said. "But you mustn't admit to something you didn't do. Don't change what you told the police." Chandan said, "People join two things together and invent a third." "That's why documents, dates and the truth matter," Naina replied.

In the lane behind the house, two neighbouring women fell silent the moment they saw Naina. Earlier they had always asked after Saraswati's health; now they turned their faces away. Naina was hurt, but she did not stop to quarrel. She went indoors, gave her mother her medicine on time, and recognised that abandoning the small disciplines of daily life would make it easier for the false accusation to triumph. She washed her clothes, put the kitchen utensils in order, then placed a copy of her application to the police in a safe envelope.

At dinner Saraswati served a smaller helping of vegetables than usual. Naina noticed that there were potatoes at home, but almost no oil left. The next payday was still some way off, and her income had become

uncertain now that she was being kept from work. She opened her notebook and began to enter the household expenses—grain, groceries, her mother's medicines, electricity, Chandan's examination fees. No court had yet imposed any punishment for the accusation circulating online. Its effects, however, had already entered the household accounts.

The following morning Abhay had a short report published in his newspaper. Its headline read: 'Unverified Image Concerning Employment Institution Circulates; Complaint Submitted to Police.' It said nothing about Naina's private family relationships. It reported only the police's official statement, the unverified status of the image, and the fact that the institution had not issued a clarification. After reading Abhay's report, Naina sat holding her phone for some time. She considered thanking him, then wrote: 'It was good that you kept within the limits of the evidence.' He replied: 'That's not a personal favour to you. It ought to be a rule of journalism.'

Naina read the reply again. Expecting justice from someone dear to her and respecting the independence of that person's profession were two different things. She remembered their argument the other day. In the courtyard, Saraswati was hanging clothes out in the sun. Chandan had gone out saying he would look for work. The office had not closed; its door had been closed only to Naina. Poonam was still missing. Naresh's family still waited for justice. Her damaged reputation had become one more knot in all this, but to undo it she could not abandon her truth, her documents, or her patience.

Meanwhile, at the other end of town, Ratan Singh sat in a meeting with the contractor Virendra Rai. "People's attention has shifted to the employee's name," Virendra said. "Attention can shift again," Ratan answered, "but police documents follow their own course." "Then what about the reply to the file they've demanded?" Virendra asked. Ratan continued looking out of the window. He gave no definite instruction. Outside, labourers were making their way home with the day's earnings. In the town, the food and medicines of those whose names were being blackened depended upon such earnings. In Ratan's room, the value of relationships was measured instead in piles of papers and access to power.

That night Naina read Poonam's last appeal for help again on her phone. The search for Poonam was still unfinished. Justice had not been done for Naresh's death either. She did not want the pain of her own public humiliation to absorb her so completely that she forgot the suffering of others. In her notebook she wrote down three essential tasks

for the next day: contact Poonam's family; secure a copy of the office's written letter; buy Saraswati's medicines. The first two concerned the world outside; the third, a living need within the home.

She closed the notebook. Tomorrow she would have to open the door again, even if the voices of rumour had not fallen silent. Truth demanded patience, and courage within the home as well.

That evening a formal letter arrived from the office: regular attendance was suspended until further instructions, and she was to make herself available whenever the relevant department requested information. The letter did not establish any accusation as fact. Naina read it and kept a copy safe. She understood that more difficult than the wound of rumour was the official silence that followed it. Then, on the first page of her notebook, she wrote: 'My work has been suspended; no crime has been proved. These are two different things.' In the days ahead, holding fast to that distinction would be essential.

Chapter 32: The Quagmire of Debt

When Chandan left home in the morning, he did not tell Naina where he intended to go first. “I have to speak to people about work at two places,” was all he said. His mother laid a hand on his forehead. “Have you eaten?” He said yes, though he had left half his roti untouched. Outside, the street vendors were arranging their wares. Chandan felt in his pocket: eighty-seven rupees. Out of that he would have to pay for his bus fare, tea, and the journey home in the evening. Five messages from people demanding repayment had arrived on his phone. Every one asked the same question: ‘When will you pay?’

The first place was a small goods-transport business. “Experience?” the proprietor asked. Chandan explained that he could drive and had worked delivering goods. The next question was, “Do you have a permanent driving licence and a written recommendation from your previous employer?” He had the licence, but not the recommendation. He did not want to mention Manoj's name. “I need a driver I can trust,” the proprietor said. Outside, Chandan reflected that no one needed trust more than he did just then, yet he carried very little proof of trustworthiness in his pocket.

At the second place there was work counting stock in a warehouse. The monthly wage was lower than he had first imagined; the hours ran from eight in the morning until eight at night. There was one day off, and payment for overtime was uncertain. “Will you give me an appointment letter?” Chandan asked. The shopkeeper laughed. “Start working first. We can look at the paperwork afterwards.” Chandan remembered Naina's warning: there was no security in a job without written terms. He noted down the name and number but did not accept the offer at once. Between the hunger at home and his fear of illegal work, he now had to contend with humiliating conditions even for lawful employment.

The warehouse owner had also spoken of the difficulties of running his business. “If fewer goods arrive, we can't afford to keep so many workers.” Chandan had listened. He had no solution for the whole market. But he understood this much: a worker might be badly treated in a legitimate, poorly paid job, yet the extra money earned through illegal transport could never put an end to fear. For him, the comparison

was not merely a question of morality; it concerned his next meal. He had sometimes imagined that respectability would come of itself with employment. Now he understood that the terms of the work needed questioning too.

Sitting at a tea stall behind the bus stand, Chandan took out an old notebook. It had once been used for the formulae he was learning for competitive examinations. Now its first page held a list of debts: coaching fees, journeys to the city for examinations, application charges, a small loan taken during his mother's treatment, and the monthly instalments on his motorcycle. Some money was owed to a bank, some to acquaintances, and some to people who were demanding more in interest than the original sum. Chandan added the figures. The account was simple enough on paper, but the path to repayment was tortuous.

He remembered his three years of preparation: rising at four each morning to study, sharing the rent of two rooms, forcing his way through crowds to reach examination centres. Once his marks had fallen short; another time the number of vacancies had been reduced; on a third occasion, after the written examination, a controversy had erupted over a leaked question paper. An inquiry had been announced and the examination cancelled. Chandan had no grounds for saying all the candidates were corrupt. He knew that many had prepared honestly. Yet because of crooked middlemen, everyone's labour had once again been counted as nothing.

After that examination, a broker named Awadhesh Sah had telephoned him. Saying, "There may be help available with the next recruitment," he had raised the matter of money. Chandan had refused outright. Awadhesh had laughed. "Studying isn't enough for everything, you know." At first the words had seemed an insult. Later, as jobs remained out of reach, he had often remembered them. Some people in the village said nothing could be achieved without influence. But Chandan knew very well that if he accepted that belief as truth and took a dishonest path, still greater darkness would spread through his life.

He had first met Manoj at a motorcycle repair shop. "Two hours of deliveries, a fixed payment, none of the trouble with paperwork," Manoj had said. On the first trip the cartons were sealed, a warehouse name was written as the destination, and payment was made in cash. Chandan did not ask what was inside. On the second trip a sharp smell came from the goods. Manoj joked, "A mixture of oil and spices." The third time, as cartons were being loaded, a crate broke and the necks of bottles became

visible inside it. Chandan realised that these were not ordinary lawful groceries. He protested, but Manoj pressed more money into his hand than the agreed fare for that day.

With the earnings from his first delivery Chandan had bought rice for the household. Saraswati had asked how he had received so much money. "It's a new job," he had said. His mother had been pleased. The memory of that pleasure now hurt him. In the early months of prohibition, women such as Saraswati and Madhavi had spoken of how men's wages no longer disappeared entirely into drink. Families had begun eating better. Now, because of smuggling, that same money was leaving homes by a new route, and Chandan had become one of the minor drivers on that route.

"You've seen enough to know enough," Manoj had told him. "You needn't work again. But keep today's money." Chandan had accepted it. Afterwards he had offered himself many arguments—his mother's medicines, examination fees, the pressure of debt. At night, however, he could no longer believe his own justifications. After seeing the bottles, he himself had chosen to deliver the consignment. Need had driven him towards it, but he had taken the final step of his own accord.

On the night of Naresh's murder he had driven Manoj in a vehicle. The canal road had not been completely dark; lights were burning in two houses beside it. On the way Manoj had spoken to someone on the telephone. Chandan could not hear every word. All he knew for certain was that Manoj had told him to stop at a particular turning and ordered him not to go farther. Ever since he heard of the murder, Chandan had been replaying every sound of that night. When someone called him a criminal, fear rose within him; yet even when someone said he was innocent, he found no peace.

"Another tea?" the stall owner asked. Chandan shook his head. Just then his creditor, Prabhat Sah, called. Prabhat dealt in grain wholesale and had lent him money on an acquaintance's recommendation. "Babu, the due date has passed. I have payments of my own to make," he said. "Give me another fortnight," Chandan replied. "I'm looking for work." Prabhat's voice hardened. "My capital can't be tied up while you go on looking for work. Meet me by this evening." "I'll meet you in the market, not at home," Chandan said. Prabhat ended the call.

That day he happened to meet Savita at the office of a small training institution. She was distributing notices about a free application-assistance camp for candidates whose examination had been cancelled.

On seeing Chandan, she asked, "Are you thinking of sitting an examination again?" "I am, but I have to keep the household going," he said. "Both are difficult," Savita replied, "but that doesn't mean you should give up studying. The examination will take place when the responsible authority announces a new date. Don't believe rumours for now." Chandan silently accepted the leaflet. Savita also asked about the false allegation being circulated against Naina. "It's putting a great deal of pressure on the family," he said.

Chandan had been present when the first instalment of Prabhat Sah's loan fell due. At that time Prabhat had spoken the language of personal ties: "You're one of our own. Pay on time and there will be no problem." When Chandan's income stopped, his language changed. Chandan understood that there ought to be a boundary between an actual financial obligation and personal humiliation. By asking for the interest calculation in writing, he was not insulting anyone; he simply wanted to establish the amount he owed. Some of the loans had genuinely helped: his mother's treatment had continued and he had been able to sit examinations. But without a clear repayment plan, even a loan begun in the name of help could become a quagmire.

In the afternoon Chandan went to the police station. Sujata Kumari had already given him an appointment. During questioning he again described the canal route, the place where Manoj got down, the fare and the timing of telephone calls. "When you saw the bottles, why didn't you stop transporting those goods?" Sujata asked. "There were debts at home," Chandan replied. "But that's no justification. I should have refused that day." "Tell me only what you know," Sujata said. "Don't put guesses about things you didn't see into your statement." She had his available messages and payment details submitted in accordance with procedure.

Sujata offered no assurance that giving a statement would absolve Chandan of wrongdoing. She made clear that his participation in illicit transport was one matter for investigation, and the information he possessed about the murder was another. "Doing something unlawful and being a witness to an incident aren't the same thing, but both will be investigated," she said. The stern truth brought Chandan little comfort, yet it was easier to bear than a deceitful promise. Leaving the police station, he did not delete his old messages from his phone.

That evening he met Prabhat Sah near the bus stand. An accountant accompanied him. "How much can you pay now?" Prabhat asked. "Not a

paisa today. But I've made an account. Write down the principal and the interest separately, and I'll pay what I can on agreed dates." Prabhat's face grew hard, but the accountant took out a sheet of paper and began to enter the sums. Chandan questioned two items of interest. "No one in the market lends at less than this," Prabhat said. "Show me the terms we agreed on," Chandan replied. "I won't accept a new amount merely because you say it."

"Your mother and sister live at home," Prabhat said. "We may have to speak to them too." For the first time Chandan raised his eyes and looked directly at him. "I took the loan. There's no need to threaten my family. Take the figures and I'll make arrangements to pay." Prabhat said nothing, but dissatisfaction showed on the accountant's face. Chandan knew the matter might reach his doorstep. The debt was no longer merely financial; it could become a means of exerting pressure upon his mother's peace and Naina's reputation.

On his way out of Sujata's room, he had encountered a young constable who had earlier visited the place where Naresh's body was found. The constable asked him nothing, merely had him sign the register. Chandan was astonished by the ordinariness of the encounter. In the darkness of his fears he had imagined that everyone would look at him as a criminal once he entered a police station. In the actual office, documents were governed by their own procedures, and the staff went about their respective duties. It did not dispel his fear, but it showed him that clear answers to questions mattered more than imagining what other people thought.

On the way home Chandan stopped outside a school. Classes had ended and children were coming out. A teacher was telling someone, "Leave in a line." Chandan remembered his own schooldays. Then each year's examination had opened the way to the next class. Now examinations themselves had become an uncertain waiting. He noticed a large advertisement beside the road: 'Guaranteed Appointment—Contact Us.' A few years earlier, such words would have filled him with hope. Now he saw the possibility of deception behind them.

As soon as his mother opened the door, she asked, "What happened about work?" "There's a job at one place, on a low wage," Chandan said. "I asked for written terms, and the conversation went no further." "Even if the pay is low, take it if the work is honest," Saraswati said. "We'll reduce our expenses." "I can manage on less money," he replied, "but the work must be clearly defined." Naina was sitting in the veranda

examining the office letter. Chandan told her about his meeting with Prabhat. "How much principal is still outstanding?" she asked. Chandan passed her his notebook. For the first time he did not hide the full extent of his debts from his sister.

Naina examined the accounts. Paying off two small loans might reduce the pressure of interest on the remaining amount. But the family did not have enough money at hand. "We won't borrow from someone else now to pay off the first debt," she said. "First, a firm arrangement for lawful income; then a written repayment schedule." "Didi, I know how uncertain your salary is," Chandan said. "I won't take money from you for myself." "A family's troubles aren't divided up into separate rooms," Naina replied. "But you will have to bear the consequences of your own mistakes as well."

Chandan's phone rang again that night. It was an unfamiliar number. He answered. A voice said, "Manojji says you should stay out of town for two days. It isn't wise to talk too much to the police." "Who are you?" Chandan asked. There was no answer; the call ended. His hands began to tremble. He immediately called Naina. She noted the time of the call. "We'll tell Sujata about this," she said. "For now, don't go to meet anyone or follow anybody." For the first time, Chandan agreed without offering an excuse.

Chandan went outside and looked at the papers for his old motorcycle. Selling it would pay off a small part of his debts, but would make legal delivery work or journeys to distant workplaces more difficult. He raised the question with Naina. "We won't decide in haste now," she said. "First we'll write down how much income is possible, how many instalments remain and what it costs to keep the vehicle." For the first time Chandan considered the value of what something could do for him rather than merely the money he might get by selling it. Under financial pressure, people sometimes sell the very thing they need again the following week.

That night the dal was thin, but they all ate together. "How long has it been since you slept properly?" Saraswati asked Chandan. "A long time," he said. His mother pressed his hand. "Understand one thing. Being born a poor man's son isn't a crime. Being unemployed isn't a crime either. But don't repeat the wrong you have done." Chandan looked at her. He wanted her trust to return at once. Yet he knew trust was not a sum of borrowed money that could be repaid in a single day upon a sheet of paper.

The next morning Prabhat Sah's accountant came and stood outside their home. Saraswati reached the doorway. In a loud voice the man began reciting the amount of the debt. Two neighbours came out to watch. Naina emerged from inside. "If you wish to speak, speak quietly," she said. "Give us a written statement of the amount owed. Humiliation doesn't settle a debt." The accountant drew back a little. The distress on Saraswati's face was unmistakable. "I trust that my son won't do wrong again," she said, "but why make a commotion at our door?"

After handing over a sheet of paper, the accountant left. Saraswati came inside and sat upon a wooden cot. Naina noticed that her breathing was somewhat rapid. She gave her some water. "Ma, don't worry. We'll put the accounts in order." Saraswati tried to smile, but sweat had gathered on her forehead. Chandan stepped forward and took his mother's hand. Once more he remembered the day his examination had been cancelled. Had he found employment, this debt might not have felt so heavy. But the question was no longer merely about a job: his mother's health, his sister's good name and his own courage to tell the truth were all at stake together.

As she laid out the bedding that night, Saraswati opened her old trunk. Inside were certificates of merit from Chandan's schooldays. She had once believed that those certificates would carry her son into employment. Now they were safe in the trunk, but there was no peace in the house. Chandan took the papers from her hand. "Ma, none of this has been wasted. I'll start studying again. But I won't give you false assurances now." "Trust returns through what you do each day," his mother replied, "not through words."

Thinking about the next day's expenses, Chandan also remembered how much petrol he put into his motorcycle. Earlier, pleased to get a fare, he had failed to deduct that expense from his daily earnings. Manoj's deliveries brought cash, but the vehicle's wear, fuel and meals on the road had to be paid for separately afterwards. His apparent savings looked substantial on paper, but little money remained in his hand. He understood now that earnings and what was left of them were not the same. If he started a small legitimate business, he would have to record each item of the fare. The road was difficult, but at least the accounts would be in his own hands. Even if lawful work paid less, the value of his labour would be definite; he could stand before his family without shame.

Sitting in a corner of the veranda, Chandan wrote three things on the last page of his notebook: 'No more transporting illegal goods. Hide nothing from the police. Keep written accounts of every debt.' He did not tear out the page. He had made many resolutions before, only to be shaken the next day by fear and the temptation of money. Keeping these would not be easy. Inside, Saraswati lay with her eyes closed. As Naina heated water, she wondered whether her mother's exhaustion came merely from too little sleep or from something else. She decided that if rest did not help, she would take her to a doctor without delay.

Chapter 33: A Night at the Hospital

By midday the sweat on Saraswati Devi's forehead had not dried. Naina had thought that the accountant's shouting had frightened her mother and that a little rest would put things right. But when lunch was served, Saraswati could not even look at her plate. "My head is spinning, and there's a heaviness in my chest," she said. Chandan immediately brought water. Naina touched her mother's hand; her palm was cold and her face had turned pale. She called Prabha Kaki from next door. "Don't sit here guessing," Prabha said. "Take her to a doctor."

There was a small dispensary near their house, but the doctor did not come until evening. Naina put her mother's old prescriptions, her current medicines and some cash into a paper bag. Chandan went out to find transport. "Why make such a fuss?" Saraswati protested. "Let me sleep a little and I'll get up." "You're telling us something is wrong with your body," Naina replied. "Having it examined isn't making a fuss." Her mother's voice was growing weaker. At that moment the slander against Naina at work and the uncertainty of her employment seemed of secondary importance.

When the first autorickshaw driver heard that they wanted to go to the government hospital in town, he demanded a high fare. Chandan's face flushed, but there was no time to argue. They found another vehicle. Prabha Kaki helped Saraswati into it. Naina sat beside her mother, while Chandan sat at the front by the driver. Their vehicle was trapped in the crowded market road. They passed toy sellers, students standing near school gates and labourers returning from work. Every person in the town seemed occupied with something, yet Naina felt as though time had come to a standstill for her family alone.

At the hospital's emergency department, the staff took Saraswati inside. Naina was asked to write down her name, age, address and history of illness. Chandan stood beside her as she filled out the form. She could not clearly recall the names of her mother's medicines. Fortunately she had brought the old prescriptions. The doctor on duty examined them and ordered checks of Saraswati's blood pressure and other preliminary tests. "We'll keep her under observation for now," she said. "When we see the results, we'll decide what to do next. Don't panic, but don't be careless either."

Saraswati lay on a hospital bed. Her eyes were open, but she had begun to speak less. Sitting by her pillow, Naina asked, "Ma, would you like some water?" A nurse said that food and water should be given according to the doctor's advice. Naina drew back her hand. At home, her mother had always worried about feeding everyone else first; now other people were making decisions for her. "Is Chandan outside?" Saraswati asked faintly. "Yes, he's submitting the forms." "Don't scold him." Naina took her hand. "Get well first, Ma. We'll speak of everything else afterwards."

At the counter they were given a list of fees along with the test forms. Some investigations were available at the hospital, while others involved a wait. Chandan was no longer counting the eighty-seven rupees he had set out with but the additional money brought from home. Naina took out the small emergency savings hidden in a fold of her bag. She had saved that money for her mother's medicines, but had not imagined that so great a need would arise in a single day. "Didi, all this has happened because of my debts," Chandan said. "This isn't the time to count who's to blame," Naina replied sternly. "It's the time to act. Submit the forms and then come inside."

While arranging the payment, Naina noticed in her bag the small envelope Savita had given her for the examination protest. It contained a list of people's signatures, not money. For an instant she thought how the public affairs of the town and her family's private troubles were not two separate paths: an examination was cancelled and household savings disappeared; a job was suspended and paying for medicine became difficult. But explaining that connection would help nobody at the hospital counter. She handed over the money she had counted, collected the receipt and asked when the next test would take place.

One test result came at seven in the evening. The doctor said another examination was necessary. Although Saraswati's condition was stable for the moment, keeping her under observation overnight seemed advisable. Naina asked to stay. "I'll stay too," Chandan said. A nurse explained that one relative could remain beside the patient while another waited outside. Naina decided to stay inside. Chandan went out for tea and necessary supplies.

In the hospital corridor, the anxieties of different households seemed to meet and collide. A man hurried about looking for medicine for his child; an elderly woman struggled to understand a treatment slip; two women spoke of the difficulty of arranging a vehicle from their village.

Naina saw something of her own household in all their faces. No one's problem was confined to illness alone. Fares, leave from work, earnings and the cost of treatment accompanied it. She thought that for a poor family, a night of illness could also mean the loss of a day's wages.

Prabha Kaki passed on the news to Madhavi Devi. After finishing her work, Madhavi came to the hospital at night with a clean towel and a small container of homemade sattu. "I brought it for you people, not for the patient," she said. Naina smiled, though hers was a weary smile. Sitting in the corridor, Madhavi spoke of her own experience. "When my husband gave up drink, we had fewer journeys to the hospital. A few years later illicit liquor came back, and the expenses returned too. It's never only a matter of someone falling ill. The whole order of the household is disrupted."

"How are things at home now?" Naina asked. "I haven't given up my work," Madhavi said. "I try to pay my daughter's school fees on time. My husband's health deteriorated again, but he's receiving treatment now. No two days are quite alike." There was grievance in her voice, but no self-pity. She tried to give Naina two hundred rupees. Naina refused. "If you won't take the money, that's all right," Madhavi said. "Give me the house key tomorrow morning. I'll clean Saraswati Didi's kitchen. Someone has to keep the house running." Naina took her hand in gratitude.

Savita informed Abhay of what had happened. For a little while he wondered whether arriving at the hospital unasked would go against Naina's wish for distance over the past few days. At last he sent a brief message: 'I've heard about Ma's health. If you need help with anything at the hospital, medicines or blood tests, tell me. I can arrange things from outside.' By the time Naina had a chance to read it, it was nine at night. She replied: 'I'm at the hospital. The doctor is attending to her. If the pharmacy at the counter closes, there may be difficulties. I'll call if needed.'

Abhay replied, asking which hospital it was. Naina sent him the name. He wrote nothing further. Half an hour later, when Naina came out to meet Chandan in the waiting room, she saw Abhay standing near the doorway. He had not tried to go inside. "I know a chemist who stays available late into the night," he said. "I can find out whether the medicines on the prescription are in stock." Naina was silent for a moment. "I'm glad you came, but I'm very tired just now," she said. "I didn't come to prolong a conversation," Abhay answered.

Chandan grew awkward as soon as he saw Abhay. He remembered his previous conduct. "Give me the prescription, Chandan," Abhay said. "If the medicines are available, get them from the counter according to the rules. I'll wait outside." "I've made mistakes," Chandan began. "Didi has had to—" Abhay interrupted him. "You've told the police the truth about your mistakes. Your mother's treatment comes first now. I'm not going to ask you to feel sorry for yourself. What matters is what you do on the days ahead." Chandan lowered his head.

Through the waiting-room window a little eating house could be seen. Labourers came there for tea in the morning; at night it served the relatives of hospital patients. Chandan thought how difficult it would be for anyone to get through such a night without the labour of those who provided treatment inside, those who cooked outside, and those who remained at home putting a patient's clothes in order. His textbooks had contained chapters on the social economy, but never a lesson so immediate as this. He counted the money in his pocket again and decided not to buy tea unnecessarily that night.

At ten o'clock Saraswati's second test report arrived. The doctor said that she saw no immediately alarming change, though medication, rest and regular monitoring would be needed. Certain readings would be checked again in the morning. Naina asked whether the previous medicines should be continued or changed. The doctor gave her written instructions. "Stress and anxiety may affect the body, but it will take tests to establish the full cause," she said. Naina listened carefully to that qualification. It would not be right to console everyone by dismissing her mother as merely a patient suffering from fright.

The night wore on. The electric lights in the hospital corridor seemed wan. Chandan dozed in a plastic chair, woke and looked at his phone. Another message had come from Prabhat's accountant: 'Meet tomorrow.' Chandan wrote back: 'My mother is in hospital. I've received the written statement. I'll meet you on a fixed date.' A powerful temptation seized him to telephone Manoj's people and ask for a large payment just once more. The cost of the hospital lay before him as a tangible reason. But he opened the phone and closed it again. To get money immediately and be trapped once more in the fear of crime would only prolong the same calamity.

Abhay remained on the street outside the hospital for some time, but did not insist on staying all night. "I've sent you the shop's number," he told Naina. "Get only what the doctor prescribes. I'll go home now. May

I ask how she is by phone in the morning?" "I'll send a message in the morning," Naina said. Abhay asked once more after Saraswati, folded his hands in farewell and left. Naina saw that he was learning the limits of help without making a new promise or reopening their old disagreement.

At midnight Saraswati asked faintly, "The house is locked, isn't it?" "Prabha Kaki is looking after it," Naina replied. "Has Chandan eaten?" "He has." "And you?" Naina said yes, although she had eaten no more than a little of the sattu Madhavi had brought. "Don't lie, daughter," her mother murmured. "You tell me not to worry about anything, yet you go hungry yourself." Naina looked into her mother's eyes. Even in illness, Saraswati's concern returned to whether her children had eaten.

After a while Saraswati said, "We hear what people say outside the house. I was frightened when I read what was being written against your name. Hearing about Chandan's debts frightened me even more. But don't imagine I have come to hate my son and daughter. I'm afraid. I can see the home we built with our own hands beginning to shake." Naina held her hand. "I won't hide things from you. But we can't solve every problem in a single day. I'll make my position at work clear, and Chandan will stand by his statement."

"Did Abhay come?" Saraswati asked. "Who told you?" Naina said in surprise. "Chandan came inside and told me." Naina nodded. Saraswati smiled faintly. "You learn what someone is like not in good times but in times like these. Still, don't make every decision on the strength of one night's help. Understand your own heart first." Naina agreed. She knew help and love could sustain one another, but one was not proof of the other.

Watching the first light of dawn, Saraswati asked, "What day is it today?" Naina told her. Her mother's eyes began to close, but her voice was clear. "If your father were alive, he would be terribly worried now." "The three of us are here," Naina said, "and there are others outside who are helping too." Saraswati nodded slowly. In that small gesture of agreement lay great consolation. Since losing the old support of the household, they had been learning the difficult art of becoming each other's support. That night had brought a new test of all they had learned.

Near dawn a nurse checked her blood pressure again. The reading was better than before. Naina breathed more easily, but did not think it right to take her mother home before the doctor's final advice.

Chandan was putting the papers at the counter in order. From far away the pale sunlight was falling across the corridor. The hospital night was ending, but the financial crisis at Naina's home was not. The written instructions, the test bills and the future cost of medicines still had to be entered in their notebook.

Savita called early in the morning. After asking about Saraswati, she said that the examination protest meeting had not been cancelled, but if Naina could not attend, no one would give a speech in her name. “I'm grateful for that,” Naina replied. “I'm still at the hospital. If Poonam's family calls, please let me know.” “I will,” Savita said. “But eat something first.” When the call ended, Naina smiled a little. Different people in the town had made a little room for her family amid their own work.

Chandan went to fetch some extra clothes from home. On the way he looked again at his notebook of debts. One thing was now clear to him: another consignment for Manoj could not be the answer to his mother's medical expenses. For the first time, the thought of accepting poorly paid but lawful work did not feel humiliating. He decided to see the warehouse proprietor again as soon as they returned from the hospital, though he would still ask for written terms of appointment. His sister had been suspended from work; he too must take responsibility for the family's income.

Before noon the doctor advised Saraswati to rest for several days, take her prescribed medicines regularly and return for further examination at the appointed time. The discharge procedure began. Naina's hands trembled as she counted the amount on the bill, but she kept all the prescriptions and receipts together. Over the phone Prabha Kaki gave news of the house: the kitchen was clean, and the water containers had been filled. Madhavi said she would prepare a light supper in the evening. After a night in hospital, Naina understood that a family survived not only through blood relationships but through work shared and help freely given.

Prabha Kaki had tied the house key into the end of her sari. On the phone she said she had shut the room windows but left a small ventilator open to let air circulate in the kitchen. The care with which she had done these things felt like an unexpected source of strength to Naina. Even while she remained at the hospital, the home had not been abandoned.

"Are we going home now?" Saraswati asked as she got into the vehicle. "Yes, Ma, we're going home. But you must rest," Naina replied. Chandan held the door. As they left the hospital gate, he saw a brief message from Abhay on his phone: 'I've heard how Ma is. I hope all goes well. Tell me if anything is needed.' Naina did not reply then; she was supporting her mother's head against her shoulder. The road home seemed longer than it had before, but all three were together in the vehicle. In the light of morning they would now have to begin again the difficult reckoning of their lives.

Chapter 34: Helping Hands

After they returned from the hospital, a bed was made for Saraswati Devi in the veranda. She could still feel in her body the jolting of the road. Naina kept unfolding the prescription to check the times of her medicines. One tablet was to be taken after food, another in the morning; the next blood-pressure check had been written down too. Chandan filled a glass with water and put it beside her pillow. “I've made you all run about so much,” his mother said. Straightening her pillow, Naina replied, “You haven't made anyone run about. It's our turn now to do the things you've always done for us.” Saraswati closed her eyes, but the weariness had not yet left her face.

Madhavi Devi arrived early with two clean utensils and some vegetables. Without making a great thing of it, she wiped down the kitchen stove, picked over the rice and put a thin khichdi on to cook for Saraswati. Naina protested that Madhavi would be late for her own work. “When my family was in trouble,” Madhavi said, “Saraswati Didi gave us money for my daughter's books without our asking. She never kept accounts of the help she gave. I haven't come to settle an account either.” Naina was silent. That day she saw clearly the difference between helping someone and placing someone under an obligation. As she left, Madhavi offered to prepare their evening meal too. Naina declined, saying that the work had been divided up and Madhavi must think of her own home as well.

That day they read once more the letter suspending Naina's attendance at the office. Its language was not harsh, but its consequences were. It did not say how long her wages would remain stopped. In her notebook Naina worked out the costs of the next fifteen days: medicines for her mother, milk, transport to the doctor, kerosene for the house, Chandan's necessary journeys. Then she examined her savings. It would be difficult to keep calm with so little money; but spending without a plan would be harder still.

Some of Saraswati's saris lay neatly folded in an old trunk at one end of the room. “Ma was saying she could sell two saris to pay for the medicines,” Chandan said. Naina immediately objected. “She saved those even through difficult times. She must be the one to decide, when she's well enough, whether to sell them. First we'll reckon with what we

have." Chandan said nothing. Until now, they had scarcely thought about who owned the things in the house. In a crisis, every possession begins to look like common property, and it becomes easy to forget whose labour preserved it. Looking again at the notebook, Chandan said, "I'll go and ask about work again at the first place today." "Go where the terms are clear in writing," Naina replied.

Abhay telephoned. He first asked how her mother was. Naina told him she was home and would be checked regularly. "Did you manage to get all the medicines on the prescription?" he asked. She said yes. After a little silence, Abhay asked, "May I come by? There's nothing urgent I need to discuss. I'll simply ask after Ma and leave." "Come in the evening," Naina said. "The house has been in disorder since morning." After ending the call, she noticed how natural her voice had sounded. Despite the distance of the past few days, she had felt no need to pretend while speaking to him.

Savita Kumari arrived in the afternoon. Since the cancellation of the examination, a written delegation of candidates had submitted a memorandum to the district office. Savita said some people were trying to portray every student as someone who had purchased a leaked question paper. "Even those who spent their days and nights studying are being defamed," she said. "Anyone against whom there is firm evidence should be investigated separately," Naina replied. "To cast suspicion on the labour of thousands of candidates at once is unjust." Savita sat at Saraswati's feet and asked after her health. In her tired voice Saraswati said, "Don't give up studying. The examination will take place again, but losing the habit of hard work would be another loss."

Savita had another small proposal. Two families in the neighbourhood were looking for a trustworthy teacher for their children's mathematics and languages. Naina could teach them, but with her mother's health in mind she did not want to go far from home. "The children can come here in the evenings," Savita said. "The fee won't be much, but it'll be regular." Naina wrote down the proposal. She remembered the degree towards which her mother had saved by cutting so many expenses. Amid unemployment, teaching was no small occupation. "I'll speak to the parents first and settle the hours and syllabus clearly," she said.

When Abhay arrived in the evening, he brought neither expensive fruit nor sweets. In his hand was a small folder for the hospital prescriptions, with compartments in which documents could be kept by

date. Saraswati laughed when she saw it. “Journalist Babu, are you going to make news of my illness now?” “This isn't news,” Abhay replied with a smile. “It's a way of keeping the papers safe. When the doctor asks for an old prescription, you won't have to hunt for it.” “Tell that to my son and daughter,” Saraswati said. “They put every paper into the same bag.” Chandan opened the folder and examined its different sections.

While tea was being made, Abhay and Naina sat on two chairs in the veranda. A vegetable seller passed along the road calling out his wares. For a while they spoke about Saraswati's treatment. Then Abhay said quietly, “There are two things I want to make clear. I'll keep the material I obtain for reporting separate from your family, and I won't make your family's suffering a means of gathering news.” Naina looked at him. “My doubts arose because, if Chandan's statement were published, the gang could target him before the police had acted.” “That fear was justified,” Abhay replied. “I need to be more careful in my work.”

For the first time Naina spoke plainly. “I didn't decide to keep my distance out of hatred. I thought that by remaining close to you I might place unnecessary pressure on you, and that you might hold back a story because of me.” Abhay listened for some time. “My affection doesn't mean I must agree with everything you say,” he replied, “and yours doesn't mean you have authority over every report I write. We can give each other room to tell the truth, can't we?” Naina nodded. It was no ornate declaration of love, but something more reassuring than that.

Chandan came from inside to announce that it was time for his mother's medicine. Seeing Abhay, he stood awkwardly for a moment. “How did the job search go today?” Abhay asked. “There's been talk of a small delivery job at a printing shop,” Chandan replied. “The owner says he'll provide papers and put the fare in writing. I'm to meet him again tomorrow.” Abhay did not congratulate him. He said only, “Read the terms of any promise you receive. We've all seen what the road offering quick money can cost.” “I'm beginning to understand,” Chandan said.

Saraswati called from inside. “Abhay, son, may I ask you something?” He went to her. “The people in this house are so entangled in their separate worries that they're afraid even to say ordinary things. Tell Naina that losing a job doesn't diminish a person's worth.” “Naina knows that better than I do,” Abhay replied. “But I'll keep talking to her.” Saraswati went on, “I'll bear the truth about Chandan. But will these documents help defend my daughter against false allegations?”

"Accurate documents, statements made at the right time, and patience are all necessary," Abhay said. "A newspaper report alone cannot secure justice for an innocent person."

After the meal Abhay prepared to leave. Naina accompanied him to the door. The lamp on a street pole flickered twice. "Will you visit Poonam's father tomorrow?" he asked. "I'll call first," Naina said. "Reena interrupts her studies to answer every call. We mustn't give them empty hopes." Abhay told her he was checking the source of an old recruitment advertisement connected with a location in Sonapur, but had no reliable new information yet. "We'll speak when there's evidence," Naina said. They were agreed on that.

That night Poonam's mother called Naina. "Will we have to give another photograph of my daughter?" Lalita Devi asked. "The police already have one. If they need a new copy, I'll have it made," Naina replied. "Reena dials the station's number three times a day," Lalita said. "Some people say girls choose to stay in the city and cut themselves off. I can't sleep when I hear such things." "So far there is no evidence that Poonam has broken contact of her own free will," Naina said gently. "Please don't take rumours for the truth." A long silence followed at the other end.

Lalita spoke again. "My daughter said she was saving for a sewing machine of her own. Is she the sort of girl who would stay away somewhere without sending word?" "I know what she's like, Kaki," Naina replied. "That's why we haven't stopped looking. But it wouldn't be right to guess where she is now." "Reena opens her book and keeps staring at a page with her sister's name on it," Lalita said. "Her examination is near." Naina promised that Reena could telephone her with difficult mathematics problems if she wished. Even with Poonam absent, both women shared a small determination that Reena's education should not stop.

The next morning a trained neighbourhood health worker came to measure Saraswati's blood pressure. After checking the prescription, she recorded the time and advised them to contact the doctor immediately if the symptoms worsened again. Naina placed the old test results and the new readings in the folder. "Look, the journalist's folder has proved useful," Saraswati said. A little laughter rose in the house. The laughter that had been suppressed within its walls for days could be heard once more.

"I used to remember when to take my medicines," Saraswati said, "but I can't make out the lettering of the names on these three prescriptions." Naina checked each medicine against the doctor's prescription and wrote the names in large letters on a separate sheet. "My elderly mother needs large letters too," Madhavi said. "No special learning is needed for this," Naina replied, "but you have to be careful. A mistake in a medicine's name could do harm." She checked them again against the printed slips from the pharmacy. In that ordinary act of household caution there was no great act of charity, only a family's intelligence in working together. Chandan smiled as he washed a glass, though anxiety had not entirely left his eyes.

In the evening the first two children arrived for their lessons: one in Class Seven, the other in Class Eight. Their mother asked at once, "We won't be able to pay a very high fee." "Let me see the syllabus first," Naina replied. "Then we'll write down what is reasonable. There should be no awkwardness about changes halfway through the month." She looked at both notebooks. Facing a simple mathematics problem, one child asked, "Madam, why is the route to this answer so long?" Naina laughed. "Understand the reason first. Then we'll look for the shorter way." For a little while, as she taught, she found relief from her own worries.

When the lesson ended, the children's parent fixed a date for the following month. Naina recorded the first fee on a separate page. Compared with her salary, it was a very small sum, but it was money earned through honest work. Looking at Naina's notebook, Saraswati said, "Small job or big, money earned honestly is like the fire in a household stove. It may burn slowly, but it's your own." Naina remembered the red receipts at her old office, in which even the name of the person making a deposit could be changed. She wanted no such ambiguity in her little notebook.

The next day Abhay discussed a possible new instalment of his report with the editor. It concerned Naresh's death and the records of the employment institution. "Will you write that Chandan's vehicle went beside the canal?" the editor asked. "The vehicle's role hasn't been established in the investigation," Abhay replied. "Publishing it on the word of someone I know could affect the testimony." The editor was dissatisfied. "Then what's new in the story?" "Respecting the limits of the evidence is part of journalism's duty," Abhay said. "We can print

confirmed information from the victim's family, not conjecture." In the end they postponed the report.

That evening, while looking through old publications, Abhay noticed that an advertisement for the Nayi Disha institution gave two different contact addresses. One was the office in Navgarh; the other related to training in Sonapur. The advertisement was old, and he did not know whether the second address was still in use. He did not message Naina. Instead he decided to confirm the issue number, the institution's registration and the original source first. He knew that even a small unverified lead could become enormous hope for Poonam's family. He had no right to destroy that hope thoughtlessly.

At home Naina saw Chandan with one of his old examination books open. He was not reading it; he was making small calculations in a corner of the page. "Will you start studying again?" she asked. "For an hour a day," he said. "If I find work, I'll use what time remains. I haven't decided whether to sit another examination." "That's your decision," Naina said. "But don't give another broker money in the name of preparation." "This time I won't run after an advertisement," Chandan answered. "I'll look at the rules first." Seeing the neatly written daily expenses in his notebook, Naina understood that change began in small acts.

At the end of the week Saraswati expressed a wish to get out of bed and sit in the courtyard. Keeping the doctor's advice in mind, Naina brought her a chair. The afternoon sunlight fell across half the wall. Madhavi stopped on her way home from work. "Your daughter's still studying, isn't she?" Saraswati asked. "Yes, but I worry about her fees," Madhavi replied. "Send her for help a couple of days a week if she needs it," Naina said. "We can talk about fees later." "Don't diminish the value of your work by teaching my daughter for nothing," Madhavi said at once. "I'll give what I can." Saraswati smiled as she looked from one to the other.

That ordinary exchange helped Naina see that people did not help one another with money alone. Someone filed hospital prescriptions, someone worked in the kitchen, someone made time to teach a child, and someone listened to a difficult truth without making accusations or walking away. The same trust was now growing between her and Abhay through such small acts.

In her mother's old notebook Naina found the account of her first month's wages. At the top Saraswati had written clearly: 'Household

Expenses.' In the margin she found another sentence in her mother's hand: 'Never make the giver's hand seem small.' Naina asked what it meant. "When a poor person gives something, don't measure their dignity by the size of the sum," Saraswati replied. "Sometimes giving half an hour of your time is harder than giving five hundred rupees." Naina closed the notebook. Thinking of the small kindnesses shown by Abhay, Madhavi and Savita, she understood how badly she needed that simple lesson now. But she knew trust did not mean that the crisis was over. Poonam was still missing; Naresh's killer had not been identified; Chandan's statement remained under investigation.

Abhay telephoned that night. "How is Ma now?" he asked. "Much better," Naina replied. After they had spoken for a while, Abhay said, "There's something I've wanted to tell you. If you're ready, I don't want our relationship to be limited to meeting in times of crisis. I'd like to spend time with you on ordinary days as well." Naina looked towards the window. "I'd like that too," she said, "but we mustn't hide what's happening at home and manufacture some happiness apart from it." "We won't hide it," Abhay replied. "We'll face it together."

When the call ended, Naina wrote down the next day's tasks in her small notebook: her mother's medicines, lessons for the two children, a reply to the office's letter, a call to Poonam's home, and an appointment with Sujata. She did not write Abhay's name on the last line. Some relationships belong not in a notebook's list of duties but in the trust of everyday life. Yet she decided to send Abhay a message of her own accord when she rose in the morning. For the first time in many days she did not find it hard to acknowledge her own wishes so clearly. Outside, a hawker's cry could be heard in the lane; inside, Saraswati was breathing more easily than before.

Chapter 35: Changing Testimony

There were fewer people than usual in the police station's waiting room that day. Sujata Kumari separated the papers relating to Naresh's death on her desk. Several statements had already been recorded, but two of them gave different times. Gokul Sahni, who had seen the body beside the canal, had first said that he reached the spot a little before seven in the morning. On a second occasion he had put the time after seven. On paper the difference looked small, but it mattered in determining who had arrived at the scene and when. “People's memories aren't clocks,” Sujata told her colleague. “But if the time has changed, we need to find out why.”

Gokul was called in again. He entered wiping the sweat from his forehead with an old towel. Sujata saw that he was frightened. “Tell us again, in your own words, what you told us on the first day,” she said. Gokul explained that he had left his fishing net near the canal bridge. He had been standing on the bridge when a cow crossed the road. Looking down towards the water, he saw the body and called people nearby. “Did you look at a clock?” Sujata asked. “No. I heard a bus horn. That's how I estimated the time,” he replied.

The assisting officer asked which bus it had been. Gokul's recollection shifted again. “At first I thought it might be the school bus. Later people said the school was closed that day. That's when I said seven o'clock.” Sujata stopped him and made the distinction clear. “What other people said isn't something you witnessed. Tell us only what you yourself heard and saw.” Gokul looked somewhat reassured. His statement retained the fact that he had heard a bus horn, but not a definite time by the clock. His earlier and later estimates were recorded as separate observations.

As Gokul came out of the station he met Abhay. Abhay considered asking him questions for a report, but seeing the alarm on his face, held back. Gokul spoke of his own accord. “I didn't see a murder. I saw a body. Everyone seems to have put the responsibility for identifying the murderer on me.” “You don't have to say what you didn't see,” Abhay replied. Gokul drew a long breath. In the world of news, an ordinary witness was so often treated as someone capable of unlocking every

mystery of an incident. Abhay was being reminded of the limits of his profession.

That afternoon an unfamiliar woman came to Sujata's office. She introduced herself as Amita Karn. For almost a year and a half she had worked as an office assistant at Nayi Disha Employment Centre. Six months earlier her contract had not been renewed. During the preliminary investigation the police had contacted her at home, but she had said she knew little about the appointment records. Now she had come to correct that statement. An assisting officer checked her identification and brought out her earlier testimony.

"Why did you give us such a limited account before?" Sujata asked. Amita reached into her bag and showed her a folded message. It warned that speaking about her former office could affect her new job. There was no sender's name. "I have a daughter," Amita said. "Her school fees have to be paid. I keep the accounts at a tailoring shop. I was afraid of what would happen to our household if I lost that work. But after seeing Poonam's mother weeping, I couldn't bear to stay silent." Her voice shook, yet she did not withdraw her decision.

Amita explained that, when she joined the office, three kinds of registers had been maintained: applications, money deposited, and referrals for training. At first the entries were checked against one another in sequence. Later certain entries began to be kept separately on the computer. Kiran would give verbal instructions to remove the names of those sent elsewhere for training from the office's ordinary list. Once Amita had asked under whose name the fee receipt would remain when the applicant's name was removed. She had been told that this was a 'management adjustment' and that an employee should not ask so many questions.

"Did you yourself alter Poonam Yadav's name?" Sujata immediately asked. "I was no longer at the office when Poonam applied," Amita replied. "I'd already left. But I had seen some other people's entries altered in that way earlier." Sujata ensured that the distinction was recorded clearly. A witness to an earlier practice was not the same as the person who had changed Poonam's particular entry. "As you go on, separate what you saw from what you heard," Sujata reminded her. Amita agreed.

One incident remained particularly clear in Amita's mind. Naresh Mandal had once called her over and asked her to compare copies of two receipts. Money paid by the same applicant had been entered as a

training fee in one register and a vehicle fare in another. “If a paper contains a mistake, there must be a trace of its correction,” he had said. “If we erase the old entry, how will someone examining it later understand what happened?” Amita had replied that she had no authority to make corrections. Naresh had then written a note and signed it. Amita remembered what the note looked like, but did not possess the original document.

“What was the date of that note?” Sujata asked. Amita thought for a moment. She could not remember the exact day, but her husband had undergone treatment for an eye problem that month, and she had taken a day's leave. By consulting the old prescription at home, she might be able to identify the week. Sujata told her assistant to record that information separately for verification. A domestic event that helped a witness locate a memory could be useful, but it could not be treated as evidence without corroboration. Amita was told to preserve any old documents lawfully available in her personal possession; she was not expected to take records secretly from the office.

At midday Rekha came to the station for routine information. She was Naresh's sister. In her hand were her father's medical prescription and a copy of Naresh's death certificate; she needed to understand a claims procedure for the household. In the waiting room she saw Amita. A flicker of recognition passed across her face. “You used to work at my brother's office, didn't you?” Rekha asked. Amita nodded. “He often said Nareshji kept the accounts properly,” she said. Rekha's eyes filled with tears. “He kept those accounts, and left the accounts of his own home unfinished,” she replied.

Amita could find no words. Taking her hand, Rekha asked only, “Did my brother ever harm anyone?” “On the basis of what I've seen, I can't say he did,” Amita replied. “But I told the police today about the irregularities I saw.” Rekha lowered her head. She wanted no empty assurance; she wanted to hear of evidence. Sujata watched their conversation from a distance but did not wish to turn the grief of two families into a formal investigative document.

A police employee read Amita's written statement aloud to her. One line said, ‘Poonam Yadav's entry used to be altered.’ Amita stopped him at once. “I didn't say that. I said I saw other applicants' entries altered earlier. I wasn't employed there when Poonam came.” Sujata ordered the inaccurate line corrected. “If we put into a witness's mouth something she doesn't know,” she said, “even the truth of what she does know

becomes weaker." After reading the corrected statement, Amita signed it. She was informed of the procedure for obtaining a copy. The correction preserved the meaning of her testimony and the limits of her responsibility.

That evening a news page mentioned Amita's visit. She was not named, but was described as a 'former female employee'. The report claimed, without evidence, that the mystery of Naresh's murder was about to be solved. "A changed statement does not establish a murder," Abhay told the editor. "The connection between earlier office procedures and the killing is still being investigated." "Then what shall we publish?" the editor asked. "That the investigation continues," Abhay replied, "and that the witness's identity and the safety of her family matter."

On seeing the report, Naina called Abhay. "Did you write it?" she asked. "No," he answered. Naina remained silent for a while. "I thought you wouldn't publish anything unconfirmed. But when such a story appears, Poonam's family will begin hoping again." "That's why I'm trying to have it corrected," Abhay replied. "Have the police given any new information?" Naina asked. "Nothing official," he said. "I won't go beyond what can be established." In his answer, personal trust and journalistic restraint stood together.

The next day Naina and Savita went to Poonam's house. Lalita Devi sat in the doorway. Reena's examination was approaching, but she still tried to read every report about her sister. "I heard a former employee has come to change her testimony," Reena said. "Does that mean they'll find Poonam?" "Nothing of the sort can be said yet," Naina answered plainly. "Some old matters may become clearer in the police investigation, but finding where your sister is remains a separate task." Reena turned her face away. Seeing the disappointment in her eyes, Naina thought that a small, difficult truth was harder to give than vague consolation.

Poonam's father, Ramlal, was mending a broken chair beside the courtyard. "Everyone who comes says there'll be good news tomorrow," he said. "Tomorrow arrives; the news never does." Savita sat beside him. "We won't give you a date today. But we won't abandon the proper way of pursuing written inquiries." Ramlal took out his notebook and showed them the reference number of his earlier application to the police. Naina was glad to see the family keeping its papers in order. She

offered to make another copy of the application for Reena. “I'll write it myself,” Reena replied. “I need to learn.”

Just then a man from the neighbourhood stopped by the courtyard. “So much time has passed and there's no trace of the girl,” he said. “People are saying all kinds of things.” Ramlal began to grow agitated. Naina intervened. “Where there is no evidence, spreading rumours helps no one. If you know anything definite, tell the police.” The man went away without answering. “That's why I no longer want to open the door,” Lalita said quietly. Savita stayed beside her. The patience to listen was another kind of support.

Meanwhile Sujata had the kinds of old registers described by Amita compared with documents already received from the institution. One list contained dates on which entries had been corrected, but it was unclear who had ordered the corrections. In another, identical sums appeared under different headings. The officers decided that the preserved office records should be examined through the competent authorised officer. There were no grounds for relying upon one former employee's account alone. “Testimony shows us a road,” Sujata said. “It's our responsibility to seek evidence along that road.”

There was a different unease at Ratan Singh's office that day. Kiran was told not to speak to anyone about the former employee. When Mahesh arrived carrying a file, Ratan asked, “Where does Amita work now?” “I don't know,” Mahesh replied. Ratan's voice turned sharp. “You don't even know what's happened to an employee who worked here so long?” Kiran saw the fear on Mahesh's face. She reflected that employees in this office were expected simply to obey orders, yet when someone asked for an account of old instructions, the blame could be placed upon those same employees.

Kiran opened a letter Dinesh had sent. He was requesting a clear copy of the loan agreement prepared in his name. She put the paper carefully aside. It occurred to her how difficult it was to give a written answer to a verbal assurance. Amita had once asked her a direct question; on that day Kiran had silenced her. Remembering it now, she felt remorse.

When the police called that evening, Amita's hands began to shake again. An officer told her that she might have to produce details of her old appointment contract the following day. She took the contract from a trunk at home. “Ma, are you going to the police station again?” her daughter asked. “Yes, to explain clearly what I saw.” “Will you lose your job?” Amita hesitated before answering. “I'll try not to. But telling lies

out of fear has its own cost." The child offered no solemn reply; she merely sat beside her mother and began doing her homework.

Early the next morning Gokul Sahni came to the police of his own accord with another piece of information. He had remembered seeing a blue goods vehicle near the bridge before he discovered the body. "Why didn't you mention that earlier?" Sujata asked. "I thought it was just an ordinary vehicle. After that night, people in the village said all sorts of things. Now I remember it." Sujata had the details recorded, with an explicit note that this was a later recollection and required independent verification. Asked for the vehicle's registration number, Gokul could not give a clear answer.

Outside the station Gokul saw Abhay once more. This time he said nothing, and Abhay asked no questions. The meaning of Gokul's changing recollection was still uncertain. In his diary Abhay wrote: 'A witness's fear; an estimate of the time; a detail remembered later: three distinct matters.' He decided not to include it in his reporting yet. Then a message came from Naina: 'Ma is well. Reena has made a copy of the application. There's no verified news about Poonam.' Abhay replied: 'I'll keep that clear.'

At home Rekha was going through Naresh's old trunk. Since her brother's death she had not yet been able to organise the papers. Inside were bills for her father's medicines, household insurance details, rent receipts and some sealed envelopes. Hearing fresh discussion of Naresh's case that day, she remembered something he had once said: "The accounts I keep at home are for the house. Don't throw away the separate copies I keep from the office without asking." She had not understood it then. Now she considered taking out an old cloth bundle lying at the bottom of the trunk.

That evening Sujata kept two matters separate in her written notes. Gokul's account of the time and the vehicle needed confirmation; Amita's statement indicated possible irregularities in the office's earlier method of recording entries. It was not yet time to conclude who had taken part in Naresh's murder. But some paths that had seemed closed were opening again. "Tomorrow I'll have a general conversation with Rekha about the family papers," she told her colleague, adding that Rekha's grief and her rights over the household documents must be respected.

That night Naina said to Abhay, "One person changes a statement and such a commotion begins. Don't people who manufacture false

evidence feel afraid of anything?" "Everyone is afraid of something," Abhay replied. "Some of losing their job, some of public disgrace, some of punishment. If I fail to see the differences, I'll write a false conclusion." "I saw Poonam's mother's eyes," Naina said. "I won't tell that family uncertain things any more." Abhay agreed. Both knew that truth had to be guarded not only at the moment of some great revelation, but in small sentences as well.

Back at home Rekha opened the bundle. Inside were two old copies bearing her brother's signature and a paper envelope. On the envelope, in Naresh's small handwriting, were the words: 'Account Reconciliation —Personal Copy.' Rekha wanted to open it, but it was time to give her father his medicine. She set the papers aside and looked at the clock. The question rising in her mind would have to wait until morning. With Naresh gone, the care of the household and his unfinished work lay before Rekha together.

Chapter 36: Naresh's Documents

When Rekha rose early the next morning, her father was still asleep. As she heated water on the stove, she looked towards the cloth bundle she had opened the day before. Naresh's papers had not lain in that bundle for years; her brother himself had put them there only a few days before his death. Rekha remembered how tired he had looked when he returned home that day. After dinner he had said, "I've put some papers aside. They're my personal copies. If I'm not at the office when you go looking for me, don't throw them out without looking at them." Rekha had simply said yes. Now those words lay heavily upon her heart.

After giving her father his medicine, she spread the papers across a clean table in the veranda. The first envelope contained three tables: one listed applicants' serial numbers, another the fees deposited, and the third payments for training and placements outside the town. In the corner of each table were Naresh's signature or initials, though not on every page. Two sheets looked like photocopies; one carried a note in blue ink. Rekha was not an accountant and could not understand every heading, but she could easily see that two different sums appeared against the same serial number.

Her eye caught one name: 'Poonam Yadav'. It was a name now heard in household after household. Beside it in the first list was an amount entered as a training fee. In the second list, against the same number, appeared the words 'dispatch expenditure', but a code stood in place of the name. Rekha turned the page and looked again; the letters of the code were indistinct. She did not try to connect the code with the name and draw a conclusion of her own. Her first responsibility was to keep safe what her brother's papers actually contained. Their interpretation would be the work of the investigation.

Two envelopes held printed details of bank payments and handwritten accounts. Some sums appeared to have been transferred from the employment institution's account to outside suppliers. One payment record named 'Virendra Construction Services'; another gave goods transport as the heading. No names of individual labourers appeared beside that item. Rekha wondered whether this was the discrepancy that had troubled her brother. But printed copies alone, without checking the original banking records, could not establish

where the money had gone. She put the sheets back in their original order.

She took out a small notebook and recorded the number of papers and the order of the envelopes: six pages in the first, four in the second, and three loose sheets in the third. A few days earlier she had thought of selling the papers her brother no longer needed as waste; there was scarcely room to move in the house. Now the memory of that thought frightened her. In a room full of household possessions, many papers really are nothing but old clutter. Yet sometimes a single sheet becomes the record of someone's labour and the unanswered questions of a life. It is not always possible to recognise such importance beforehand.

When her father awoke, he saw his daughter sitting among the papers. "Are you looking through Naresh's books?" he asked. "Yes. There are some documents. I have to show them to the police." Her father sighed deeply. "He worked day and night at that office. He used to say the accounts didn't tally. I thought it was the ordinary worry of a man who kept the books." Rekha remained silent. "Don't hide what's true," her father went on. "But don't say anything false in your brother's name either." "I'll tell them what I know," Rekha replied. "What I don't know, I'll leave for the investigation."

She telephoned Sujata and told her that she had found papers Naresh had kept at home. The inspector asked who had examined them and how long they had been in the house. Rekha gave as clear an account as her memory allowed. "Keep the papers in the order and condition in which you found them," Sujata said. "If possible, bring them in a sealed bag in the presence of family members. You'll receive a written acknowledgement when they're submitted at the station." Rekha agreed. Sujata reassured her that personal household papers not relevant to the investigation would be kept separate.

Rekha did not go to the police station alone. Manorama Devi, an elderly teacher from the neighbourhood, accompanied her. Manorama had known the family since Naresh's childhood. On the way she asked no questions, merely glanced from time to time at the weight of the bag in Rekha's hand. "All these papers survived, but my brother didn't," Rekha said. "If the papers help make the truth clear now, they have value too," Manorama replied. "But reaching the truth will depend on the work of the officers who examine them."

At the station, Sujata first recorded Rekha's account: her recollection of the papers being put away, the position of the trunk, the day she

found the envelope and whose hands had touched the documents meanwhile. Rekha said she had opened and looked through the pages herself and had told her father the substance of what she had seen. “It's important to record that,” Sujata said. “A clear chain of custody will leave fewer doubts during later examination.” The papers were counted, a general description made of each sheet, and an acknowledgement given to Rekha. Manorama was present as a witness.

Rekha checked again the number of pages written on the receipt. One sheet had been folded into a small shape, and the officer had initially mistaken it for two separate sheets. Rekha pointed out the difference. The number was corrected. “Thank you for attending to a small detail like that,” Sujata said. “If the count failed to match later, unnecessary questions would arise.” “I may not understand my brother's accounts,” Rekha replied, “but I can count the papers I've handed over with my own hands.” As she said it, she felt a little firmness return to her voice.

On first examination Sujata noticed one sheet in particular. At the top, in Naresh's handwriting, were the words: ‘One Applicant—Two Headings’. Opposite five serial numbers, two entries appeared for each. Sujata asked her colleague to bring samples of older receipts. Earlier Naina had pointed out discrepancies between training receipts and other records, and that information had been entered in the investigation register. Whether Rekha's sheet independently confirmed what she had reported would become clear only after an examination of the accounts. Sujata did not hastily circle any column in red.

On the back of another sheet Naresh had written in small letters: ‘If original registers available, match serial numbers 12, 17, 22.’ “Do you know what these numbers mean?” Sujata asked. Rekha shook her head. “My brother sometimes came home and worked out accounts in a notebook, but he didn't tell me confidential things about the office.” “We'll examine those three serial numbers separately,” Sujata said. She had copies made by the prescribed evidentiary procedure and secured; the original sheet was not left lying on an ordinary desk.

Another set of papers contained headings for labourers' wages and vehicle hire. The amount shown as ‘wage payments’ for one month was not accompanied by a copy of the signed receipt register for that month. On the other hand, weekly payments listed as goods transport appeared to be rising. That increase did not, by itself, establish an illegal enterprise, but it suggested why Naresh's concern might have grown.

Sujata had a written request prepared for assistance from an officer dealing with financial crime.

Meanwhile Naina was coming home from the pharmacy with her mother's medicines when Rekha called. Rekha told her she had handed some papers over to the police. "Don't wonder why I didn't tell you earlier," she said. "I only understood their possible importance yesterday." "You did what you thought right," Naina replied. "I won't press you for their contents. If the police ask me anything, I'll tell them what I know." Rekha felt relieved. In a criminal investigation, the curiosity of acquaintances can sometimes impose the greatest pressure upon a bereaved family.

In the afternoon Sujata sent Naina a formal notice asking her to help check details of some old receipts again. Naina went to the station with the copies she had preserved and the office letter suspending her attendance. Sujata first made clear that examining the documents was one matter and the allegations being circulated against Naina were another. "We'll look again at the information you gave earlier," she said. Naina laid out her pages in sequence. She made no attempt to introduce someone's name or draw a conclusion.

On one receipt, the date of payment differed by two days from the date of entry in the register. Naina explained that in the office, after cash had been deposited, the entry was sometimes made on the computer the following day. "So the difference alone doesn't prove wrongdoing," Sujata said. "Yes," Naina replied. "But changing the heading and removing an earlier sheet would be another matter." Sujata recorded her answer. The distinction was important: an ordinary administrative delay and a deliberate alteration of accounts did not mean the same thing.

Naina recognised a type of deposit receipt like the one Poonam had been given. She herself had earlier preserved a copy of Poonam's receipt. Sujata asked where the original was. "With Poonam's family," Naina replied. "The police have already been given a copy." "Let the original remain in the family's custody," Sujata said. "If it's needed for the investigation, it can be obtained through the proper legal procedure." Naina agreed. It was not yet clear how this small document might help find Poonam, but it could at least weaken any attempt to deny that the deposit had been made.

Seeing 'Virendra Construction Services' among Rekha's papers, Sujata remembered an earlier report. A construction contractor had appeared on stage with Ratan at a public programme held by the employment

institution. A photograph of that event could not establish a crime, but it offered reason to investigate the relationship between the official payments and the contractor's business. Sujata prepared a separate list of questions: under which contract was the payment made, for what work, on what date, and what goods or services were received in return? The answers would have to be supported by documents, not by a public photograph.

Bhanu Pratap's name came up in the investigation room. He was at the police station on separate administrative business. Overhearing discussion of Rekha's papers, he said casually, "It's probably all a muddle in the accounts. Headings change all the time in business." "Possibly," Sujata replied. "We won't presume guilt without checking, and we won't dismiss it without checking either." Bhanu remained standing a moment, then went towards his room. Sujata voiced no conjecture about his role in front of anyone. She did, however, instruct her staff not to allow information about such sensitive documents to reach people who had no need to know it.

When Chandan came home in the evening, he found Naina entering a few serial numbers in her notebook. "Does Nareshji's paperwork contain my vehicle's number?" he asked. Naina looked up. "I don't know. The police won't disclose confidential details of an investigation. You've given them all the information you have, haven't you?" "Everything I remembered," Chandan replied. "The time of Manoj's call and the fare too." "Then don't try to alter your answer," Naina said. "If you recall something different, write it down separately and report it." Chandan held to that advice.

That evening, when Rekha came home, her father was waiting at the door. "Did you hand over all the papers?" he asked. "I submitted the ones connected with my brother's office accounts. I've kept the household medical and insurance papers. They gave me a receipt for what I submitted." Her father held the receipt and studied it for a long time. He could not see the letters clearly, so Rekha read it aloud. "Keep that paper safe," he said. "For all the difficult accounts your brother kept, one proper receipt matters too." Rekha's eyes filled with tears.

Ratan Singh attended a public programme in town that day. A newspaper representative asked about the complaints against the employment centre. "We will cooperate with the investigation," Ratan replied. "Nareshji's death is tragic. It would be wrong to turn an ordinary commercial disagreement about accounts into a crime." Standing in the

crowd, Abhay heard him. He wrote down Ratan's words accurately, but made a separate note in his diary that no one's conclusion should be published without consulting the investigative record. After the programme, Virendra spoke with Ratan for two minutes; Abhay was too far away to hear the words. He did not turn the silent meeting into a news story.

Back at the office, Abhay reread an earlier report about Naresh's family. It had mentioned Rekha's financial difficulties. Now some people wanted to sensationalise her as 'the keeper of the secret files'. Abhay decided that he would not publish the location of her home or the number of documents without her permission. A fellow journalist said, "You're suppressing everything." "Suppressing details of an investigation and protecting someone's personal safety are different things," Abhay replied. "I'll print what has been established. I won't print confidential matters when publishing them could damage the investigation."

The following day an officer specialising in financial crime arrived at Sujata's office. After a preliminary comparison of the documents, he said that under one heading the amount deposited by applicants had risen steadily, but spending on training had not increased in the same proportion. Under another heading, payments for goods transport appeared to have risen very sharply. "These are indications," the officer made clear, "not findings of irregularity. We'll need the original account statements, contracts and evidence of the services supplied." Sujata had a list of the required records prepared accordingly.

Beside Naresh's signature on one sheet was written: 'Obtain original bank entries for verification.' Sujata studied the sentence in silence for a while. Naresh himself had not written a final accusation; he had been assembling a basis for inquiry. It showed his caution and at the same time raised the question of who might have feared such an inquiry. The answer was still unknown. "Evidence answers the questions raised by an investigation," Sujata told her colleague. "We don't arrest someone on a guess about who might be afraid."

Rekha received a call from the police asking what an abbreviation on one of the papers meant. "I can't say for certain," she replied. "My brother never explained those letters at home." The officer thanked her. When she put down the phone, Rekha felt greatly relieved. She had feared that once she submitted the documents, she would be expected to answer every question about them. Now she understood that admitting

she did not know was an act of honesty too. She checked the time for her father's medicine and went to prepare the meal.

Savita Kumari had invited Naina to a meeting of unemployed candidates. Speaking clearly, Naina said that people collecting money on the promise of jobs and those accused of leaking examination papers might turn out to be the same individuals, but it would be wrong to combine the two offences without evidence. One young man said, “Our lives have been wasted. It'll take years to check all these papers.” Naina understood his anger. “Make a written demand against delays in the investigation,” she replied. “But accusing the wrong people may allow those actually responsible to escape.” Savita proposed that they arrange copies of all the necessary documents in order.

On her way home from the meeting, Naina met Abhay. They stood for a moment beneath a peepal tree by the road. “Is Ma keeping well?” he asked. “She's beginning to laugh a little again,” Naina replied. A spontaneous happiness came over Abhay's face. Then she said, “There's a great deal of talk about the documents found at Rekha's house. Be careful.” “I haven't reached any conclusions,” he answered. “I'll write only what has been publicly confirmed.” “That's why I trust you,” Naina said. They did not linger; it was time for her mother's medicine at home.

That night Saraswati asked Naina to sit beside her. “Did you see Abhay today?” she asked. Naina did not blush. “Yes, on the road,” she said calmly. Saraswati was silent for a little while. “Don't judge a person's heart through trouble alone. When ordinary days return, see whether you can speak to that person without having to change the sound of your own voice.” Naina touched her mother's hand and smiled. The words carried no pressure to marry, only the weight of experience. It was not yet time to decide her future, she thought, but she need not deny the truth of her own feelings either.

In her final review that night, Sujata prepared a summary. She recorded separately the source and limitations of Rekha's papers, Amita's revised testimony, Naina's old receipts and Gokul's varying accounts of the time. Some documents suggested the possibility of employment fraud; others, unusual changes in payments. None yet identified a direct perpetrator of the murder. But there were now concrete grounds for investigating whether Naresh's suspicions had been more than imagination. Sujata closed the file and prepared the list of next steps.

That night, for the first time, Rekha sat at Naresh's empty desk and opened the household expense notebook. Her brother had once used it to record their father's medicines, grain for the house and the rent. Several pages were unfinished. On the next page Rekha wrote her first line in her own hand: 'Today's medicine, milk, market.' She understood that the life of the household could not stand still after Naresh's death. The police would deal with her brother's unfinished questions about his office; she herself had to keep the family's days in order. Neither task could take the place of the other.

At dawn Sujata signed a new formal request. It sought, through lawful procedure, the employment institution's original account registers, the relevant bank entries and records of payments to the contractor. Once it had been sent, the officers knew that the investigation was moving beyond conjecture drawn from papers towards an examination of actual transactions. After reviewing the new details, Sujata instructed them to compare the original records independently, item by item. Her priority was not to make an immediate allegation against anyone, but to establish the real basis of every payment. Where Poonam was remained unanswered; it was still unclear who could be definitively linked to Naresh's death. Yet the documents Rekha had handed over had provided a substantial new foundation for the search for truth.

PART FOUR

THE PRICE OF TRUTH

Chapter 37: New Questioning

Morning light was reaching the rear courtyard of the police station, but darkness from the night still seemed to surround the file on Inspector Sujata Kumari's desk. Copies had been made of every sheet handed over by Rekha, Naresh Mandal's sister. The originals were stored separately for safekeeping. Sujata ran her eyes down a list: application fees, training expenses, advances for placements elsewhere, payment of wages, and transport of goods. Five headings, yet in several entries the same sum appeared under a different name. Changing a heading did not, in itself, prove a crime; without an explanation, however, the figures could hardly be accepted as ordinary accounts either.

Arun Kumar, the officer assisting with the examination of the accounts, placed a sheet beside the file. “I've requested the bank entries for these three months. The copies sent by the institution's office show the amounts paid, but not clearly who authorised the payments.” Sujata asked, “Is Ratan Singh's signature there?” “On some, his; on others, the manager's. Two bear only the office stamp. A stamp tells us nothing about the money's actual destination.” Sujata placed a question mark in an empty column. Where evidence was missing, she believed a question was the proper thing to write.

Naina Mishra sat on the station veranda with her old shoulder bag. Inside it were a copy of her appointment letter, details of her salary and a letter from the office suspending her attendance. She had given her mother, Saraswati, her medicine before leaving home. She had asked Chandan to wash the utensils, heat the water and see that their mother ate. When Sujata called her in, Naina placed on the desk not the bag but only the documents she had been asked to bring.

“Which accounts register did you see when you first began working there?” Sujata asked. “The register of admitted applicants and the receipts for training fees,” Naina replied. “Bank payments were not my responsibility.” “Did you see Poonam's name changed?” “Not her name. In one list, her place of posting was changed. In another, there was a code against the same serial number. I did not see who made the alteration.” Sujata wrote down that last sentence as well. Naina was defining the limits of what she knew, not filling the gaps with conjecture.

Sujata showed Naina two sheets. The first recorded payments received from five applicants; the second listed the training expenses of three people. Naina recognised the form of two of the five receipts. "What about this signature?" the officer asked. "It looks like Kiranji's, but I can't say with complete certainty. Sometimes she wrote her full name, sometimes an abbreviated one. It would be better to look at the original." "We'll obtain the original," Sujata said. "There's no pressure on you to identify it."

On her way out, Naina met Poonam's father. There was sweat on his forehead; he had come from the village by bus. "Any news of my daughter?" he asked. Naina invited him to sit down there. "No, Kaka. We still don't have a definite location. But the investigation hasn't stopped." The old man took Poonam's school certificate from his bag and began to show it to her. Naina did not stop him. She merely told him that the police already had a copy and that he should keep the original carefully. He put it back in the bag. Alongside disappointment, some measure of hope remained in his eyes.

By ten o'clock Ratan Singh's lawyer had appeared with a written reply. It requested time to produce the office records, explaining that old files were kept in a warehouse and some employees had left their jobs. Sujata accepted the reply, but recorded the date of its receipt. "Whether time is allowed will be decided according to law. They are now responsible for preserving the original accounts, contracts and evidence supporting the payments," she made clear. The lawyer signed a sheet and left.

Kiran was summoned that day too. The old assurance of authority with which she had once walked through the office had diminished, although she would not let the fear on her face become too apparent. "Who had the authority to alter the applicants' list?" Sujata asked. "Three employees could access it at the office. Final approval rested with me and the owner." "Was there a written register of alterations?" "There should have been. I can't speak about every entry." "And Poonam Yadav's papers?" The purse in Kiran's hand shifted slightly. "Her file isn't with me."

"I'm not asking whether you have the file now," Sujata said quietly. "I'm asking whether you were at the office when Poonam's place of posting was changed." Kiran thought for a few moments. "I was in the office that day. But I didn't personally examine every list." "Very well. We'll obtain your attendance record. We'll speak again later." Kiran had

come rehearsing in her mind a speech prepared for the questioning. Faced with these brief, specific questions, she felt exhausted.

When Kiran came out, she saw Ratan's car standing beside the steps. The driver signalled for her to get in. She started towards the vehicle, then stopped abruptly. “I'll make my own way home,” she said. The driver asked nothing further. On her phone she sent Ratan only a message saying that she had been questioned. His reply came at once: “Don't hand over a single paper without the lawyer's advice.” Kiran put her phone away and walked into the crowded street. She did not know whether Dinesh would be waiting for her at home.

At midday Ratan himself requested an interview with Sujata. He arrived in immaculate clothes, carrying a brief summary of the office accounts. “We obey the law,” he said. “But private notes left by one dead employee are beginning to destroy an entire institution's reputation.” “Reputation is one matter,” Sujata answered. “I have to establish the facts surrounding a death and numerous complaints. You'll receive a written acknowledgement for the papers you've brought.” Ratan passed the sheets across. The first contained a broad statement of the institution's income and expenditure, but no original receipts or copies of bank records.

“What was this substantial payment to Virendra Construction Services for?” Sujata asked. “Building materials, temporary accommodation and vehicles,” Ratan replied. “The contract?” “It should be at the office.” “Acknowledgements for the materials delivered?” “The manager handled those.” Sujata did not pursue the questions further. “Then provide the original documents. Your answer is incomplete at present.” A fine line appeared across Ratan's forehead. “Why do you question me like a criminal?” “Anyone can be asked the same questions when payment records are unclear,” Sujata said.

After Ratan left, Bhanu Pratap entered the room. “If the businessmen get angry, the town's work will suffer,” he said. Sujata did not close the file. “No order has been given to shut down any business. Documents have been requested.” “Telephone calls could come from very high up,” Bhanu said. Sujata looked at him. “If calls come, I'll ask for written instructions. The steps taken in this investigation will remain on record.” Bhanu changed the subject and began discussing another complaint. Sujata directed him to the officer responsible for it.

Half an hour later, the office telephone rang. The caller introduced himself as an associate of the local politician Jagdish Chaudhary. “Netaji

would like the honour of business establishments to be kept in mind." "The investigation is proceeding according to law," Sujata replied. "If anyone wishes to submit a written representation, let them lodge it at the office." After hanging up, she had the time of the call and a brief description of the conversation entered in the receipt register. She was in no hurry to declare this proof of political interference, but neither did she wish to leave an informal request outside the record.

The clock on the office wall showed eleven when Amita telephoned. She was a former employee who had made certain corrections to her earlier statement. Sujata told her that fresh questions might arise during the new examination. "I used to type the training lists," Amita said, "but the final list went out from Kiranji's desk. I did not see who altered any particular entry." Sujata compared the clarification with the previous statement. Her task was to understand the meaning of the revised testimony, not to mould it to suit her own case.

Amita was sitting beside her sewing machine at home. Her husband had been doing temporary work supplying a hospital for three months. "If my name appears in the newspaper, I won't get another job," she said over the phone. "We'll take account of whatever formal protection is possible during the investigation," Sujata replied. "But I won't give you a false promise." Amita put down the phone and began sewing the sleeve of her daughter's school shirt. Fear for the family's future sat alongside the courage it took to speak the truth.

Returning from the station, Naina saw Savita Kumari at the bus stand. Savita, carrying a stack of papers, was gathering signatures from candidates preparing for competitive examinations. No new date had been announced since the examination was cancelled. One young man held up his travel receipt. "It cost me a thousand rupees to come here last time. When will I have to go again?" Savita recorded his application number alongside the complaint. Naina helped her keep hold of an empty form.

"Did the people from the employment centre also take money in the name of leaked examination papers?" Savita asked. "I have no definite proof of that," Naina replied. "There are documents showing that fees were taken on the promise of obtaining jobs, but the offence of leaking an examination paper has to be investigated separately." "You're right," Savita said. "If our protest carries false accusations, our genuine demands will lose their force." The two women stood for a moment amid the

crowd. There was no immediate solution, but it was possible to make the right questions clear.

Rekha, Naresh's sister, needed to find a copy of an old bank passbook. Her father put on his spectacles and said, “We have to pay the hospital debt out of the savings your elder brother put aside.” “Now that we've handed the papers to the police, how are we to check our own expenses?” Rekha asked. Through the office, Sujata explained the procedure for obtaining the personal copies they needed. Rekha thought it important that documents surrendered for an investigation should not leave the family helpless in carrying out its lawful affairs.

At Ratan's office that afternoon, the question arose of withholding half the employees' salaries. “The accounts are under investigation,” the accountant said. “Shall we postpone payment?” Ratan stood looking out of the window. “Pay those who are still working,” he said at last. “Otherwise everyone will start asking questions.” But beside the names of employees who had gone with Naina to complain about the office, the accountant made pencil marks. Ratan saw the marks and did not erase them.

In his office, Bhanu Pratap asked an employee sitting nearby, “How many more documents will Sujata demand?” “All copies are being sent in accordance with authorised written requests,” the employee replied. “Very well. We'll see,” Bhanu said. Once outside, the employee's face showed his unease. Government records, he believed, belonged to the office; they were not things to be withheld at an individual's whim. He wrote the date of receipt clearly on the file.

That evening Saraswati Devi asked Chandan to account for his shopping at home. He had not returned empty-handed: a shopkeeper offering a small job had asked him to come again the next day. “Did he ask for any advance money?” Naina asked. “No, but he won't give me a written appointment either,” Chandan said. Naina suggested some questions he should put to the man: working hours, wages, leave and the day payment would be made. Saraswati smiled. “Your whole lives are surrounded by papers,” she said, “but may the papers bring you honest earnings this time.”

In the fading evening light, Virendra Rai arrived at the police station. A heavy watch circled his wrist and he chose his words with care. “I'm only a contractor,” he began. “I repaired some of Ratanji's buildings.” Arun laid the list of payments before him. Virendra recognised five entries, but said of the seventh that it did not belong to

his account. “We'll need your bank statements to check that,” Arun said. Virendra grew uncomfortable. “I'll speak to my lawyer first.” Sujata agreed, but served him with a written notice instructing him to preserve the documents.

Once Virendra had gone, Nandu, a young constable, said, “Madam, they all say the same thing: the papers can't be found.” “And when the papers are found, we'll compare them with precisely these answers,” Sujata replied. “What I need is not resentment but facts.” She assigned Nandu the task of obtaining details of the institution's authorised contractors and a list of freight vehicles from the government registration office. There was a reason she had not asked for the vehicle list earlier: Naresh's financial papers had only now raised definite questions in that direction.

On her way home, Sujata passed the edge of the market where day labourers counted their wages at dusk. “Some workers' wages were withheld a few days ago,” the owner of a tea stall told her. “The contractor said he'd sent the money to their bank accounts.” Instead of identifying herself as a police officer and asking for allegations, Sujata said, “Anyone whose wages have been withheld can lodge a written complaint. Keep a copy of the papers and submit an application.” Madhavi, who was sitting there, said, “The papers stay with the people who pay the money. All the poor have in their hands is a name.” Sujata listened carefully to her words.

Madhavi was on her way home. Four households' work since morning had left her exhausted, but she carried two bananas for her children in her bag. During the first year of prohibition her husband's drinking had diminished and the family had been able to save a little. Now talk of illicit liquor could again be heard in the neighbourhood. Her husband said, “It isn't cheap, but you can get it everywhere.” As she watched the police vehicle drive past, Madhavi wondered why news of the law never seemed to reach as far as her courtyard. She could not bring herself to ask Sujata that question.

Back at the station that night, Sujata examined an old list of vehicles. Some registration numbers had been partly erased; beside certain names were the words “transfer pending”. She recalled Chandan's statement that he had driven Manoj and two other men in an old vehicle. Chandan remembered only part of its number. Some digits on the list appeared to correspond, but they were not enough to identify the

vehicle. Sujata ordered the original registers to be obtained from two different offices.

Meanwhile, Naina received a message from Abhay: “Tell me how your mother is.” “She's taking her medicine,” Naina replied. “I got back late from the station.” Abhay did not ask about her work. After a while, he said, “I'll get whatever information I need for journalism from official sources. What you tell me will remain private.” In those few words Naina felt the respect that belonged within their love. After reaching home, she served porridge on her mother's plate and tried to put the hour of questioning at the station out of her mind. But the face of Naresh's sister kept returning to her.

In the room at the back of the police station, Sujata opened the details of Naresh's final telephone calls. The time of a call from an unfamiliar number had been entered in the notebook, but they still did not know in whose name that number was registered. She ordered the necessary information to be requested from the service provider through lawful procedure. No one could yet say whether the caller had anything to do with the murder or merely wanted to ask about the accounts.

At dawn the next day, Arun brought another sheet. “The same vehicle number appears twice in the hire-payment list,” he said. “One payment was made in the institution's name, the other in the name of Virendra Construction Services. The dates differ, but the owner's name has changed.” Sujata took the sheet and examined it. The vehicle was old; the state of its registration was unclear. Only one part of the number matched Chandan's incomplete recollection. She did not draw a red circle around it. On a separate note she wrote: “Verify original register, actual ownership, driver and relevant dates.” Then she sent two officers to the transport office. The next path in the investigation might open through an old vehicle.

Chapter 38: The Old Vehicle

Outside the Navgarh transport office stood rows of old buses, motorcycles and trucks. Paint was peeling from the veranda walls, but inside, the clerks seated behind their computers also kept the old bound registration volumes carefully preserved. Two police officers sent by Sujata Kumari arrived with a written request. An official read it and said, “If an owner's name has been changed, it shows on the computer. But some entries for old vehicles are still in the paper registers. We'll have to compare both.”

The vehicle number that appeared in two different payment registers had originally been registered in the name of Hashim Ansari. An application to transfer ownership had been submitted seven months earlier, but the procedure had not been completed because the necessary papers were incomplete. The other party was named in the application as “Virendra Construction Services”. “Who should be regarded as the final owner?” a policeman asked. “The old name may remain on paper,” the official replied. “Who actually operated the vehicle is a different question. I can't say for certain.” The process of providing certified copies was begun.

Hashim Ansari ran a small motor-repair shop on the eastern side of town. His hands always smelled of oil. When the police arrived, mention of the old vehicle startled him. “The blue goods carrier?” he asked. “Yes, I drove it for eight years. I'd had a line painted on the back: ‘The Fruits of Labour’.” The policemen noted the colour and the lettering, but showed him nothing. Hashim went on, “The engine was always overheating. I sold it to meet household expenses. The buyer was a contractor's man who said his name was Moharir. The money came into my bank account.”

“Do you have the papers?” they asked. Hashim brought an old file from inside. It contained a written sale agreement, a record of partial payment and a receipt for the application to transfer registration. His wife Shabnam was standing nearby. “It's more than six months since we sold it,” she said. “If the old name is still on it, won't there be trouble for us again?” The police explained that the time when the vehicle was actually being used was important to the inquiry. “I'll give you whatever

information I have," Hashim said. "But please don't let the work at my little shop come to a halt." He was given a time to attend in writing.

Sujata did not immediately make the search for the vehicle public. The bank payments, its maintenance and the place where it had been kept had first to be checked. That afternoon Pawan, an old driver acquainted with Manoj, was questioned. He said he had unloaded goods at Virendra's warehouse a few months earlier, but had been out of town on the night Naresh died. "Where?" Sujata asked. He spoke of his sister's wedding. Sujata requested the date, ticket and contact details; the truth of his statement would have to be verified separately.

Meanwhile, Chandan was called to the station for a second time. Once again his heart began to tremble. Naina accompanied him, but unlike the first occasion, she did not insist on being present while his statement was taken. When Chandan sat before Sujata, she said, "I'll read your previous statement aloud. Tell me if any word was recorded incorrectly. Anything new will be written separately." Chandan listened carefully: the rear road to the warehouse, Manoj and two other men, the bend by the canal bridge, an old vehicle and a number he could only half remember.

"What colour was the vehicle?" Sujata asked. "It was night. It looked dark blue, but dulled by dust," Chandan replied. "Did you read anything written on the back?" Chandan frowned. "I saw some letters, but I couldn't read the whole thing. The light was poor." Sujata did not show him the phrase 'The Fruits of Labour' written in someone else's papers. She had no intention of filling the gaps in a memory with another person's information. "Was it a small goods carrier or a truck?" "A small goods carrier, with an open space for the load at the back."

Chandan showed the old scratch on his hand again. "I got this from the ironwork at the back." "Do you remember anything particular about the sound of the engine?" Sujata asked. "It stopped once on an incline and Manoj began swearing. I don't know whether the vehicle had overheated." The officer recorded his words exactly as he gave them. Chandan began to realise that something he had dismissed as useless might be valuable as an ordinary detail. It did not, however, entitle him to claim he had witnessed a murder.

After the questioning, Chandan came outside and sat beside Naina. "Didi, they asked about the old vehicle," he said. "Did they press you to say anything new?" Naina asked at once. "No. I told them what I remembered." She gave him a bottle of water. As he drank, he said, "I

thought everyone would take that one night's work as proof that I was part of the whole crime. Now I feel they're checking each thing about that night." "You're answerable for what you did," Naina replied. "But it isn't right to accept blame for things you didn't do."

At the western edge of town stood a repair yard where the wheels and old parts of heavy vehicles were kept. The owner, Mangal Paswan, sat under the awning writing up his accounts. When the police asked him about a blue vehicle, he replied, "Lots of vehicles like that come here. It's hard without the number." He opened an old repair register. An entry from two months earlier came to light: a rear light had been replaced, a panel was slightly bent, and the customer's name was written only as "Virendra's people". The date preceded Naresh's death, but there was no record showing whether the vehicle returned after the repair.

Mangal remembered something else. "The driver said he was exhausted from travelling a long distance. I didn't ask his name. When the job was finished he paid cash." "Do you still have the old parts?" the police asked. Mangal laughed. "They went for scrap long ago." He was then given a written request to preserve the old repair register. Mangal's wife, listening from outside, said, "After something happens, every little account becomes worth more." Mangal looked down at his own indistinct handwriting and fell silent.

After the police summons reached Hashim, his son Nadeem sat down to go through the shop's accounts. Payment was still outstanding for a bill for truck parts. "Abba," Nadeem asked, "did you ever receive the full price for the vehicle you sold?" Hashim opened his passbook. "One instalment was left. Bablu said he'd pay it later." Nadeem's face fell. "Will you have to go to the station again over a vehicle you sold?" "If the papers tell the truth, why should I be afraid?" Hashim replied. "But I regret that unfinished account."

The account name of the person making the payment was not fully visible on the bank deposit slip. Hashim asked, with the plain reasoning of a shopkeeper, "How can I answer for a crime someone might have committed using the account from which I received my money?" "Selling your vehicle is not a crime," the police officer explained. "We want to know who used it afterwards." Hashim decided to apply for a certified copy of his passbook.

Pintu, a young assistant at the repair yard, remembered the blue vehicle. "When I took off the rear light, I remember as if it were yesterday that the iron strip was bent to one side." Mangal interrupted

him. “Look at the papers first. How long ago is your memory from?” Pintu thought. “I don't remember the date. But that day I'd brought medicine here for my little brother, who was sick in bed.” When the family found the medicine receipt, its date matched the entry in the repair register. It was a small corroboration, not evidence of what had happened on the night of the death.

The conductor of a bus that travelled along the canal road was questioned too. “That old blue vehicle used to go up and down a great deal,” he said. “Once my bus and that vehicle met head-on at a narrow bend.” “What day?” Sujata asked. “Before Dussehra. I can't remember the exact date.” His recollection established the vehicle's general presence on the road, not its journey on the night of the murder. Sujata wrote down his name and told him he might be contacted again if necessary. She did not regard human memory as more precise than the hands of a clock.

Back from the station, Chandan looked through the messages on his old phone. Some messages from Manoj remained, though the times of several calls had been erased. Alarmed, he went to Naina. “Keep whatever is there exactly as it is,” she said. “Don't add anything yourself.” “What if someone asks me a question I can't answer?” Chandan asked. “Then say you don't know. Because you made a mistake, you don't have to pretend you know everything.”

At Poonam's mother's house, the postman delivered a receipt from an old application that day. Reena opened it and looked at it. It was a delayed notification, issued months earlier, saying that a placement process in her sister's name was under way. For a moment Poonam's mother thought that perhaps her daughter was safe. Reena checked the date. “This letter is very old,” she said. “Don't take it for news from today.” Her mother sat holding the letter against her chest. The distinction between hope and evidence was hardest of all for her.

That evening Savita Kumari came to a bookshop in town to have copies of admit cards made. Young people waited for a new announcement about the cancelled examination. Chandan met her while returning with medicines. “Have you started preparing again?” Savita asked. “I'm looking for work, but I haven't given up studying,” he replied. “It isn't clear yet whether the examination will be held again,” Savita said. “But someone who still has books mustn't let the days for reading be stolen away.” Chandan did not answer her immediately.

Manjari Jha showed Abhay the headline of an old report of his. An online page had removed his byline and replaced it with: "Vehicle Used in Murder Found by Police." Abhay immediately drafted an objection; his original report had made no such claim. "We won't publish another unconfirmed story in answer to someone else's false headline," Manjari said. Abhay sent the objection and prepared a short clarification for his readers: the papers concerning a vehicle were under examination, not that a crime had been proved.

Amid the search for the vehicle, another false lead arrived. Someone telephoned to say he had seen the blue vehicle parked beside the river. When police reached the spot, it turned out to be a different vehicle, with another number and a different construction. A young constable grew irritated. "Checking bad information takes time too," Sujata said. "But if we'd ignored it without checking, questions would have remained later." She did not at once label the caller a criminal; they first had to determine whether he had made an honest mistake or knowingly supplied misleading information.

Virendra Rai sat in his contractor's office. After the police notice arrived, his assistant Bablu asked, "Should we move the old vehicle somewhere else?" Virendra snapped, "Do only what you're told." A little later he recovered himself. "We'll give whatever papers they demand through the lawyer. No pointless haste." Bablu could not tell whether his employer was worried or angry. A photograph of Virendra with a minister hung on the office wall, but sitting in front of it, Virendra felt the weight of his desk drawer more keenly.

That evening Abhay sat in the newsroom with a notebook open. Rumours had spread through the town that the vehicle used in Naresh's murder had been found. A local website called him for a story. "There is no confirmation that the vehicle has been found," he said. "I have heard officially that transport records are being examined. I can't turn that into a report of an arrest." Hearing his answer, Manjari Jha said, "A dramatic headline might bring readers, but false information increases a family's suffering." Abhay shortened his draft.

That night Rekha sat beside her father looking at an old photograph of Naresh. "Has the vehicle been found?" her father asked. "Everyone is talking about it, but there's no definite news from the police," she said. Her father turned his face away. "My son won't come back to life. I only want to understand properly what happened." Rekha placed her hand against his side. It was time for his medicine. The everyday effort of

being attentive was not separate from grief; it was the work of living within it.

The next day Arun Kumar compared the date in the repair register with the vehicle-hire list. One payment was described as "temporary goods transport". The amount exceeded the usual hire charge for that distance, but might have reflected additional work at night. He did not treat it as independent proof. The copy received from the transport department showed an application to transfer the vehicle, with Virendra's name on it. "We now need to know where the vehicle actually is," Sujata said. "Ownership papers alone can't establish how it was used at the time of the murder."

Early in the morning another piece of information reached them: a blue vehicle had been seen for several days in the rear courtyard of Virendra's old warehouse. The informant was Bharat, a milk-seller from the neighbourhood. Sujata questioned him about the time and what he had seen. "I went there to deliver milk in the daytime," Bharat said. "I saw the vehicle, but I don't know which nights it went out." That admission did not make the information worthless; it clarified its limits.

Sujata did not show Bharat photographs of other vehicles. She first decided that the ownership and use records for the warehouse should be obtained. "If the vehicle was kept there," Arun said, "we may find records of repairs or movements in and out." Sujata agreed. "But entry into any warehouse must be lawful. We'll first arrange the necessary authority and independent witnesses."

That evening Naina reread the letter threatening her with dismissal from the office. It said that her attendance was not required while the investigation continued. The financial harm of that decision was now plainly felt at home: Saraswati's medicine, Chandan's debts, the house rent. "Have you tried for other work?" Abhay asked. "I've applied at two places," Naina said. "I used to count on my wages; now I'm standing in the queue of applicants again." "I can't offer recommendations, but I can find you reliable information," Abhay said. Naina smiled. "That's all I need."

At the town's old freight stand a handwritten register was kept in which drivers recorded their shifts. The police met the keeper of the register. He said that some drivers wrote down their names at the end of the week; others left without making an entry. There was an entry for one night against the blue vehicle, but the column for the actual time was blank. The keeper agreed to preserve the original register. When

Sujata received the information, she said, "Don't fill in a blank time from conjecture. Examine only what is recorded."

At night Sujata opened another section of the file. On one side lay the registration of an old vehicle; on another, Chandan's statement; on a third, the date of the repair. All the details were coming closer together, but no single line could yet be drawn through them to form a complete picture of Naresh's death. She wrote: "Physical examination of vehicle required; preserve records of use; identify other goods-carrier drivers; establish the legal status of the warehouse concerned." The next page carried the warehouse's address. The road beside the canal was not far away, but distance alone was no proof of a crime.

Chapter 39: Inside the Warehouse

At the western edge of Navgarh, beside an old rice mill, stood a long warehouse. Rainwater had blackened the edges of its corrugated roof. On the main gate, the faded words "Virendra Construction Services" were still visible. A little way beyond it a road branched off towards the canal. Early in the morning tea stalls were opening near the warehouse, and labourers stood with towels wound round their hands, hoping for a day's wages. As on any other day, they were waiting for the gate to open. But today the sight of two police vehicles outside it sent whispers through the crowd.

Inspector Sujata Kumari had come with the necessary legal authority and a written order. With her were an officer from the excise department, staff examining financial records and two independent local witnesses. Bablu, the warehouse clerk, trembled as he opened the gate. "The owner isn't here," he said at once. "The order authorises an examination of these premises," Sujata replied. "You're the employee in charge. Read it. Every room opened will be described in a record made in your presence." Bablu tried to read the paper, then asked for his spectacles.

The first room contained samples of bricks, iron pipes, tins of paint and wooden planks. Some of the labourers regularly transported these materials; there was no suspicion concerning their livelihood. Sujata made it clear that work involving ordinary building materials was not to be stopped or innocent people harassed. The investigators kept a brief record of exactly which part of each item they opened or examined. The independent witnesses, Phoolchand Sah and the teacher Seema Devi, remained present. "Will all this be read aloud to me?" Seema asked. "Yes," Sujata replied. "You have the right to read the whole record before signing it."

Bablu used his own key to open the second room. The crates inside bore labels for ordinary goods, but glass bottles could be seen in some of them. The excise officer began an authorised examination and explained that the contents of the bottles and their legality would need to be tested. Sujata did not announce to those present that "all of this is illicit liquor". She arranged for samples to be taken, items counted and the documents examined according to law. "These aren't entered in my

inward-goods register," Bablu said. "Then on whose instructions were they stored here?" Sujata asked. Bablu shut his mouth.

There were old rainwater stains on the warehouse floor. Light filtered in through the corrugated roof. In one corner stood three cots and two cooking stoves. Under a cot they found slippers and a torn notebook. Looking at its pages, Seema Devi said, "There are people's names written here." Sujata first had the notebook's position recorded without touching it, after which an authorised officer took charge of it. Against the names of labourers, the days worked had been counted, but in many places the payment column was blank.

A young man named Imran stood outside the gate, watching. He had come there to work three weeks earlier. When a policeman asked him about it, he said, "I used to unload pipes. I still haven't received my full wages for twenty days." "Do you have any record of your work?" "I used to have my name entered in a register like that. I've nothing with me." Sujata sat him in a separate place and listened. Imran's account concerned wages owed to a worker; it was not independent proof of trafficking. But what he said made an examination of the warehouse's labour practices necessary.

While the excise officer continued his work, a constable went towards the rear courtyard. Beneath an old tarpaulin, the outline of a vehicle was visible. The constable did not touch it; he immediately informed Sujata. Before the tarpaulin was removed, the names of those present and the time were recorded. Beneath it stood a small, dark-blue goods carrier. Some lettering on the ironwork at the rear had faded, but part of the words "The Fruits of Labour" could still be read. Sujata remembered Hashim Ansari's statement, but she did not connect the vehicle to Naresh's murder merely because of the lettering.

The vehicle's registration number matched the number in the documents. One rear light looked comparatively new. The repair-yard register mentioned the replacement of a light, but an independent comparison remained to be made. "Record it in the condition in which it was found," Sujata said. "Take photographs and measurements and arrange assistance from the appropriate specialists for a mechanical examination." Bablu said then, "Lots of people ride in this vehicle. I don't know who drove it on any particular day." "Say what you don't know," Sujata replied. "But you must produce any register showing movements in and out."

In the small office were two iron cupboards. One held building-material invoices and wage slips; the other was locked. “The owner has the key to that one,” Bablu said. Within the scope of the lawful order, the procedure was recorded and the cupboard opened. Inside were three bundles of papers, an old register and forms for temporary recruitment. Some forms bore the name of the employment institution, although the warehouse operated under the building contractor's name. Sujata asked why the two were connected. “I was told to keep the temporary labourers' papers here,” Bablu replied.

Arun, the financial investigator, turned the pages of one register. The opening pages recorded movements of goods, the second section contained workers' names, and the third had combinations of letters and numbers. “Whose handwriting is this?” he asked. Bablu acknowledged two entries as his own, but not the rest. Arun noticed “P-17” written on one sheet. Beside the code were a journey date and an amount spent. A similar code appeared beside Poonam's serial number in Naresh's papers, but this page alone could not establish that the “P” stood for Poonam. Arun made a separate note.

Seeing a form being lifted, Seema Devi said, “There's a woman's name on that.” The officer read aloud: “Nasima Khatoon, temporary sewing worker.” No signature appeared beside the name. “Did this woman work here?” Seema asked. Bablu gave no answer. “First find the person named,” Sujata said. “We cannot declare someone a victim or an employee without meeting them.” The caution mattered. A name written on paper could be separated by a great distance from the experience of the living person.

A larger crowd had gathered outside the warehouse. Some said the town's entire illicit liquor supply passed through the place; others said Naresh had been murdered there. A constable told people plainly that an inquiry was under way and they must not spread unverified stories. Tending his stove, the owner of a tea stall said, “Does finding papers tell us at once who committed the murder?” “No,” Phoolchand answered. “That needs a separate investigation.” Their ordinary exchange sounded more trustworthy than the loud voices rising from the crowd.

An elderly labourer, Jagdish Mahto, still waited outside the gate for his wages. “We were told to sort building materials in the warehouse,” he said. “The first week's wages came on time; after that, only half.” A policeman arranged for him to make a written application there. “I can't write,” Jagdish said, “but I can recognise the letters of my name.”

Seema Devi wrote down his account in clear words. Only after she had read it back to him did he put his thumbprint on it.

Imran tried to remember a fellow worker's name. "Rashid worked for two weeks, then they sent him somewhere else. He said he'd found work away from here." "Which town?" Sujata asked. "I don't know. I heard only once that he'd be going along the road towards the border." The officer explained again that something he had merely heard would not be recorded as though he had witnessed it. "I was afraid then," Imran said, "but I didn't have his family's number."

Some pages of the workers' register were wet. Arun had to take care to preserve the lettering. "Could someone have deliberately soaked these papers?" a constable asked. "Water comes through the roof," Sujata replied. "First record their actual condition. Then they can be examined." It was easy to imagine a conspiracy without proof, but imagination did not alter the facts. The order of the dry register lying beside the wet pages was copied separately.

Bablu was given water and seated in the office. "If the owner hears that I opened the lock, I'll lose my job," he said. "You have done nothing blameworthy by complying with a lawful order," Sujata answered. "If anyone threatens you, report it in writing." Bablu remembered the worries waiting at home: his father was ill and his sister was still studying. After a while, of his own accord, he said that two registers had arrived one night in a vehicle from Ratan's office. He could not remember the date.

That afternoon Kiran was sitting in her room reading old messages on her computer. When she heard that the police had gone to the warehouse, Ratan rang three times. She answered once. "What have you told them about the files there?" he asked. "I told them what they asked. I wasn't the custodian of every file." His voice hardened. "Don't say that in front of me." Kiran ended the call. Her relationship with Dinesh was nearing its breaking point; now the past of her working life was closing in upon her too.

Vibha Singh was opening an old cupboard at home and examining bank records. Some payments appeared to have been authorised in her name, but the signatures on the papers looked unfamiliar to her. Hearing of the warehouse search, she decided to obtain the original bank documents and consult her lawyer. She did not wish to make false accusations in revenge against Ratan. She wanted only a clear answer about what had been done using her name.

Shanti Devi, a widow who lived beside the warehouse, came out when she saw the police vehicles. “Vehicles used to move here at night,” she said, “but I couldn't see anyone's face in the darkness.” A policeman asked about the date. “I heard the sound on a night when I had a fever. I have the doctor's prescription; that may help me work out the day.” Sujata told her to preserve the paper. “We may ask again if we need to. There's no pressure to remember what you don't remember,” she said.

In Abhay's newsroom the draft report was under discussion. “So many police officers, so many bottles, and you still want a question mark in the article?” a colleague asked. “When the excise department reports its findings, we'll state clearly what is legal and what isn't,” Abhay replied. “We can say the workers' register was found at the warehouse. We cannot say Poonam was kept there.” Looking at the final line, Manjari Jha said, “Readers need facts. Why should we take responsibility for sensationalism?”

That afternoon Ratan Singh's lawyer arrived at the warehouse. He was shown the order and requested to see the inventory of documents. “Whatever copies the law provides for will be given,” Sujata said. “The inspection must not be obstructed.” The lawyer said that some of the materials were legitimate goods used in construction. “The items whose lawful status is established are being recorded separately,” Sujata replied. “Any finding of illegality will rest on the relevant tests and records.” Her voice carried neither anger nor self-importance.

Meanwhile Virendra's telephone kept ringing in Bablu's pocket. At first he ignored it, then told Sujata that the owner wanted to speak. She told him that any necessary formal contact should be made through her official telephone. A little later, a written message arrived through Virendra's lawyer saying that the required papers would be provided. Sujata added it to the file, but did not suspend the warehouse inspection on that account.

In another part of town, Naina had taken her mother to hospital for a further examination. A few changes had been made to her prescription. On a news screen in the waiting room, a short report showed police at the warehouse. “Is that the contractor's warehouse?” Saraswati asked. “Possibly, but the report doesn't give the whole story,” Naina replied. Remembering Chandan, Saraswati became frightened. Naina took her hand. “Chandan has already told the police what he knows. Listen to the doctor now.” Her mother nodded slowly. The

sounds of the criminal investigation would not leave them alone even in the hushed hospital corridor.

In his small room Chandan was filling out an application for new work, with an old admit card beside him. His friend Vijay telephoned with the news that police had gone to a warehouse. Chandan's hand stopped. “Which warehouse?” he asked. Vijay told him where it was. Chandan understood that he had travelled that road on several nights. “You shouldn't go anywhere now,” Vijay said. “I've already given my statement,” Chandan answered. “If the police call me again, I'll go. But I won't run away because of something I heard in the news.” He ended the call and went back to filling the empty spaces in the form.

By evening the search of the warehouse was complete. The descriptions of the papers, materials and vehicle found there were read aloud in the presence of the independent witnesses. Seema Devi objected that the writing in two entries was unclear; the officer immediately rewrote them legibly. Phoolchand questioned the count of one crate, and the items were counted again. Sujata wanted no one to be able to say later that the witnesses had been excluded from the reading of the record or the counting of the objects.

After a preliminary inspection, a vehicle specialist reported that the goods carrier might not have been in regular use for some time. The precise date of its last use, however, could only be established if the available mechanical evidence and records were compared. An inventory was made of ordinary articles found inside the vehicle. No object was immediately declared connected with the murder. Where the vehicle had actually travelled on the night Naresh died remained an unanswered question.

The warehouse labourers were preparing to go home that evening. Imran held a copy of his application for unpaid wages. Seema Devi told him that he could also raise his wage claim separately before the labour officer. “If the warehouse closes, who'll pay me?” Imran asked. “That will have to be decided through the investigation and the legal process,” Seema replied. “But write down the days you worked and the names of the others.” The young man's face did not brighten, yet instead of going home empty-handed he had a receipt acknowledging his application.

When the last vehicle drove away, the corrugated roof behind the gate fell silent again. In her notes Sujata wrote that the items found offered important leads concerning possible illicit liquor trading and irregularities in workers' recruitment records. But each separate alleged

offence would require its own evidence. No crate by itself identified Naresh's murderer; no list by itself revealed Poonam's present whereabouts. The work of reading those lists, finding the people named and establishing the true purpose of the payments had only begun.

At dawn the following day, a written police notice arrived at Rekha's door. Copies had been found of some of the contractor's records mentioned in the papers Naresh had saved. Rekha was not being asked to make a new accusation, merely to help identify her elder brother's handwriting. She told her father. “Dada's death is still darkness to me,” she said, “but the papers he preserved are being examined carefully now.” Her father spoke softly. “He saved those papers so that the people to whom justice is due might learn the truth.” Rekha folded the notice and put it in her bag.

At the station that night, Sujata compared two separate inventories. The excise department's samples and the papers from the workers' register had been secured separately, so that material from one inquiry would not become confused with material from another. Only the relevant parts of the warehouse examination were added to the file on Naresh's murder. “If we keep all the papers about every offence in a single heap, even the real connections will become unclear,” she told a colleague. “Each question needs its own evidence.” The dates of every statement had been entered separately too.

Arun looked once again at the edge of an old register recovered from the warehouse. Two names appeared beside the same date of travel; in a third column there was only a code. He showed Sujata the page. “The code may relate to people sent to places outside town,” he said, “but the destination isn't clear yet.” “Don't send news to Poonam's family on this basis,” Sujata answered. “First compare the papers from other institutions and the statements of the people concerned.” Arun secured the sheet. What they had found inside the warehouse offered enough leads to suggest the shape of crime in the town, but the search for one missing young woman remained unfinished.

Chapter 40: Kiran's Fear

On the morning after the search of the warehouse, Kiran reached the office to find more people than usual gathered at the gate. Some demanded the return of their deposits; others asked where their sons, sent to distant cities, could be found. The security guard was explaining that the office was open as usual, but half the chairs on the veranda inside were empty. Another employee had taken Naresh's desk, yet the space once occupied by his old registers remained bare. Kiran went into her room and opened the window. Noise from outside came in, but louder in her mind was the memory of the telephone she had let ring unanswered. Ratan had called four times during the night. She had not answered once.

Fresh instructions lay on the desk. At the top was Ratan's signature; below it the declaration that the office's entire recruitment record had been prepared under the supervision of its manager, Kiran, and that any errors in the details would be the responsibility of the department concerned. Kiran read the letter twice. How much could be hidden inside the word "errors": Poonam's altered name, incomplete proof of training, payments attributed to people who had never worked there. Nowhere did the letter mention Ratan's own approvals. Kiran remembered how many payments had been passed despite her written objections, with the words "the owner's orders". Where were the copies of those objections? That question now lodged in her chest like a thorn.

Kusum came in and asked, "Madam, are you going to sign these letters?" There was a new division of duties against the names of five employees. The list also ordered documents to be removed from Naresh's old room. "No old papers are to be moved for now," Kiran said. "Keep a copy of the list that's been prepared." Hesitantly, Kusum replied, "The owner said yesterday that the inquiry mustn't obstruct work." "Work will go on," Kiran answered. "Removing evidence is not work." The sound of her own voice surprised her. For days she had been saying this to herself; now, for the first time, she had said it plainly in the office.

Ratan arrived at half past ten. His clothes were freshly pressed and his step was much as before, but there were signs of a sleepless night beneath his eyes. He closed the door to Kiran's room. "Why was your telephone switched off?" "It wasn't switched off. I didn't want to speak," Kiran

replied. Ratan tried to laugh. "This isn't the time to sulk. The journalists have turned the warehouse inquiry into a spectacle." Kiran held out the letter. "Why is my name written on this?" Ratan glanced over it. "Whose name should be there if not the manager's?" "The name of the person who gave approval ought to be there too," Kiran said.

Ratan pulled a chair towards him and sat. "I have always trusted you. You used to see all the papers. Now that there's an investigation, will you step away from responsibility?" Kiran's throat went dry. "I'm not talking about escaping blame. I'll say what I did. But I won't bear the entire blame for orders you gave." Ratan's voice hardened. "You're forgetting how many places bear your signature." "The signatures are mine," Kiran replied. "But they will ask how many amounts were changed on the owner's instructions." Ratan stood and went to the window. Voices of employees could be heard outside. He drew the curtain a little farther across.

"Has Dinesh come home?" Ratan asked abruptly. Kiran understood that this was not a question born of concern. "We're living apart," she answered. "I've told him everything." Ratan turned to look at her. "Everything? My name too?" Kiran said nothing. "Do you imagine domestic quarrels are one thing and business another? You're ruining both in a single day." Anger surged within Kiran, but she steadied her voice. "I hid what was happening at home myself. No one has the right to conceal what happened in the business." Ratan struck the desk with his hand. Outside, Kusum stopped in her tracks.

After a while Ratan spoke more softly. "Everything can be made to look different in a legal inquiry. If you stand with me, I'll make arrangements." "What arrangements?" Kiran asked. "I'll open a branch for you in another town. The lawyer will look after the old papers." The mention of a branch brought Poonam's file to Kiran's mind. So many promises had been made here in the names of employees sent elsewhere. "I'm not going anywhere now," she said. "First I'll examine copies of my own documents." As Ratan rose from the chair, he said, "If trust is finished, remember this: papers recognise responsibility, not love."

He went out. Kiran remained sitting where she was. Many months earlier, in this same room, Ratan had given her an expensive watch. At the time she had felt that, amid the humiliations of her life and her growing distance from Dinesh, someone valued her. The watch hands were still moving, but the sight of their gleam now brought her mistake into focus. She had entered the extramarital relationship of her own

choosing; she could not place that responsibility on Ratan. Yet it would be no more right to use her private wrongdoing as a reason to accept all the blame for financial crimes. Distinguishing between the two was now her first necessity.

At midday Kusum brought an old file. "There's a letter from the other branch in this," she said. "The owner's assistant has asked for it." Kiran turned the pages. Two letters bore her signature, but the attached list looked different from the one used at the time. A name seemed to have been added later; even the ink was of another colour. "Don't alter anything in this," she told Kusum. "All the files will stay where they are. If anyone takes one, they must leave a written acknowledgement." Kusum nodded. "Madam, I'm afraid for my job." "So am I," Kiran said. "But who can promise our jobs will be safe even if we hand over everything without a word?"

A brief message from Dinesh appeared on Kiran's phone: When will I get the loan papers? "I'll send whatever copies I have by this evening," she wrote. Dinesh replied, "I won't discuss our personal relationship now. I want the bank documents to be correct." Kiran felt an odd relief on reading it. Dinesh was angry, yet he was asking clearly for what was rightfully his. After Ratan's threats, even this ordinary question felt like something she could trust. She took off her watch, put it in a drawer and began gathering the papers relating to Dinesh's loan.

An employee named Rambabu came to the door and said quietly, "When Naresh Babu was here, he once came to you asking for a copy of the confidential accounts. He was sent away." "I told him to obtain the owner's permission," Kiran replied. "But wasn't the owner out of town that day?" Rambabu asked. Kiran stopped. She could not remember. The date would have to be checked. Rambabu showed her a page from his daily register. Ratan had come to the office that day, but the meeting-room door had been closed. Kiran recalled that Ratan had said certain papers would be given "after examination". Those words were beginning to mean something different now.

"Keep this page with you," Kiran told him. "If you receive an order, ask for it in writing." "Some people say Naresh Babu's death was an accident," Rambabu said. "Others call it murder. I didn't see anything with my own eyes." "Don't testify to what you didn't see," Kiran replied. "But don't forget the date of what you did see." Even as she spoke, her heart trembled. Naresh had been an ordinary office employee, yet since

his death everyone had begun reckoning with their memories. Pressure was mounting to silence anyone whose recollection might cause harm.

When Kiran returned to her room, Kusum was waiting with the wage register. Two employees' monthly payments had been withheld. They sat on empty chairs at the employment centre because their former duty of overseeing the crowd outside the office had been taken from them. "Why has their pay been stopped?" Kiran asked. "They've been told that the investigation has caused the office losses," Kusum replied. Kiran examined the dates in the register. Naresh's death and the warehouse search could not cancel wages the employees had earned. She had a notice prepared requesting the reason in writing. Even amid her fear for her own job, she understood that the homes of employees whose pay was withheld had to be kept going too.

Towards the end of the afternoon, Shyamli, the office's long-serving cleaner, came to the door. "Will I receive my wages for this month or not?" she asked. "We've run out of cooking gas at home." "Your payment date has passed," Kiran said. "I'll ask about the account." "Has my name got caught up in some investigation too?" Shyamli asked. Kiran felt ashamed at the question. A woman for whom the papers were hard to understand was bearing the weight of uncertainty over her earnings. "There is written proof here of the work you've done," Kiran said. "If payment is withheld, you can make a complaint in writing. I'll acknowledge its receipt." Shyamli did not look reassured, but she told Kiran the number of days she had worked.

Kiran remembered scenes from her first year in the job. Dinesh had then been unemployed for several months. During that time she had worked extra hours and saved out of her salary. At first Ratan had praised her efforts; later his requests to meet her privately had grown more frequent. Kiran had begun confiding her dissatisfaction to Ratan rather than to Dinesh. Her choices had changed slowly, not in a single night. It now seemed wrong to lay the blame for that old change upon someone else. But, seeing how many lives had been affected because she had relied on personal closeness and failed to question the meaning of documents, she understood for the first time the full extent of her mistake.

She took an empty register and began work. On each page she wrote three questions: Who gave the order? Who signed? Who received the payment? As the answers came, she would enter them with the dates. "What if the owner sees this list?" Kusum asked. "I'm making an

account of what I know," Kiran replied. "I won't take any original document out or alter it." Kusum felt reassured, although fear for her job remained. Kiran knew it would be another injustice to press an employee to take sides. "Remember only what you've seen," she told her. "Don't lie for me."

In a quiet moment Kiran answered a call from her mother. Her mother lived in the village and had heard of the trouble between her daughter and son-in-law from a neighbour. "What happened? Isn't Dinesh there?" she asked. "I've broken his trust," Kiran replied. "He's decided to live separately." Her mother remained silent for some time. "You've done what you've done. What do you want now?" Tears rose to Kiran's eyes. "I don't expect to ask forgiveness and have everything erased. I only want not to add more lies." "Forgiveness doesn't always come at once," her mother said. "You have to face the consequences of what you've done." Kiran kept the words in her heart as she ended the call.

Kiran told Kusum that from now on old records would be moved only on written instructions. Then she contacted the accounts employee about Shyamli's outstanding wages. The reply came that there was no written order withholding them; the bank process had been delayed. Kiran asked for the actual reason to be supplied in writing. So small a correction did not lessen her fear of her own possible wrongdoing, but it lay within her power to correct the minor injustice immediately before her. Amid that work she realised that standing for truth was not only a matter of great declarations. It also meant writing one's name carefully and knowingly on everyday papers.

Before evening an unfamiliar number called. A man's voice said, "A word of advice for you: keep fewer papers and you'll have fewer troubles." "Who are you?" Kiran asked. The call ended. She wrote down the number. Her hands trembled with fear, but she recorded the time as well. She thought of sending a message to the police immediately. Yet if she did not recognise the voice, why should she accuse anyone? She simply wrote out the details of the threat and preserved them with the time.

At the close of the working day Kiran visited a lawyer's office in town. Sumitra had told her that the lawyer, Malati Sinha, had taken no side in the office's earlier disputes. Kiran spoke separately of her extramarital relationship, her position at work, the payments she had signed and the possible irregularities. Malati interrupted only to ask

necessary questions. “Have you altered any papers?” “No.” “Have you told anyone else to alter them?” “Two or three times I asked for corrections to lists, but I didn't know the real facts then.” “Do you have written copies of instructions given to you?” “Some, not all.” “On incomplete information,” Malati said, “neither declare yourself innocent nor accuse someone else. Write down what is true.”

“What if the owner puts all the blame on me?” Kiran asked. “Then the papers, the limits of your authority, the source of the decisions and the circumstances of every signature will be examined,” Malati replied. “If you have made mistakes, you will have to take responsibility for them too. But destroying anything out of fear, or giving a false statement, will make matters worse.” After a long pause Kiran asked, “Should I speak to the police?” “If you have relevant information, cooperate according to law. Preserve the facts in writing and read your documents carefully before giving a statement.” Hearing this simple advice, Kiran understood that the way to protect herself was not through a secret bargain but through giving a truthful account of what she had done.

When Kiran reached home, Dinesh's old shoes were no longer by the door. The hook where he used to hang his bag stood empty. She switched on the light. There was little rice left in the kitchen container, and she felt ashamed to think how long it had been since she had looked at the household accounts. She remembered the evenings spent away from home in the name of love. She had neglected Dinesh and broken the quiet trust of her household. Ratan's threats could not serve as an excuse to escape that truth. She sent Dinesh photocopies of the documents he had requested and wrote, “If any page is missing, tell me. I'll obtain that too.”

That night Vibha telephoned. The relationship between the two women was burdened now by old humiliations and new ones. Vibha asked directly, “Where is the original authorisation for payments made in my name?” “Some of the papers are at the office,” Kiran replied. “I'm preparing a list of the payments in your name that bear my signature.” “I don't need your personal remorse,” Vibha said. “I need the papers.” “I understand,” Kiran replied. “If a name was added to any list later, I'll tell you that too.” Vibha remained silent for a moment. “Keep the originals safe. I'll speak to my lawyer.” The call ended.

Sitting on her bed, Kiran opened two pages of her diary. On the first she wrote: Papers I signed. On the second: Decisions taken without me.

Both lists were still incomplete. Another message arrived from Ratan: "If you cooperate, everything can be managed." Kiran did not reply. She turned off her phone screen. She decided that in the morning she would request lawful copies of certain office records and, through her lawyer, give the investigating officer the information available to her. The fear had not ended. But that night, for the first time, Kiran decided on her next day's work according to the facts, not according to her fear.

Chapter 41: Vibha's Decision

When Vibha went to the bank branch that morning, she carried an old passbook, her identity card and two applications. Before leaving home she had told the maid that if Ratan asked, she should simply say she had gone to the bank. Vibha did not wish to conceal anything, but that morning she had no strength for another argument over her own financial papers. She joined the queue outside the branch like everyone else. There were elderly farmers in it, a student who had come to inquire about scholarship money, and a woman filling out a receipt with a small child in her arms. In all those years Vibha had seldom stood in such a bank queue herself.

The branch manager had already prepared some of the copies. Two payments had been made from her joint account, but it was necessary to examine separately who had filled in the original request details. “Examine the signatures yourself,” the manager said. “If there is a dispute, notify us in writing. The bank will investigate in accordance with its rules.” Vibha looked at the first sheet. One signature resembled her own, but the date was a day when she had been at Sumitra's house. On the second sheet the signature was unclear. She put the pages in her bag. “I won't draw any conclusion yet,” she said. “Tell me how to obtain the original authorisation and details of the recipient.”

Leaving the bank, she remembered the first year of her marriage. Ratan's business had been small then, and they had examined the shop accounts together. In the evenings Ratan counted the money while Vibha entered the day's sales in a notebook. There had been little money at home, but both knew what had been bought on credit and what debts remained. Once the business grew, Ratan had said, “You look after the home; I'll manage the outside accounts.” She had given her time to the family, relatives and social engagements. It had never occurred to her to question how she was gradually handing someone else the right to understand the meaning of her own signature.

She went to Sumitra's house. Without asking many questions, her sister brought tea. Vibha spread out the copies. “This is dated the day of my visit. I remember it clearly.” “Remembering the date is useful,” Sumitra said, “but you'll need evidence of where you went. Tickets, medical receipts, photographs—whatever you have.” Vibha remembered

that Sumitra's daughter had taken part in a school programme that day. Photographs had been taken and the time would be recorded on the phone. Sumitra opened her phone and showed them to her. Vibha was stunned. Quite apart from the pain of betrayed trust in her marriage, here was the first concrete matter that could actually be checked.

"Do you want to separate from Ratan?" Sumitra asked. "I don't have an answer to that yet," Vibha replied. "What I've decided is that I'll find out the truth about what was done in my name. No one will frighten me into deciding whether I should live with him or not." Sumitra agreed. "Then seek independent advice first. Keep copies of the papers, and let the originals remain safely where they belong." "What will people say?" Vibha asked. "People had something to say on the day Ratan received his awards, and they'll say something on the day he's investigated too. They won't bear responsibility for your money, your signature or your life."

At midday Vibha met the lawyer Malati Sinha. She did not know that Kiran had also gone there for advice. Vibha placed before Malati copies of the two payments, Ratan's explanation and the bank's reply. "Was there any dispute when you obtained these copies?" Malati asked. "No." "Make a separate list of the occasions on which you actually gave an authorisation in your name. Inform the bank in writing of those you did not authorise, describing them as disputed." "If illegal money has passed through the account, will I be held responsible?" Vibha asked. "Questions can arise because your name is on the account," Malati replied. "But your knowledge, permission and role will have to be examined in each transaction. Present your account with the supporting facts."

Malati asked another question. "Are you afraid someone at home may hurt you?" Vibha hesitated. "Ratan has never struck me. But when I ask questions he insults me and says that a wife has no business understanding commercial affairs." "You need not accept humiliation as something normal," Malati said. "If you wish, you can consider living somewhere else. Don't rush a decision about the relationship. The security of financial documents and your personal safety are separate questions." It was the first time Vibha had heard her situation distinguished so clearly into its different parts.

When she returned home, Ratan was sitting in the dining room. "Did you go to the bank?" he asked. "Yes." "If you'd told me, I'd have sent someone." "This was something I had to do myself," Vibha answered. Ratan glanced at the clock. "Listen, the office is under a great

deal of pressure. This isn't the time to take family matters outside." "The family matter went outside when payments were made at the office in my name," Vibha said. "What do bank employees know about everything?" Ratan replied. "They're provoking you." Vibha kept her voice steady. "I haven't brought back their opinions. I've brought written copies."

Looking at the papers, Ratan tried to identify the name on the first sheet. "This is an advance to Virendra Construction Services." "When did I authorise it?" Vibha asked. "There are numerous payments in the ordinary course of business. You can't be told about every one." "Then why was my name used?" Vibha asked. Ratan fell silent. His silence was not an admission, but it was not an answer to her question either. "I'll notify the bank of the disputed transactions in writing," she said. "If they're genuine, the documents will make that clear." Ratan stood up and went to the window.

After a while he said, "Kiran is making a mess of everything. That was her work. I signed what was put before me." "I'm asking about my name, and you're talking about Kiran," Vibha replied. "Why?" Ratan said irritably, "You all want to join together to disgrace me, don't you?" "No one has decided to disgrace anyone," Vibha said. "I'm only saying that if my name has been used, I want to know how." Ratan tried once to stop her, but Vibha gathered the papers and went to her room without prolonging the argument.

That night Phoolo Devi, the family's long-serving maid, asked, "Mistress, shall I cook separate dinners this evening?" "Cook what you always cook," Vibha said. "Our quarrel shouldn't become a burden on your work." Phoolo quietly began kneading dough. Vibha asked whether her daughter was still going to school. "For now, yes," Phoolo replied. "My husband used to drink in the evenings, and often there was no money left for bread. During the first year after liquor was prohibited there were fewer quarrels at home. Now costly liquor is available secretly again, and I'm afraid." Vibha listened closely. Her respectable house and Phoolo's small courtyard were different worlds, but questions of how money was used and whether people could trust one another were present in both. That evening Anushka came to her mother after studying. "Will you stay at Auntie's for a few days?" she asked. "Perhaps," Vibha said. "But I won't change places without considering your studies and what you want." Anushka thought for a moment. "I want to sit my

examination here. If I can get to school from Auntie's house, I'll stay with you." Vibha promised to check the route and the journey time first.

"Don't cry, Mistress," Phoolo said again. Vibha gave a faint smile. "There's nothing wrong with crying, Phoolo. But tears won't put the papers right by themselves." Phoolo picked up the plates. Vibha thought how often women took their own rights to be a threat to the peace of the household. She had not decided to become an example for anyone; she was simply trying to understand the documents that concerned her own relationship. Even in so small a decision she could feel the restrictions of society closing round her.

Vibha looked again and again at the acknowledgement of her application to the bank. It carried ordinary numbers and dates, but for her it was the first official recognition that she had raised an objection. For years she had waited for Ratan's decisions whenever difficulties arose at home. Now an officer had received her application. It did not mean immediate justice, but it opened a door to the next question. "I'm afraid that by doing all this I'll destroy whatever happiness is left in the house," she told Sumitra. "It's important to understand the price of happiness that survives only as long as you keep silent," her sister replied.

Later that day an old acquaintance named Usha came to visit. Usha's family had known Ratan's business for years. "Everyone in the village is talking," she said. "Don't take an excessively harsh decision merely because an adviser tells you to." Vibha served her tea, then asked, "If money had been sent in your name and you knew nothing of it, what would you do?" Usha hesitated. "I'd ask my husband first." "I've asked," Vibha said. "Instead of an answer, I was told about another person. Now I want a written account." Usha said nothing more. Vibha did not take her silence as an insult; many people were hearing the true dimensions of the question for the first time.

An old trunk stood in an inner room, containing wedding invitations, account books and a few old letters. In one notebook Vibha found the accounts from Ratan's early years in business. Back then, if two rupees were left over, he would laugh and say, "You're my best accountant." The memory softened Vibha's heart, but she did not close the notebook. She could not dismiss the happy years of her life as though they had been a lie. Nor could she accept today's doubtful papers as genuine merely because of those happy memories. She tried to hold that distinction between love and evidence steadily within herself.

One night an old employee of Ratan's office was standing outside the house. After introducing himself, he said, "Mistress, I'm not against the owner. But some people are telling me to tell everyone about your signatures. I don't know anything." "If you don't know anything, don't make a statement for either side," Vibha replied. "Preserve whatever documents are in your charge according to the rules." "Will I keep my job?" the employee asked. Vibha did not give a promise that was beyond her power. "If you're put under pressure, report it in writing and seek legal advice." Hearing him thank her made Vibha feel the depth of her own helplessness.

As she prepared to go to Sumitra's, Vibha told Phoolo that the money for ordinary household expenses would continue to be provided under the previous arrangement. "What will happen to my monthly wages when you aren't here?" Phoolo asked. "I'll make it clear in writing. Payment for the work you do mustn't be stopped," Vibha replied. Phoolo did not understand everything, but she had good reason to worry about her livelihood during her employer's absence. For the first time Vibha considered how the shadow of a private dispute in a large house might reach the small earnings of a woman working in its kitchen. She did not want to ignore that burden.

The next day Vibha lodged her written objection at the bank. She kept a copy of the acknowledgement in her bag. An official said the bank would follow its procedures to examine the disputed signatures and protect the account. Vibha did not yet know what those procedures would establish. She wanted separate answers to who had received the money, why it had been sent and how much she herself had known. Leaving the bank, she went towards the police station. Years earlier she had travelled along that road to a religious gathering; today she was going to provide information about the use of her own name. When she submitted the application at the bank, the employee had also allowed her to retain a copy, so that if questions arose later she could show the date on which she had recorded her objection. That small precaution gave her words a tangible foundation of self-respect.

Inspector Sujata Kumari listened to her. "I'm Ratan Singh's wife," Vibha said. "I don't want any advantage here because of that name. I've come to hand over copies of two payments from my account. The date of one signature doesn't agree with where I was." Sujata made an inventory of the papers. "Write only what you know personally," she said. "Don't add assumptions about your husband's business." Vibha agreed. She made

clear, too, that she was not declaring either payment criminal; she was saying it required examination. The police gave her an acknowledgement. The papers had passed out of her hands, but the weight on her mind did not immediately lessen.

Rekha Mandal stood outside. She had been summoned again concerning her elder brother's papers. Vibha had first seen her at the condolence meeting for Naresh. As their eyes met, Rekha gave a slight greeting. Vibha went up to her. “How is your father?” she asked. “He's taking his medicine. There are also outstanding shop accounts to attend to,” Rekha replied. “I can't find words for the sorrow of Nareshji's death,” Vibha said. Rekha was silent. After a few moments she said, “I want justice, but not through false accusations. Whoever says anything in Dada's name must have proof.” Vibha understood that Rekha's suffering was far greater than the indignity she herself had borne; there could be no easy equivalence between them.

On her way back from the station a newspaper reporter asked what she had to say against Ratan. “I've given my documents to the investigating officer,” Vibha said, stopping. “I won't make accusations in public.” “So you support your husband?” the reporter pressed. “Standing for truth is neither blind support for someone nor blind opposition,” she replied, and got into her car. Her answer did not make a great newspaper headline, but Vibha could hear her own mind clearly in it.

That evening Sumitra came to the house. “Will you stay with me for a few days?” she asked. Vibha looked around at the walls. The first rituals of her marriage had taken place there; so many dear people had been welcomed there. Yet it no longer seemed possible to remain only for the sake of memories. “I'll stay with you for a while,” Vibha said. “But I'll leave my belongings and papers safe, without destroying anything. Leaving the house isn't the end of a decision; it is changing the place from which I can think about it.” “Stay as long as you need,” Sumitra said. Vibha packed the clothes, medicines and lawful copies of documents that she required.

When Ratan returned, Vibha told him directly, “I'm going to stay at Sumitra's for a few days. The information I've given to the bank and the police is official. If you think it right, give them your account and documents.” Surprise appeared on Ratan's face, followed by anger. “What will become of my standing in society?” “And what meaning will my name have if I cannot even understand my own signature?” Vibha asked in return. Ratan tried to speak, but she would not prolong the

argument. She did not leave her house keys on the table: she had not decided to sever every connection with her home before the questions of her rights were resolved. She simply went out with Sumitra.

As the car moved, the leaves of the old gulmohar trees stirred on either side of the gate. Vibha looked back through the window. She felt anger towards Ratan, the love she had once borne him and her uncertainty, all at once. She had no power to establish anyone's guilt; she did have the right to tell the truth about herself. "Will you eat something now?" Sumitra asked. "Yes," Vibha replied. "I've had nothing but tea since morning." The small answer felt new to her. Even in sorrow, the daily work of living continued. Whatever happened next, she resolved to base her decisions not on fear or public shame but on what the facts showed and on her own dignity.

Chapter 42: A Lead Across the Border

The pages of the workers' registers recovered from the warehouse lay arranged in separate groups on Sujata Kumari's desk. One list was headed “outside placements”, another “construction work”, and a third contained only numbers and dates. Arun Kumar put his finger on a name. “This young man submitted his job application in Navgarh, but the wage receipt bears the name of an institution on the other side of the border.” “Does the receipt have the recipient's signature?” Sujata asked. “No. It merely records a payment by the institution.” “Then don't write that he received the wages,” Sujata said. “First we must find out whether these people went of their own accord, who sent them, and whether the promises made to them were kept.”

For two days reports of the warehouse inspection had been circulating through town. Some claimed every crate contained liquor; others said all the labourers had been sold. It was easy to combine those assertions in one sweeping declaration, but the police needed separate facts. The excise department was testing its samples. The labour department had begun accepting applications for unpaid wages. Naresh's murder remained a separate investigation, while the search for Poonam was making contact with authorities in another state and with offices near the border necessary. Sujata placed slips of different colours on the files. The work was increasing, but it was essential to give each question its proper name.

Arun showed her a copy of an account. “After payments went to Virendra Construction Services, some money was linked to an external recruitment office. But the amounts paid for liquor consignments are entered under another head.” “The same names appearing in two branches doesn't necessarily mean the business is one and the same,” Sujata replied. “Our concern is with human beings and their labour.” She circled two names in the register: Rita Mahto and Suresh Mukhiya. Neither had maintained regular contact with home since leaving. Their families had come to the station to complain. Poonam's name did not appear directly on that list, although the serial number of an application she had submitted partly matched a receipt for an outside placement.

Constable Nandu brought in a young man from a village near the border. His name was Imran Ali. He had worked at the warehouse and

had submitted a claim for unpaid wages on the day of the inspection. Today he had come to speak about a friend. “My name was on the recruitment list, but I didn't go,” he said. “My friend Ravi went. He said food and accommodation would be provided. He called during the first week. After that, nothing for two months.” “Did you go to see him off?” Sujata asked. “No. He caught a bus at the village crossroads.” “Do you have a way of contacting Ravi's family?” Imran gave her a telephone number.

Ravi's mother, Shanti Devi, came to the station in the afternoon. She carried two photographs of her son and an old receipt. Across the top were the words “advance for training and accommodation”. “He said he'd pay back the loan in four months,” she explained. “I sold a goat to raise the money. Now when I telephone, someone says Ravi has gone to another job and someone else says he's gone home. But he hasn't come home.” Sujata accepted the photographs and gave her an acknowledgement. “We'll give you whatever information we obtain, with its date. We won't pass on anything unverified.” “I only want to know where my son is,” Shanti said.

Outside the police station Abhay came seeking information and identified himself as a journalist. “The investigation is continuing,” Sujata told him. “Officially, I can say that we have requested the relevant departments' cooperation in verifying recruitment records. No possible victim's present whereabouts or identity should be made public yet.” “Are the illicit liquor business and the recruitment of labourers run by the same group?” Abhay asked. “Some financial and office connections are under investigation. Allow the evidence to be gathered.” Abhay closed his notebook. He knew the advantage of publishing news quickly, but he remembered Poonam's family waiting for an answer.

Leaving the station, Abhay went to Madhavi Devi's lane. Women who had worked in other people's homes all day were returning in the evening. Some carried bags of vegetables, others their children's schoolbags. Madhavi recognised him. “Journalist Babu, are you writing about liquor again?” “I want to understand what's changed in people's homes,” Abhay replied. Madhavi sat on the raised platform outside the house. “At first we felt relief. My husband used to drink away his earnings. When prohibition came he said, ‘I'm not feeling quite myself, but at least there is money in my pocket now.’ Tears came into my eyes too, only that time they were tears of happiness.”

Madhavi went on, “Before a year was out, bottles were arriving under cover of darkness. Higher prices, greater fear. What the poor had managed to save began disappearing again. Some men had given up drinking and stayed away from it—their households improved. But for those who began again, debt and quarrels returned in another form.” Phoolmati, sitting nearby, said, “Before, we knew where the shops were. Now we don't even know where the rumours come from. How can we tell the police if a threat may come to the house the next morning?” Abhay wrote down both women's accounts carefully. He had no desire to proclaim their experiences the one truth about the entire state. These were the lived circumstances of people in this lane.

Just then a little boy came running. “Ma, Baba is asking for credit again.” Madhavi's face fell. “From whom?” “At the paan shop.” She rose to her feet. Instead of asking another question, Abhay gathered his notebook. “Don't put my name in the report about this,” Madhavi said. “My child goes to school; people will tease him.” Abhay promised not to make her identity public without permission. Darkness was deepening in the street. Writing about the trouble approaching a household was one thing; protecting the people who had to live through it was another.

The next day Sujata sent formal requests through official channels to the police unit and labour-assistance centre near the border. The case might extend into another country, so formal coordination was necessary. Details identifying Poonam and others whose recruitment was suspect were kept confidential in the letters. “If a local contact merely says over the phone that everyone is well, we will not accept that as a final answer,” Sujata told her assistant. “We need the person's own independent statement and a way of making contact safely.” The assistant agreed.

Sujata spoke officially with Archana Jha, a woman officer working in the border-area office. “Some recruitment agents here first promise a job and then change the place of work,” Archana said. “Some families don't complain because they're afraid.” “Does your office have any old applications naming Navgarh?” Sujata asked. “Yes, but all the records will need to be compared. A matching name doesn't necessarily mean the same person.” “I particularly need confirmation about Poonam Yadav, Rita Mahto and Ravi Mukhiya,” Sujata said. “If a name isn't found, we mustn't stop looking.”

During this inquiry, Virendra Rai sent a message through his lawyer stating that the warehouse was a store for building materials and the

payments made in his name were part of regular business. He denied any connection with illicit liquor or labour trafficking. The police placed his reply on record. “Every side's account will be recorded,” Sujata said. “Opposing an investigation is not the same thing as being proved guilty.” Meanwhile, an excise officer reported that preliminary findings from tests on the warehouse samples had arrived: some material differed from the construction goods under which it had been declared. Any final legal action would follow the applicable rules and the complete report.

Bhanu Pratap's name did not appear directly on some of the payment sheets. Questions had, however, arisen about the night register at a checkpoint near the border. An entry showing a vehicle's movement was incomplete; a staff member said the register had been in another room that night. Sujata wrote to the appropriate senior officer. Suspicion of corruption within the police required independent oversight. “We won't put anyone's name on a list of the guilty without proof,” she told Nandu, “but wearing a uniform will not exempt anyone from questions.” Nandu had never heard her speak with such severity before.

Meanwhile, Poonam's mother telephoned Naina. “Is there any news?” There was the old impatience in her voice, but now it was overlaid with exhaustion. “Information has been requested from government offices,” Naina said. “Poonam's identity has not yet been confirmed.” “I've put some of my daughter's clothes aside,” her mother said. “If she comes back suddenly, she'll need a change of clothes.” Naina could find no answer. “We haven't forgotten you,” she said at last. After the call she looked at her old appointment letter. Ratan's office had withheld her wages; the hopes of Poonam's family, too, were entangled in the papers of that institution.

At midday Arun showed Sujata a new list. A short code was the same in two different recruitment registers, but the names were different. “What does this code mean?” Sujata asked. “Some say it's an abbreviation for a location, others a number assigned to a recruitment group,” Arun replied. “I won't decide without verified information.” “Send Archana only the code,” Sujata said. “The person's name and family details must go separately through a secure channel.” The decision slowed the search slightly, but identifying the wrong person could injure both that person and the family.

Seema Devi, an employee of the labour department, had called a small meeting. Five workers from the warehouse, two women and the

father of an adolescent boy were sitting there. "What wages were promised when you applied?" Seema asked. "They told us a monthly sum," one woman replied, "but in the first month they deducted the cost of food." Another worker said, "They told me the papers would be made later." Seema asked for the time and any relevant documents alongside each reply. She did not tell those who had no papers that they could not complain. She recorded separately what they had seen themselves and what they had heard from others.

At the end of the meeting a young man asked, "We need work. If we complain here, who will employ us somewhere else?" "Wanting work and demanding wages you've earned are not opposing things," Seema replied. "But legal proceedings can take time. You'll also be given information about legitimate employment." The young man did not even smile. His father's medicines and his sister's education depended on the household's earnings. When there is no certainty about daily wages, even raising one's voice for a rightful claim seems dangerous. His question reminded Sujata of Chandan's statement: under the pressure of debt, courage to ask what a job truly involves begins to fail.

Before writing his report, Abhay went to Poonam's village. At the door, Poonam's mother was drying old clothes. He asked permission to enter. "People come to make news," she said, "but no one brings my daughter home." "I haven't come with a new claim," Abhay answered. "I've come only to say that I won't publish anyone's name without official confirmation." "Her voice was trembling in the message she sent. When I listen to it again, I can't sleep at night," the mother said. Abhay listened without speaking. It would have been cruel to invent glad tidings as a form of consolation.

Inside, Poonam's father was sitting on a cot. "And if my daughter went of her own free will?" he asked. Abhay understood the meaning behind the question. Rumours spreading through society had worn down the family's courage. "Going away to work is no crime," he replied. "If someone has forcibly controlled her labour or freedom, that must be investigated. For now we must wait for evidence." "I had told her that when she got a job, we'd repay the household debt," her father said. "Now I'm the one waiting for her." In his words were both the hope of money and the regret of having sent his daughter far from home.

After returning home, Shanti Devi, Ravi Mukhiya's mother, told a neighbour that the police had taken her papers. The neighbour advised

her to name someone on social media; only then, he said, would the authorities listen. Shanti grew frightened. Naming the wrong person might endanger the young man. She looked over and over at her son's photographs. In the village courtyards everyone remembered stories of his early childhood, but no one knew where he actually was now. It was difficult to reconcile the helpless family's waiting with the time required for a confidential inquiry near the border. The two clocks moved at different speeds.

Archana, the officer near the border, spoke to a workers' assistance group in her area. She made it clear that she could not promise an immediate meeting simply because someone supplied a name. The free wishes and safety of the person needing help would be considered first. The group's representative said some people were trying to recover their identity documents. Archana noted the details, but no conclusion about a cross-border offence was inserted into the investigative file on the strength of guesses. She understood that careless reporting could indirectly harm those whom the inquiry was meant to protect.

Sujata looked once more at the file on Naresh's murder. Two entries in the warehouse accounts matched pages he had preserved. The financial connection was a useful lead, but it did not explain what happened on the night of his death. “Naresh raised questions about certain payments,” she told Arun. “We now have to establish which questions he put to whom, and exactly which documents he had seen.” “Should we add the name of the agent near the border to this file?” Arun asked. “When we find evidence connecting that person with Naresh's death,” Sujata replied. “A network of different offences may be emerging, but we must test every knot in each thread.”

That day Chandan sat at home looking through employment advertisements in the newspaper. Savita had sent information about a new date for a competitive examination. “Didi, if I want to sit another examination, where will the money come from?” he asked. “First look at how much time you have to study and find out about a legitimate application,” Naina replied. “The debt is a separate account.” Chandan spoke of his old mistake. “Manoj said everyone did work like that. I should have found out what was being carried in my vehicle.” “You'll have another chance to understand,” Naina said. “This time don't lose the courage to ask questions.” The worry over Poonam's disappearance lived in that house, but the question of Chandan's new life could not be

put aside either. That was why every lead needed to be tested, every person contacted safely, and every claim officially confirmed.

The first letter from the labour-assistance centre near the border contained three new facts. At one workplace, some workers' identity documents had been held temporarily; at another, a complaint about unpaid wages had been recorded; and there was an incomplete name of a young woman who had requested safe contact. The letter stated that her full identity and current safety were still being verified. Sujata read the page a second time. The incomplete name might belong to Poonam, but she would not make such an announcement on the strength of this letter.

Archana telephoned a second time in the evening. “A former worker has come to our office,” she said. “He wants to give information about a companion. His statement isn't complete yet.” “Is the person safe?” Sujata asked. “He's in contact with the centre now. When the statement-taking procedure is complete, we'll send an official report.” Sujata thanked her. As soon as the call ended, she opened Poonam's file again. The date of her last message, the recruitment advertisement, the sum deposited and the receipt number were still there, as before. There were more papers now, but Poonam's own voice had not yet been heard directly.

Returning home from the newsroom that night, Abhay wrote a short report: records concerning outside recruitment and the payment of workers' wages were being verified, and officials had sought formal cooperation. He published no names. Afterwards he telephoned Naina. “Has anything been confirmed?” she asked. “Not yet. But for the first time the search has reached the appropriate office outside town.” Naina stood by the window. Inside the house, Chandan was giving their mother her medicine. “If Poonam is found,” she said, “she'll need a safe home first, not a crowd of questions.” “Yes,” Abhay replied. “We'll put that first.”

Late that night Sujata wrote her final note. Some individuals and financial records appeared in both the investigation of the illicit liquor trade and the inquiry into labour trafficking; nevertheless, each accusation would have to be established through separate evidence. Poonam Yadav's present whereabouts had not been verified. The next steps would depend on the awaited statement from the assistance centre outside town. She closed the file. A breeze was coming in from the direction of the canal. In many homes doors were still left open in the

hope that a missing son or daughter might return from somewhere. Sujata understood the cost of that waiting. That was why, before giving the first definite news, she wanted to be certain it was true.

Chapter 43: Poonam's Whereabouts

The call from Archana Jha at the labour assistance centre near the border came on Wednesday morning. Sujata Kumari had only just reached her office. The vehicle register requested the previous night, copies of Poonam's application and the papers submitted by Rekha lay in separate piles on her desk. Archana said, "The statement of the former worker I told you about yesterday is complete. His name is Ravi Mukhiya. He spent several months at the workplace where the young women brought in from elsewhere were kept." Sujata first asked about Ravi's health. Archana replied that the young man was under the centre's protection and had given permission for his family to be informed. "Did he see Poonam with his own eyes?" Sujata asked. "He heard the name and saw the woman's face once. We are arranging for him to identify her from a photograph. I will not announce a name without independent confirmation." Sujata was relieved by her caution. To offer Poonam's family hope on the strength of a conjecture and then break that hope would be a grave injustice.

Archana had already checked Ravi's identity with Shanti Devi. When shown the photograph sent from Navgarh, Shanti had given her son's former name and the year of his birth. On receiving news that her son was alive, she had at first been afraid there might have been another mistake. On the telephone Ravi had asked his mother, "Have you sold the goat, or is it still there?" His mother had answered, "If the goat goes, we can get another. You come home first." Archana did not make this private exchange part of his statement. Its significance lay simply in the fact that the injured young man could now speak freely to his family.

The name of the workplace in Ravi's statement was 'Surya Vihar Garment Complex'. An old building on the outskirts of an industrial town across the border had been converted into a workshop. The job advertisement had promised a monthly wage, food and a room to live in. Once workers arrived, the first two months' wages were withheld against what the employers called 'advance expenses'. Ravi cleaned the warehouse and loaded goods. He was told that female employees did packing work in another part of the building. One day a young woman approached him on the pretext of asking for water. She had given her name as Poonam and mentioned Navgarh. Hearing the town's name,

Ravi had remembered a small town near his own village. Yet he could not be sure whether Poonam had given her real name: many people at the workplace were addressed by names other than their own.

"Ask Ravi whether he remembers anything that might distinguish that woman," Sujata said on the telephone. Archana called again after some time. According to Ravi, there was a small, old burn mark near the woman's right wrist, and she had mentioned a friend named 'Naina'. The words immediately reminded Sujata of Poonam's last message. Poonam had first telephoned Naina to speak of her fear. But the account of that small mark had to be verified. Sujata summoned Naina, telling her over the telephone only that there was a question concerning identification, not that any reassuring news had come. When Naina arrived at the office, she was asked whether Poonam had any distinguishing mark on her hand. "As a child she burnt her right wrist on a hot vessel at the hearth," Naina answered. "It left a round mark. Her mother knows about it too." Sujata recorded the date and the source of this information.

Hope and fear were visible together on Naina's face. "Is it Poonam?" she asked. "Some details agree," Sujata replied. "Her direct, independent identification and her safety have yet to be established. It may be your friend, but I will not say so with certainty yet." Naina held back the tears rising in her eyes. Questions crowded into her mind: Was Poonam alive? How much had she suffered? Had anyone injured her? But when she saw the copy of Poonam's application on the police desk, she understood that the answers had to be gathered properly, not guessed at. She agreed that the police could speak directly to Poonam's family to confirm the mark.

To follow the lead, the police also had to re-examine Poonam's earlier route of travel. The bus ticket bore no clearly legible name; the travel list drawn up by the intermediary contained serial numbers. On the reverse of a receipt Naina had previously submitted there was a seal that had not been deciphered. Arun took a small magnifying glass and examined its blurred letters. No one's destination could be determined from them, but they could reasonably be compared with the name of an outside office. Sujata had the photograph of the old paper placed with its certified copy. "What is the value of such a tiny mark?" her assistant asked. "We do not know its value yet," Sujata answered. "That is why we are investigating."

Meanwhile, Archana was having a second copy of Ravi's statement prepared at her office. His hand was bandaged. A doctor at the labour assistance centre had examined his ordinary injuries. Ravi told Archana, "I keep thinking that I ran away and left the others behind." She answered, "First you managed to get out yourself. Now you can help by saying clearly what you remember. Do not add what you did not see." Ravi fell silent for a while. Then he explained that a young woman working in the workshop had twice asked permission to telephone home. The second time an employee had taken away her phone. One evening, when Ravi saw her in the dilapidated veranda, she had said, "If I ever get out of here, the first thing I shall do is hear my mother's voice." Ravi remembered the words because he himself had been unable to speak to his mother, Shanti Devi.

Archana recorded this portion of the testimony as a quotation, but did not treat it as an utterance definitely made by Poonam. The paper clearly stated: 'Reported by witness; independent corroboration required.' She then requested, through the appropriate official channels, information on the legal identity and present condition of the workplace. An officer at the industrial town's local labour inspection branch replied that work was carried out in the old Surya Vihar premises under two separate contracts. The register for one section was available; the contractor for the other had changed. Complaints from some workers had already been lodged at that office, but the workers' present whereabouts could not be stated with certainty. Archana immediately sent a formal request for an inspection on site and safe contact with the workers.

After hearing Ravi's account, Archana read his statement back to him. He asked for one word to be changed: 'confined' should be replaced with 'prevented', for he had seen the door of a room closed but had not seen everyone imprisoned inside it. Archana accepted the correction. At first Ravi had feared that every word of his statement might be turned against him. Now he felt that admitting what he did not know did not diminish the credibility of what he did. He telephoned his mother again to say that his statement was complete. Shanti merely told him to eat his meals on time; the safety of her son's body mattered to her more than any news.

In Navgarh, that morning at Poonam's mother's house was unlike other mornings. Her younger sister Reena kept glancing at the doorway as she swept the courtyard. Their mother had put lentils on the stove,

but her attention rested on the telephone rather than the pot of rice. When it rang, she picked it up at once; the unfamiliar number belonged to a clothing shop. "Mother, if you abandon your work all day to wait for the telephone, your health will suffer," Reena said. "I haven't abandoned my work, daughter. I wait while I do it," her mother replied. Reena looked at her mother's wrinkled hands and said nothing. There was no sensational news in that house, only a day of waiting whose final hour no one could know.

That afternoon Naina went to Poonam's home. Sitting on the familiar veranda, she had to choose her words with care for the first time. It would be wrong to give the family false hope and keep them awake all night; yet complete silence seemed cruel too. "The investigation has produced some new information," she said. "Certain names and identifying marks are being compared. The officer has not confirmed anything yet." Reena asked, "Does that mean you've found Didi?" Naina met her eyes. "No, not yet. But the search has narrowed." Poonam's mother opened a trunk containing an old shawl and childhood photographs. "The mark on her wrist?" she said thoughtfully. "Yes, there was a very small one. She was little when she was hurt." Naina explained that the investigating officer had asked for confirmation of this detail. The mother quietly laid out the photograph.

Reena said nothing in front of her mother. After Naina took her leave, she accompanied her as far as the road. "Didi, everyone in the village says she left of her own free will," she said softly. "Some even say Poonam has settled down somewhere else. Whenever Mother hears it, she stops eating." Naina replied, "Nothing we know gives any basis for that accusation. Don't waste your strength answering rumours." "What if Poonam comes back and people begin asking questions?" Reena asked. "She will say only what she wishes to say. No one has the right to put her in the middle of a circle of interrogators," Naina answered. For the first time Reena said goodbye with a face that looked a little more at ease.

At the newspaper office, Abhay was waiting for official information through Archana's colleagues. Local journalism had become a race to call every new lead an immediate 'exposé'. A television channel's representative telephoned him. "Shall we use Poonam's photograph and announce that we've found where she is?" he asked. "If the place is not certain, the report will be false," Abhay said. "And even if she has been found, her safety must come first." The representative said mockingly, "You're always late with the news." Abhay ended the call and wrote

explicitly to his editor that no name or location should be published until verified information arrived. He remembered the shawl kept in Poonam's mother's trunk. For that family, a false sentence would be no small error.

Her mother took an old letter from the trunk. Poonam had written in it that with her first earnings she would buy Reena a good dictionary. "You still have this letter?" Reena asked with a laugh. "What I have kept is not the paper. It is her handwriting," her mother said. For the first time that day she even began to think about what she would feed her daughter when she came home. Then she checked herself. There was still no certain news. She returned the letter to the trunk, though this time her hand did not tremble as she closed it. Reena understood that her mother could not hide hope entirely beneath fear.

An official letter arrived at Sujata's office that evening. Officers had reached the Surya Vihar premises, but the number of female workers in the main building did not match the attendance register. They were told that some had been sent to another unit. Arrangements had been ordered for a separate entry by the women's assistance team. Two names in the letter carried notes of uncertainty: 'P. Yadav' and 'Meena'. The signatures did not match; there was only mention of a copy of an appointment receipt found inside an old earth-coloured bag. "Have they actually met the owner of the bag?" Sujata asked. The answer was 'Not yet'. Sujata dated her acknowledgement of the letter and made another call.

The next morning a young man named Ajit, a former colleague of Ravi's, presented himself at the assistance centre. He said he had heard two young women who lived in the rooms inside the workshop called 'Poonam' and 'Mamta'. One woman had been moved to an outside room the previous week because of fever and weakness. Ajit had only seen someone seated in a vehicle; he had not seen the face clearly. "Which day do you remember?" Archana asked. He gave two possible dates. Archana compared them with the records. This did not establish the woman's present location, but it offered a new direction for checking the vehicle's movement register and the site of the outlying unit. Instead of chasing every falsehood, they were preserving the sequence of evidence.

Sujata had three points expressly included in the next request: immediate protection for those suspected of having been detained, an opportunity for independent identification, and safe contact with their

families if they wished it. Because jurisdiction lay elsewhere, the Navgarh police could not enter the building directly. Archana was arranging an inspection under a locally authorised team. “This is not merely a criminal case file,” Sujata said. “The people there must have a chance to make their own choices known.” Archana replied, “My first task will be to speak to the women without their employer present.” On that understanding, the next day's plan was settled.

That night Chandan lay awake in his room for a long time. He asked Naina whether there had been any news of Poonam. She told him only what was known. “I keep remembering the vehicle I drove,” Chandan said. “Perhaps someone was carrying people in that consignment as well.” Naina stopped him. “Say what you saw. Do not turn what you did not see into truth merely because you feel guilty.” After a long pause Chandan said, “I wanted the money for the trip. But now I see how dangerous it is to dismiss something shady as ‘only transport’.” Naina listened. Remorse did not mean replacing evidence with guilt; it meant accepting responsibility.

At dawn the authorised team reached the outlying unit of Surya Vihar. The first information Archana received was simply that some female workers had been brought safely into a separate room. Their identities were being verified. One young woman said that her home district was near Navgarh. Sujata did not telephone Naina as soon as she read the message. Instead she asked, “Has the woman herself been given the chance to give her name, family details and permission for contact?” Archana replied, “She is receiving medical help and rest. No one is pressuring her to make a statement.” “Good,” Sujata said. “We shall wait.”

On the day the assistance centre was inspected, a local schoolteacher contacted the authorities of her own accord. She had previously taught the children at that complex in the evenings. She said that some of the young women could read and write and tried to read their receipts, but were not given copies of their papers. “One young woman wrote down her home address and gave me a little scrap of paper,” she said. “I was frightened then, but I did not throw it away.” An officer formally received the paper. Its handwriting still had to be identified. The possibility did not turn an earlier conjecture into a confirmed fact, but it opened another path towards direct contact.

A brief, secure message arrived at midday. It recorded three details given by the young woman: her mother's name, Reena's name, and a

landmark in the lane of their old Navgarh home, where a handcart stood in the evenings. They agreed with the police's earlier records. Archana said on the telephone, "The young woman has given her name as Poonam Yadav. She is in a safe room now. Formal confirmation of her identity and medical supervision are continuing. She wants to speak to her family, but she is exhausted." Sujata rose from her chair and stood by the window. A road that had been closed for months was opening. For the first time she picked up the telephone to call Naina. "There is substantial information about where Poonam is," she said, "but visits and arrangements for her return home will be made safely." There was silence at the other end for a few moments. Then Naina's trembling voice came: "I'll bring her mother with me."

Chapter 44: Poonam Found Alive

After Sujata's call, for a moment it seemed to Naina that every sound in the room had stopped. Saraswati Devi was sitting on the bed. Chandan came in carrying a glass of water and saw Naina holding the telephone without speaking. “What happened?” he asked. “They've found Poonam. She's alive,” Naina said. The strip of medicines slipped from Saraswati's hand. “Truly?” “The officer told me. She's in a safe place. They still have to arrange the meeting.” Though Naina had managed to say the whole thing, her mind remained fixed on a single word: alive. For months she had imagined hearing this news, yet she had never been able to prepare herself for it.

Saraswati took Naina's hand and offered a word of caution. “In your happiness, don't say that all her suffering is over now. That girl who is coming back will have many things she must be allowed to tell in her own way.” “I know, Mother,” Naina replied. Saraswati's own health had not fully recovered, but she had a little box filled with jaggery and roasted gram for Poonam's mother. “No one in that house will feel like eating today,” she said. Naina put the box into her bag. As she crossed the threshold of her own house, she saw nothing extraordinary in the gesture, only the ordinary affection of neighbours.

Before going to meet Reena and Poonam's mother, Naina telephoned Abhay. “There's news, but speak to the officer before you print anything,” she said. “My first question is about her safety, not publication,” Abhay replied. “Go to Poonam's family. I'll ask the police station about the official arrangements.” “And if someone comes to the house with a camera?” Naina asked. “I'll tell my editor in advance not to publish the family's address or particulars. I cannot control other news organisations, but the police can help.” After that brief conversation, Naina shut her door and set off for Poonam's house.

Poonam's mother was picking through rice when Naina arrived. “Why have you come so early?” she asked. Naina sat beside her. “They've found Poonam.” At first the mother did not understand. “Where?” “At an assistance centre across the border. She's safe. The officers say she's alive.” Her mother set the tray of rice on the floor. The grief she had held back for so long suddenly broke through. Reena ran in from inside. Her mother caught her and said, “They've found your sister.” Reena

stood speechless, then began asking Naina questions. "Where was she? Is she hurt? When will she come home?" Naina answered each question as clearly as she could. She did not yet have every answer.

At the doorway Reena could hear the neighbours asking questions. Some had heard the news; others had heard only rumours. "If she's been found, show us a photograph," one woman said. For the first time Reena answered firmly. "First Didi must rest. I am not giving her photograph to anyone." Another neighbour asked in an oblique tone where she had been all those months. From inside the house, Poonam's mother said only, "Be glad to hear the good news. The other questions can wait." Her voice was low but unmistakable. As Reena closed the door, she realised that the work of protecting her sister's privacy had begun even before her return.

On the other side of the border, Poonam returned to the assistance centre after an examination at the hospital. She had grown thin, the skin on her hands had become coarse, and she tired after rising and sitting down two or three times. The doctor noted dehydration, weakness and the effects of irregular meals. There was no immediate grave danger, but she needed rest, nourishment and further examination. Seema, a woman support worker, sat beside her. "You are not obliged to answer any questions now," she said. "Would you like to eat, sleep or speak to your family?" Poonam thought for a moment. "My family first. But I won't be able to bear it if Mother starts crying." Seema offered her a choice rather than a promise. "If you wish, I can speak to her first and then give you the telephone."

Poonam looked around the room. The door was not locked. She could pour herself water from the jug without asking anybody. In experiencing those small freedoms, she remembered the days behind her, when it had been difficult to go outside, telephone someone or ask for an account of her wages without permission. Now a support worker paused at the doorway to ask whether she needed anything before going into another room. Even such ordinary consideration felt strange to Poonam. Silently she took from her cloth bag a fragment of the old appointment receipt that she had hidden for so many days. At the sight of it, her eyes filled with tears. When she applied for the job, she had seen that paper as a road towards the future.

While giving Poonam her medicines, the doctor explained that exhaustion could cause difficulties with memory and sleep. He wrote down the date of her next examination. "For now, eat nutritious food,

drink water and give your body time," he said. "Can I work now?" Poonam asked. "Your work today is to rest. You can make decisions about further work according to your health." Poonam looked at the pulse in her wrist. For months she had been made to regard her body merely as an instrument of labour. Now its care was being described as her right. Outside in the veranda, the afternoon sun was strong.

Poonam was not the only one at the centre. Five other workers had been brought in from different places: two women and three men. Their experiences were not identical. Some had had their wages withheld; others had had their identity documents taken away; still others had been made to do work different from that promised in their contracts. A woman named Mamta had spent several weeks with Poonam. Her lower back ached. "I'll go home," she said, "but if I go back empty-handed, people will say I went abroad and earned nothing." "First let us reach home alive. The accounts can be settled later," Poonam replied. She surprised herself by saying it. How often she had wondered how she could face her family if she could not return the money they had gathered for her journey.

Archana Jha came to meet Poonam with a woman language assistant, because Poonam did not fully understand the language of the local office's forms. "Some of the details you have given match the complaint lodged in Navgarh," Archana said. "With your permission we have informed your family. Would you like to speak to them by telephone today?" Poonam nodded. "To Mother. And Reena. And if Naina is there, I want to hear her voice too." Archana smiled. "We'll fix a time and arrange it. You do not need to speak to the news media now." Poonam asked one question: "Will they send me back to that workshop?" "No," Archana answered plainly. "You are at a safe assistance centre. The procedures for whatever happens next will be explained to you."

Mamta kept reversing the digits of her family's telephone number. The centre's staff did not hurry her. She wrote the numbers on an old piece of paper and read them herself. When the call connected, her father did not at first recognise her voice. "It's Mamta," she said. At the other end there was only the sound of her father's heavy breathing. Poonam did not overhear the conversation from outside the room. But seeing Mamta's smile afterwards, she knew that the closed door of another home had opened too. The support worker recorded the details

of Mamta's family contact confidentially. It was not possible to inform every worker's family at the same time or in exactly the same way.

Sujata had asked the family to come to the police station in Navgarh. As she entered its gate, Poonam's mother could scarcely keep her footing. This was the place where she had heard disappointment so often that she could not immediately accept the hope before her today. Sujata seated her and said, "Your daughter is in a safe place and is receiving medical care. We shall arrange for you to speak to her directly shortly. If she does not want a long conversation today, we must respect her wishes." "Can I call her by her name, just once?" her mother asked. "Yes. But the necessary legal papers must be completed before a visit or her return home." The mother agreed. To be able to address her daughter was the greatest thing in the world just then.

Before the call was connected, Sujata gave Poonam's mother water. "Your daughter is very tired," she repeated. "Speak to her as you wish, but don't ask her to recount everything all over again." Her mother nodded. Reena kept her phone screen dark, suppressing the desire to take a photograph of their first reunion. She wanted to see her sister's face again, not manufacture a picture as proof. Naina moved a little farther back so that their conversation would not be weighed down by the presence of others. A fan was turning in the room, and in the courtyard outside someone was drinking tea. The ordinary sounds of life seemed strangely distinct.

At first the face of the support worker appeared on the screen. It took a little time to make the sound clear. Then Poonam came into view. Her cheeks were thin and a dry strand of hair hung across her forehead, but the eyes were Poonam's. Her mother spoke almost inaudibly. "Poonam?" Poonam's lips trembled on the other side of the screen. "Mother." After those two words, sobs rose on both sides. Reena stood holding her mother's shoulder. "Didi, it's me." Poonam managed a smile. "You haven't stopped studying, have you?" Weeping, Reena said she had not. Then Poonam asked, "Is the mango tree still there at home?" Her mother nodded. In those little household questions lay the longing to return.

Naina stood some distance away. When Poonam saw her, she asked, "Are you there?" Naina stepped forward. "I'm right here, Poonam." "I called you. Then they took the phone away." "I received your message," Naina said. "I never stopped looking for you." Poonam closed her eyes and remained silent for a while. Then she said, "I can't tell everything

now." "You don't have to," Naina replied. "Rest first." Seema, the support worker, signalled that their time was nearly over. Poonam said of her own accord, "Mother, I'll telephone again. I'm safe now." Her mother kept her palms together and her gaze fixed on the screen until the call ended.

The moment she saw Naina's face on the screen, Poonam had wanted to ask something about the past, but there was too little time. At college the two had promised that after their examinations they would go together to the village fair. On the day of the fair Poonam had been busy preparing papers for the job away from home. Now she thought that some day she wanted to speak to Naina once more about nothing more urgent than a fair, books and the weather. She smiled at the thought. The support worker saw that the conversation was coming to an end. "Anything else?" she asked before switching off the camera. "Tell Mother I'll eat the pickle she makes," Poonam said. Then the call ended.

Afterwards Poonam's mother sat for some time in the police station veranda. Her crying slowly subsided, though her body was still trembling. Reena gave her water. "I stayed alive to see this day," the mother said. Sujata explained that they would not rush ahead without arranging the journey, identity papers and coordination among the officials concerned. The next stage of contact would be decided according to the family's consent and Poonam's own wishes. Reena asked whether Poonam had been able to take her clothes. "She is being given the clothes and medicines she needs," Sujata replied. "You may send a family photograph or a message by a secure channel." Reena immediately chose a photograph taken with her mother, showing the laughter of an ordinary morning rather than the sorrow of recent days.

Abhay was outside the police station. A local reporter was trying to photograph Poonam's mother. Abhay quietly told him, "Don't take a photograph without the family's permission. The young woman is still in a protection centre." "Then how is the public to know?" the reporter asked. "Write the facts of the story. You don't have to show the family's faces." Sujata came out and gave the media a brief official statement: progress had been made in the search for a missing young woman, and, with help from the relevant authorities, arrangements were being made for the woman's protection and identification. She did not disclose her name, exact location or personal health details. Some journalists were

disappointed, but that restraint spared Poonam, at least on her first evening, from being put on display before a crowd.

The local authorities were questioning the workshop manager separately. He maintained that all the employees were working of their own free will and that identity documents had been kept only to distribute wages. The officers gave the workers the opportunity to make statements separately, outside his presence. Mamta said that when she asked to leave, she was told she was in debt. Ravi's account referred to wages kept as security. Poonam was still resting, so her detailed statement was postponed until the following day. Despite what had already emerged, each person's experience would be recorded separately. No one's story would stand in for another's.

Poonam sat with a plate of food before her. The smell of lentils reminded her of the hearth at home. It was hard to take the first mouthful; she longed to hear her mother's voice again. "Do you need anything?" Seema asked. "A little salt," Poonam said. Seema placed a small container of salt beside her. Such an ordinary exchange brought tears to Poonam's eyes. At the workshop even asking what would be served for dinner had been treated as trouble. Now she sat with her own plate before her. Mamta was eating slowly beside her. Neither looked directly at the other, yet the mere fact of sitting together gave them strength.

Archana and her colleague were making a list of the formal steps necessary for the journey home. A health summary, proof of identity, safety during travel and approval from the relevant office each required separate arrangements. One employee said, "The case is in the news now. It would be better to send these people home today." "The speed of the news cannot replace documents and security," Archana answered. "If something goes wrong during a half-prepared journey, who will be responsible?" The employee consulted the list and wrote down dates for the outstanding work. This delay did not diminish anyone's hopes, but the return had to be prepared safely.

That night the cooking fire burned properly for the first time in Poonam's mother's house in Navgarh. "Make a little more dal," her mother told Reena. Reena laughed. "But Didi isn't here to eat it yet!" "We'll eat it," her mother said. "For so long hunger in the belly and fear in the heart have been knotted together." Naina sat with them for a while. She looked at an old photograph of Poonam in which the two friends stood holding books at the college gate. That day Poonam had

said that she would repair the roof of the house with her earnings. The roof still leaked, but Poonam was alive. Naina understood for the first time that some hopes cannot return to their former shape; they have to be given a new one.

After dinner Reena opened the page beside Poonam's name that her mother had left blank in the household account book. Each month her mother kept a line empty while recording the expenses: her daughter's telephone call, money for her journey, a little saving for her. Reena saw that, though the expense line was empty, her mother's mind had already filled it. On a fresh page she wrote, 'Preparations for Poonam's return home'. Her mother read the words. "Don't write the date yet," she said. "We'll fill that in later," Reena replied with a smile.

In her last office note of the day, Sujata recorded the sequence of events: preliminary confirmation of identity, medical assistance, contact with the family by the woman's consent, protective arrangements and preparations for a further statement. Poonam's original application, her last message and the records found at the workplace had yet to be compared. The financial relationship between Ratan's organisation and the management of Surya Vihar was also still under investigation. That night something appeared in the police file that had never been written there before: 'Poonam Yadav alive, under safe supervision.' Sujata read the line once more. The full truth of the crime was still distant, but a human being had not been lost to the darkness of death or oblivion.

Chapter 45: Wounds as Witnesses

Poonam was told that she could choose the time that day to give her detailed statement. The doctor examined her in the morning, and Seema, the support worker, asked whether she felt able to listen to further questions. Looking out of the window, Poonam said, “I'll speak today. I need to say these things. But if I want to stop in the middle, I will stop.” “You may stop,” Seema replied. “No one will press you to remember something you do not remember.” On the table were water, a handkerchief and a page setting out her rights in simple language. A locally authorised woman officer, Archana and the support worker were present. There was no accused person or workshop employee in the room. Poonam sat touching the old mark on her hand. For the first time she was beginning to understand that her words would be recorded without her herself disappearing into the paper.

Before beginning, Poonam said one thing. “Don't blame my mother because I left home to take that job. She educated me. She trusted me.” The officer explained that her statement would record the sequence of events, not judge her family's character. Poonam breathed more freely. For months she had imagined that when she returned to her village, people would ask why she had gone and why she had trusted anyone. Here, at least, her choices were being heard instead of putting her in the dock. She straightened the hands resting near her knees and began to answer.

“When did you apply?” the officer asked. Before fixing the date, Poonam recalled the entries in her notebook. After seeing the job advertisement at Navgarh's Nai Disha Employment Centre, she had gone there with Naina. The office had said there was regular work in the garment industry away from home, with a monthly wage and accommodation. The training fee had been paid out of the family's savings. Poonam's mother had discussed pawning an old ornament; in the end they borrowed from a relative to raise the money. “I wanted to repay the loan through my own work,” Poonam said. “My family did not stop me because they trusted the written receipt we had received.” She paused. “Now I realise that a piece of paper looking genuine and the job itself being genuine are two different things.” The officer entered the last sentence as Poonam's reflection, not as proof of an event.

Poonam explained that seven people had been on the bus on the day of departure: two women, several young men and an intermediary. On the way they were told that the original place of employment had changed; there would now be work at another factory. When they objected, an employee said that unless they paid the costs of the journey and accommodation already incurred, it would be impossible to return home. "I thought I would go and see what it was like," Poonam said. "I had no means of paying again what I had already deposited." She gave the date of travel, the name of the bus stand and details of possible fellow passengers separately. The officer put questions in her notebook, but they agreed that the old documents would be compared later before those details were treated as settled.

Poonam remembered being made to get off the bus at one point and sit with the others beside an old warehouse. A young man had brought tea. He had several days' stubble on his face, but she could not remember his name. The police officer asked whether she remembered the colour or number of the bus, or could identify the driver. Poonam gave the colour, not the number. The officer wrote something and told her there was no need to guess a number she did not know. Poonam reflected that many memories glowed like vivid pictures in her mind, while she had never even noticed some of the numbers that were now important. That absence did not make what she had seen untrue.

When they reached the workshop, their identity documents were taken away for 'safekeeping'. Food and a place to sleep were provided in the first week, but no wages. The employees said the cost of training was being deducted. From the second week the hours of work increased, and the doors began to be closed in the evenings. "I told them I couldn't work such long hours," Poonam said. "I was told to clear my debt first." "Were you ever shown a written account of that debt?" the officer asked. "No. They just kept saying I owed money for travel, food and a place to stay." Her statement separately recorded withheld wages, altered work and restrictions on leaving the premises.

From a window in that building, Poonam could see a small section of the market in the evenings. People went home carrying vegetables; children ran past. At first she had thought that after a few days she would be able to go to the market herself. But when she asked another employee whether she could go out to buy soap, she was told that the shop inside would supply it and the price would be deducted from her wages. "What hurt more than the price of the soap," Poonam said, "was

that I could not even buy what I needed with my own money." The officer added this detail to the account of restrictions on her freedom of movement.

In the first month Poonam had managed to telephone her mother. On the second occasion she got the chance to call Naina, but the conversation was cut short. "I was speaking quickly," she said. "The woman employee standing near me realised that I was asking for help. She took the telephone out of my hand. After that I don't know whether my number was blocked or what happened to the phone." "Did you see anyone break the telephone?" the officer asked. "No. I only saw it being taken away." The care with which Poonam answered made her statement clearer. She was not trying to prove her suffering by multiplying accusations. She was describing what had happened.

Poonam seemed about to say something about a female employee, then stopped. The officer did not press the question. After a little while Poonam herself explained that this employee had sometimes treated them harshly, but had once brought her water and a cloth when she had a fever. "I can't say she was bad in every way," Poonam said. "But she wouldn't let us leave, either." The officer recorded both facts. A single act of kindness did not justify depriving people of their rights; nor was it right to erase genuine help from an account of harsh treatment. Poonam felt a little more comfortable when she saw that the complexity of her memories would be preserved.

After a while Poonam drank some water. Her hands were trembling. Seema asked whether she needed a rest. "Ten minutes," she said. She went out and sat on the veranda. In front of her was a neem tree, its leaves moving in the wind. Mamta came with a shawl for her. "Have you still got everything to tell?" she asked quietly. "What I remember," Poonam answered. Mamta rested a hand on her shoulder and went away without another word. In that silence neither tried to tell the other's story. When Poonam went back inside, her voice was still weary, but the decision to speak remained her own.

Poonam said that some women in the workshop had continued working even after becoming ill. Mamta had injured her back and had not been given regular rest. One young woman who answered a call from her family was threatened with the loss of her remaining wages if she spoke to anyone outside. "What happened to us was not all the same," Poonam said clearly. "I did not see anyone being beaten, but I saw fear and restrictions. My own body grew weaker." The officer asked

separately who had said what, on which day, and whether anyone else had been present. Poonam gave some names; elsewhere she remembered only faces. 'Do not know' was recorded in those places, not an invented name.

One evening, while cleaning an outer room, Poonam had met Ravi. Frightened, she had asked for water. Ravi gave her his bottle and asked where she came from. She said Navgarh. She hoped that mentioning a familiar place might enable someone to send word outside. But Ravi too was troubled by unpaid wages and a missing identity document. "I told him about my friend Naina," Poonam explained. "He said that if he met anyone from my part of the country, he would pass on the information. I did not know whether he would really get out." The officer made a separate note to compare this with Ravi's earlier statement. Poonam was not told the outcome of the comparison yet; the accounts of two witnesses needed to remain independent.

"How did you come from the workshop to the safe room?" the officer asked. Poonam said that she had developed a fever some days earlier. She had then been moved to an outside room where she was given less work. There, a woman employee asked whether she had a home telephone number while giving her medicine. Poonam could not at once find the courage to trust her. Later, when the authorised inspection team arrived, a woman support worker spoke to her without the manager present. "At first I thought these people belonged to the same group," Poonam said. "But she gave me the choice to go outside and told me to say my own name. That was when I gave Naina's name, Mother's name and Reena's name."

Poonam particularly wanted Mamta's injury included in the statement. "Mamta will make her own statement as well," the officer said. "Tell us what you saw yourself." Poonam described Mamta lifting heavy sacks during packing work and being unable to straighten up after bending down. She was then allowed some rest, but told that money would be deducted from her wages. Poonam did not know whether the deduction had actually been made. This last point was explicitly recorded. Mamta was subsequently given help with treatment and her rights as a worker. Poonam did not make the credibility of her own experience dependent on Mamta's separate account.

During the statement the officer raised the question of money. "Did you receive any wages in cash?" Poonam thought before replying. In the first week a small amount had been given in the name of food expenses,

but it had not been called wages. After that there were only promises that the accounts would be settled. Her signature was not on any receipt for the monthly salary specified in her appointment paper. “Once someone held my hand and told me to put my thumbprint on a paper,” she said. “I refused. After that they took the paper away.” “Do you have that page now?” the officer asked. “No.” Poonam took out and showed a copy of her old appointment receipt. She said that the original receipt should be safe with her mother. Both papers would be verified separately.

Outside Ratan's office in Navgarh, former job applicants had begun gathering again. Some had heard that Poonam had been found and were asking for the whereabouts of their own sons; others wanted their deposited money returned. Naina did not go there, but Abhay told her that hope had been rekindled in several families. “Finding one Poonam does not mean everyone else has automatically been found,” she said. Abhay agreed. In his report he provided information about the assistance centre and legitimate ways of lodging complaints, but printed neither the names of families nor private statements by the rescued workers. He hoped that such new caution would be of use to many families.

In Navgarh, Sujata received an official summary of Poonam's preliminary statement. Because of jurisdiction, the original statement remained in the records of the local authorities; Sujata began the procedure for obtaining a certified copy. She found dates common to Rekha's papers, Naina's receipt and Poonam's account. One heading was ‘Outside Training Expenses’. Naresh's handwriting showed that he had questioned the accounting under that heading. “An examination of the accounts is important here,” Sujata told Arun. “Keep three questions separate: to whom did the money go, why did it go there, and through whom was the appointment actually made?” “We'll request the original bank records and a copy of the contract,” Arun replied.

Naina was given very little information about the contents of Poonam's statement. Sujata said that Poonam was recording her experiences, but it would be wrong to make the details public. Naina agreed. She told Abhay only, “Poonam is well enough to speak.” “Have you spoken to her?” he asked. “Briefly on the family call. There will be time later.” Abhay closed his notebook. “If I write, it will be about the organisation and verified facts of the investigation. Not Poonam's private statement without her permission.” Naina was reassured. She had

feared that the moment Poonam was found, everyone would begin asking, 'What happened to you?'

That evening Poonam received a family photograph through the support worker. Her mother's face was tired, Reena was smiling a little, and the old mango tree could be seen behind them. Poonam looked at it for a long time. "When I go home, will I get work?" she asked Seema. "You will be given information about assistance letters and available programmes," Seema replied. "But you need not make every decision about your future today." "I won't trust another document I cannot understand," Poonam said. "But I don't want to stop working, either." It was her own determination. Instead of being shown pity, she was being told about real choices.

That night Poonam had a nightmare. On waking, she looked towards the door. The corridor outside was bright and there was no lock. A support worker brought water and asked whether she needed anything. "I won't be able to sleep for a while," Poonam said. The worker offered to sit with her, but Poonam said she wanted to be alone. Leaving the door half open, she sat near the window. From far away came the whistle of a train. She remembered the railway tracks near her old home, where she and Naina had boarded trains to sit examinations during their student days. The thought that one day she might board a train again for an ordinary journey gave her strength.

The next morning Poonam heard the written copy of her statement read to her in simple language. She corrected dates in two places and asked that the name of one employee be replaced with the words 'I remember the face, not the name'. The officer entered the corrections and placed the copy in safe custody. Poonam asked that the copy of her receipt also be included in the case records. Its edges were worn, but the sum written on it was clear. When the statement was complete, Seema asked, "What do you want now?" "To speak to Mother again. And for Mamta to receive proper treatment," Poonam answered. Even while describing her own suffering she remained concerned for another injured person; but she no longer needed to lose sight of herself in that concern.

The official who wrote the statement explained that a copy would be kept safe and that Poonam would be contacted if she was needed in the further investigation. "Can I say later if something has been written incorrectly?" Poonam asked. "Yes. You will have the opportunity to

clarify your account." Poonam looked at the paper. The words were now being written with her permission.

When the call came to her mother's house, Reena said with a laugh, "Didi sounded like herself today for the first time in so long." Poonam asked, "Did the mango tree bear fruit this year?" "It did," her mother answered, "but half the mangoes fell in a storm. I'll keep some pickle from the ones that survived for you." Poonam laughed softly. "Shall we bring you home in two or three days?" Reena asked. "The officers are making arrangements," Poonam said. "We won't rush. I want the journey to be safe." "Daughter, from now on we shall listen to what you say first," her mother replied. A relationship that had been held fast for months by fear and uncertainty began to breathe again through ordinary talk at home.

After giving her statement, Poonam took her medicine on time. That afternoon she asked for a notebook. The support worker gave her one with blank pages. On the first page Poonam wrote three things: the names of her family, a list of the certificates still in her possession, and one wish of her own. Beside that wish she wrote: 'I shall study again, and work again; but first I shall read my terms.' She put the notebook beneath her pillow. Not everything could be settled now, and the way ahead was still uncertain. But she who had been deprived of her telephone, her papers and control over her time could now write the first line of her next day for herself.

At the end of the day Sujata wrote in her file that Poonam's statement brought specific allegations into focus: false promises of employment, withheld wages, control over identity documents and restrictions on free movement. Each allegation required confirmation by documents and other witnesses. The files concerning Naresh's murder and the illicit liquor trade would remain under separate investigations, even though certain financial connections overlapped. Poonam's protection and rehabilitation were no less important than the investigation of the crime. Sujata closed the file and looked again at Rekha's list of papers. Behind the lifeless figures in the office now stood Poonam's own voice. The struggle to give that voice its proper place in judicial proceedings had only just begun.

Chapter 46: A Dishonest Offer

The day after news of Poonam's statement spread through town, people began coming to Naina's house early in the morning. Some were asking about jobs away from home for their daughters; others wanted to know how to recover the money deposited with Ratan's organisation. Naina kept giving the same answer: keep copies of your receipts, write down the dates, and lodge a complaint in your own name. She did not promise anyone that the money would be back by tomorrow. Saraswati Devi sat on the veranda listening. It seemed to her that amid her anxieties about her own household, her daughter had taken upon herself the worries of many households she did not know.

Towards the morning a strange car stopped at the bend in the lane. The man who stepped out wore a plain kurta and carried a leather bag. He approached the gate of Naina's house and asked politely, "Does Naina Mishra live here?" Chandan stepped forward. The man introduced himself as Ajit Kumar, an adviser from Ratan Singh's office. He said his employer had sent a proposal to correct certain mistakes and wished to speak privately with Naina. Chandan's expression tightened. "If you have something in writing, leave it here," he said. The adviser smiled but repeated his request to be allowed inside.

When Naina came out, the man rose to his feet. "We have no quarrel with you," he said. "My job is simply to explain the offer." Naina kept the door open. Saraswati Devi and Chandan remained seated a little distance away. From his bag the adviser took a folded paper. According to it, Naina could be given a regular position at another branch of the organisation, her outstanding wages and assistance with the family's medical expenses. It also mentioned a substantial sum as 'special compensation'. There was no official appointment letter, only a draft proposal. Before taking the paper Naina asked, "Whose signature is on this?"

"The employer has authorised it," Ajit said. "The signature will come later. First give your consent." Naina read the final paragraph. It stated that the original complaint about her employment had arisen from a misunderstanding and that she would make no further claims. Her eyes stopped at that line. "This sentence means that my earlier complaint was false," she said. Ajit grew a little uncomfortable. "It's a lawyer's wording.

In practice it won't harm you." Naina replied quietly, "Changing the words doesn't change the facts."

Chandan reached for the paper, but Naina finished reading it first. Another line said that she would not cooperate with any 'unnecessary police inquiry' in future. She laid the paper on the table. "The police are not my private servants, to end an investigation because I tell them to," she said. "And if I am asked what I have seen, I shall say it." Keeping his voice soft, Ajit replied, "You are young, and your whole future lies ahead. There is a sick person in your house, and questions are being raised about your brother as well. You ought to think of all that before deciding." It sounded less like advice than a threat.

Saraswati Devi spoke for the first time. "Son, my daughter needs a job. Why should anyone offer money to keep her mouth shut?" "Mother, that is not what I meant," Ajit replied. "Families sometimes make compromises for their own good." "I know the price of medicine every day," Saraswati said. "But I will not tell the girl who helped bring Poonam home to be silent in return for money." Naina heard not a speech in her mother's voice but the fatigue of the months they had endured. The weight of making her decision felt a little lighter.

Ajit tried another approach. "Look, the organisation employed hundreds of people. It would be unjust to put every fault on the owner. The death of Naresh Babu is a separate investigation. Say only what you know at first hand." "That is precisely what I've been saying," Naina replied. "I have spoken of discrepancies I saw in Poonam's appointment papers. I do not know who murdered Naresh Babu." "Then what's the difficulty?" Ajit asked at once. "The difficulty is that you are offering to make even my truthful statement read as a misunderstanding," Naina said.

The adviser placed a sealed envelope on the table. "There is some advance assistance in here. Please don't take it as pressure to decide." Naina did not touch it. "If there are wages due to me, have the organisation send them to my bank account with a proper statement. If there is some payment I am entitled to, give me its reason in writing. I do not want money without an explanation." Picking up the envelope, Ajit said, "You will regret being so rigid." Chandan rose, but Naina motioned him to sit. "You have said what you came to say. Please leave now," she told the adviser.

After the car drove away, Chandan's restraint broke. "Didi, why did he bring up my name so easily? Do they think you'll agree if they

frighten you about me?" "That is what it sounds like to me as well," Naina replied. "But we mustn't turn a suspicion into evidence." Chandan took out his old debt ledger and said he wanted to consult a proper lawyer. "I'll face the consequences of what I did. But I won't accept blame for what I didn't do." Naina nodded. In the past, there had been only anger in this household over Chandan's carelessness. Today she heard the first definite words of responsibility from him.

A message from Abhay arrived on Naina's telephone. He said he could come to see her on his way back from the newspaper office. She replied that someone had come with an offer of compromise and that there had been a document to see. Abhay telephoned immediately. "Do you have the paper?" "No, he took the draft away. But I read the main lines and wrote down the time and his name." "Write down everything you remember today," Abhay said. "I will mention it in a report only with your permission and after checking the facts." "Are you my friend first, or a journalist?" Naina asked. Abhay paused. "I'm trying to understand the different limits of both roles."

That afternoon Naina opened her old appointment letter and the bank details of her wages. The 'arrears' mentioned in Ratan's offer were much greater than her actual unpaid salary. Why offer so much money without any connection to work done? She made three headings in her notebook: the position offered, the financial offer, and the condition about withdrawing her statement. She recorded the time, Ajit's full name, the colour of the car and the principal sentences spoken during the conversation. She knew that memory could be mistaken, so she wrote down only what she distinctly remembered. She had no need to embellish the incident to make it seem larger.

When Abhay came in the evening, Saraswati Devi gave him tea. The household's strip of regular medicines was nearly finished again. Abhay quietly looked at the name on the prescription, but did not attempt to give money without being asked. Naina told him the details of the proposal. "If you were really offered a regular job with no conditions attached, what then?" Abhay asked. "Then I'd read the qualifications and terms and make a decision," Naina replied. "I haven't taken a vow never to earn my living. But a false statement about Poonam is a price I won't pay for any job."

Abhay did not take out his notebook. He listened first to the family's concerns. Chandan said he had often heard Manoj's name at Ratan's office, but did not know where Manoj was now. "Don't alter the

information you've already given the police," Abhay said. "There is no advantage in offering new guesses to a journalist." Chandan was a little surprised. He had expected Abhay to want something sensational for his newspaper. But Abhay asked only whether he had found a lawful way to repay his debts. "I've begun doing the sums," Chandan answered.

That evening Kusum, an employee at the office, telephoned. "Didi, there was an order to open a new appointment file in your name," she said. "But I haven't submitted any application," Naina replied. "That's why I didn't record your consent. Some people here are saying you're coming back." Naina thanked her. "Keep your office records accurate. If you see something false entered in my name, send me written information." "Since Naresh Babu died, everyone has been afraid," Kusum said. "Not everyone understands whether changing even a single word on paper might be a crime." "When we don't understand, it's important to ask," Naina replied.

The following day Naina requested an appointment at the police station with Inspector Sujata. In a written application she described Ajit's visit and the principal conditions of the offer. "Were there witnesses?" Sujata asked. Naina named her mother and Chandan. "Do you have a copy of the paper?" "No. They didn't leave it with me." Sujata recorded exactly that. "This complaint will be investigated. The promises you report must be established by evidence. You were right not to accept unexplained money, but don't stop leaving your home out of fear."

In the police station veranda Naina met Rekha. Naresh's sister carried a folder of papers. She had come for a copy of her brother's death certificate. "Are things all right at home now?" Rekha asked. "It's hard to say that anything is all right," Naina replied. "Finding Poonam has at least allowed us to breathe a little." "My brother will never return," Rekha said. "But I won't let what he wrote down be destroyed." They sat for a while on the same bench. Their sorrows were different, but waiting for the truth was equally exhausting for them both.

Rekha said that Rambabu, an old colleague of Naresh's, had expressed a wish to meet her. "He's frightened. He says Bhaiya was terribly disturbed one day," Rekha explained. "Rambabu should tell the police directly what he saw," Naina said. "We ought not to add guesses in between." Rekha agreed. Naresh's papers had given the police a new direction, but each line needed its proper witness if it was to be understood. Rekha had kept her brother's old spectacle case in the folder; she would not give it to anyone.

On the way home Naina bought medicine for her mother and a plain account notebook for Chandan. Little money remained in her bag after paying for the medicine. A message arrived from Abhay: the government had released information about Poonam's rescue, but had kept her name and location confidential. Naina wrote back, 'Thank you for taking that care.' A little farther along, two young men were filling out forms at a stationery shop. "The examination date has changed again," one was saying. "We'll have to look for some other work too," the other replied. Naina stopped for a moment. The crisis that had brought her life to this point had not disappeared from the town.

After she returned that evening, an envelope came by post. It contained a printed letter bearing the organisation's name. According to it, Naina had voluntarily resigned, and no wages were due to her. The letter was dated the day before Ajit's visit. Naina read it without speaking. On one side was the temptation of a new job; on the other, the denial of wages already earned. Both were coming from the same office. She photographed the letter and kept the original safe along with its envelope. "What will you do now?" Saraswati asked. "Ask them to account for what they've written," Naina replied.

At dinner Chandan did not argue as he once had. He showed Naina his debt ledger: how much he owed to whom, and how he might repay it. Questions still remained about the source of some money. Naina told him that if any amount had come from illicit transport work, he must speak plainly about it to his lawyer and the investigating officer. "I won't say that everything has been put right," Chandan replied. "But I won't add any more lies." As she served lentils, their mother said, "Money keeps a house running, but a house cannot stand on the promise of lies." The words stayed with Naina all night.

When Madhavi Devi heard about Ajit's offer, she too came over in the afternoon. She worked at Saraswati's house two days a week. Sitting beside the hearth, she said, "Employers can use money to stop people from speaking. We have neither that money nor the comfort of silence." "How are things in your own house now?" Naina asked. "In the first year of prohibition, my husband's earnings stayed at home, and I bought my daughter new sandals," Madhavi said. "Now illicit liquor is sold for high prices again behind the lane. My husband has run up new debts. But I will say this too: not all men are the same. Some have left drink and are looking after their families." Naina thought the

distinction important. To tell the story of society's suffering, one need not make every person's experience identical.

Madhavi also spoke of her younger sister's son. He had been preparing for government examinations for two years, but once an examination was cancelled amid reports that its question paper had been leaked. Now he delivered parcels on a motorcycle. “He tells me, ‘Auntie, the qualifications I had on paper didn't put rice in the pot at home,’” Madhavi said. “There is no shame in any honest work,” Naina replied. “But trusting a job offer without checking it can be costly.” Madhavi put an old advertising leaflet into Naina's hand. “This promises a job away from home within a week. See whether it's genuine or the same trap again.” Having read it, Naina said that no money should be paid before the organisation's registration and terms had been examined.

Naina understood that even finding trustworthy information about jobs was a great struggle for the town's poorer families.

The next morning Naina went to Sujata's office to obtain a copy of her written application. The officer said formal information would be requested from the organisation about the offer, and Ajit's identity would also be checked. “Tell your family to record the time of any threatening telephone call,” Sujata added. “But it is for the judicial process to determine who is guilty.” Naina nodded. Then she asked whether Poonam might be put under pressure because of this. “Her protection is being dealt with separately,” Sujata said. “We shall not unnecessarily draw her into your complaint.”

Leaving the police station, Naina realised that rejecting the proposal had been a decision made in one moment, but she would have to live with its consequences every day. She had no job. The household's expenses had not diminished, and Ratan's influence had not disappeared. Even so, she had not consented to have a lie written beside her name. A rickshaw driver sat waiting for a passenger beside the road. Naina asked his fare, then looked at the money left in her pocket and decided to walk. Such want was not unfamiliar to her. The only difference in today's hardship was that she had chosen her answer for herself.

Chapter 47: Manoj's Arrest

Ever since Naresh Mandal's body was found beside the canal, the file on the vehicle on Sujata Kumari's desk had grown thicker by the day. First there was a vehicle number, then a repair bill, transport receipts, drivers' names and entries from the night checkpoint register. Today Arun Kumar arranged three records in order. "On the night Naresh Babu did not return home, this vehicle first left the warehouse and was seen again in the same direction before dawn," he said. "Seen—according to whose statement?" Sujata asked. "And how clearly was the number visible?" Arun replied that the accounts of the two witnesses had not yet been fully reconciled.

The first witness was Binod, who ran a tea stall near the canal bridge. When closing his shop at night, he had seen an old light goods vehicle standing there. He could not remember the driver's face, but the left rear lamp was broken and the load was covered with blue tarpaulin. The second witness was the watchman near the bridge, who had heard a vehicle turning around for a little while that night. "Two people's incomplete recollections do not combine to make a complete event," Sujata told Arun. "Look at the repair bill and the register."

The vehicle's ownership papers carried an old name, but the recent insurance particulars recorded its use by Virendra Construction Services. Chandan's name appeared for a few days in the list of workers who drove it; Manoj Sah's signature was on the transport authorisation. One bill recorded the replacement of the left lamp two days after the murder. The police sent a written notice to the mechanic who had issued the bill. "The date becomes useful only when the mechanic's recollection agrees with the actual payment record," Sujata said. She was weighing the documents, not the drama of the story.

Chandan came to the police station for further examination of his statement. He had already informed them that a lawyer would accompany him. Sujata asked when and where he had dropped Manoj on the night of the murder. "We left the warehouse at about half past nine," Chandan said. "Manoj told me to let him off before the bridge. I wasn't given any further work." "Where did you take the vehicle then?" "I left it at the goods-vehicle stand near the old mill. Then I rode home on my motorcycle." His estimate of the time in his first statement had

been different. Sujata recorded the discrepancy but did not scold him or try to force him to accept a particular time.

“Did you know what was inside the vehicle?” Sujata asked. Chandan lowered his eyes. “There were some crates. Manoj said they contained construction supplies. I had suspected beforehand that not everything was lawful, but I didn't open them.” Sujata said, “Suspicion and direct knowledge are two different things. If you knowingly carried prohibited goods, that will be examined separately. For now, tell us what you know about the night of Naresh Babu's death.” Chandan agreed. He understood that repeating the same vague answer out of fear would not make the truth clearer.

The repair shop's reply arrived that day. The bill did indeed relate to the same vehicle. The mechanic said that a man he knew as Manoj had brought in the complaint about the broken lamp. But he could not say whether the lamp had broken on the night of the murder or earlier. Payment had been in cash, and the receipt bore an ordinary signature acknowledging payment. Sujata did not enter this information as proof of a definite date. Evidence of Manoj's actual movements was needed first. The mechanic was instructed to hand over the original receipt for verification of the signature.

The financial investigation yielded another lead. Among Naresh's preserved papers was an entry for ‘special transport expenses’ in Manoj's name. Half the sum had been withdrawn two days before Naresh's death; the remainder was sent to an associated account on the third day. Ownership details of the account were formally requested from the bank. “This payment might have been for the murder,” Arun said. “It might,” Sujata replied, “but we have to prove it. Companies enter expenses for their own reasons too. When, on whose orders, and for what work—those are three questions that need answers.”

In the afternoon Naresh's sister Rekha arrived with an old notebook containing numbers written in her brother's hand. “These aren't household accounts,” she said. “Bhaiya used to keep a notebook like this after coming home from the office.” Sujata counted its pages, gave her a written receipt, and asked how long the notebook had been in her possession. Rekha said she had found it while clearing out the cupboard after his death, but had not known what in it might be useful. Sujata made it clear that the source of every entry would have to be examined.

A short sentence in the notebook read: ‘Unexpected meeting with Manoj near bridge; will not give original receipt.’ No date followed it,

only the day of the week. "Bhaiya said at home that week that some papers were going missing," Rekha said. Sujata asked her to write down what she remembered. "If you cannot recall the exact date, just write that it was around that week." Rekha agreed. Sujata treated the sentence in the notebook as evidence of possible contact before the murder, not proof that someone had witnessed a killing.

The police had previously sent Manoj two written notices to attend questioning. The first came back from his home address; to the second, his family replied that he had gone away on business. Virendra's office said Manoj was no longer a regular employee. A bank transaction and a new application to the transport department suggested his current whereabouts. Sujata had the papers needed to obtain permission from a senior officer prepared. "Being away does not prove guilt," she reminded Arun. "But it is proper to ask why he has avoided the summons."

Meanwhile, Manoj was preparing to open a small office at a transport yard at the other end of town. He had two vehicles belonging to an old acquaintance, although even their ownership was unclear. One day, over tea, he called Virendra. "All these papers they're asking for belong to your company. Why should I have to face them alone?" The reply came from the other end: "Speak to your lawyer. The company will deal with its own affairs." Manoj ended the call. For the first time he realised that those who had promised to stand by him in difficulty were closing their doors, one after another.

The next morning a police team reached the transport yard. Manoj was there. Sujata identified herself, explained the grounds for arrest, and began the necessary written procedures. At first Manoj protested, "I haven't run away anywhere. I would have come in for questioning of my own accord." "Notices were sent to you earlier," Sujata replied. "We are proceeding on the evidence presently available. You have the right to inform your family and your lawyer." Manoj fell silent. The labourers nearby tried to gather in a crowd, but the police asked them to keep their distance.

His brother's telephone number was written down. The time, place and grounds of arrest were recorded. Documents lawfully taken from his possession were listed and a receipt was issued. About a blue file Manoj said, "This concerns my private business. It has nothing to do with Naresh." "That will be examined," Sujata replied. "Your statement will be recorded too." The team brought him to the police station. On the way, Manoj kept asking what Ratan had said. No one answered his

question by guessing. He seemed to believe that merely invoking the name of his powerful supporter would change something. But when the vehicle stopped at the police station gate, nothing changed.

As news of the arrest spread, different claims appeared in the local media. Some wrote ‘Murderer Caught’; others announced ‘Entire Smuggling Ring Exposed’. Abhay told his editor that ‘Manoj Arrested in Murder Investigation’ would be the more accurate headline. “Will people read something that flat?” the editor asked. “This isn't entertainment for the dead man's family,” Abhay replied. “An arrest and a conviction are different things.” In the end a short report appeared confirming the arrest officially and mentioning the stage of the investigation and the accused's legal rights.

When the news reached Naresh's home, Rekha sank into a chair with exhaustion. “Will your brother get justice now?” her mother asked. After a pause Rekha answered, “One man has been arrested. We can call it justice when it is proved who did what.” Tears fell from her mother's eyes. “And if it wasn't this man?” she asked. Rekha took her hand. She was afraid the family would raise its hopes once more only to have them dashed again. Yet she saw no path other than continuing to investigate the truth.

Naina heard the news not from Abhay but from a shopkeeper in the neighbourhood. She immediately went inside to see Chandan. He was sitting by the window. “Manoj has been arrested,” she said. Chandan nodded. “I know.” “Are you afraid?” “Yes. He can say that I drove the vehicle. That's true. But I did nothing to Naresh Babu.” “Don't change your statement,” Naina said. “Say only as much as you know.” “Do you believe me?” Chandan asked. “I want what you say to agree with what the investigation establishes,” Naina replied. “Trust doesn't mean blind support.”

At the police station Manoj asked to see his lawyer and was given the opportunity. During the first formal questioning he acknowledged that orders for special transport had been issued under his signature, but maintained that he did not know the contents of every consignment. He also admitted that he had argued with Naresh one day about the accounts. “On what basis are you accusing me of violence?” he asked. “The use of the vehicle on the night of the murder, financial transactions and witness statements are being examined,” Sujata replied. “You may give your answers.” No one attempted to force a confession out of him.

Arun noticed that parts of the accused's account conflicted with earlier documents. Manoj said that the vehicle had remained in the warehouse on the night of the murder, but the vehicle register recorded its departure. Manoj said the register might have been filled in incorrectly. Sujata ordered a separate statement from the employee who had made the entry. "We shall examine the source of the papers that go against him, and also the ones in his favour," she said. For an accusation to stand firmly, contrary possibilities had to be tested first.

Manoj's brother arrived at the police station in the afternoon, furious. "My brother has been arrested because of Ratan's name," he said. "Have you received written information about his arrest?" Sujata asked. "Yes, but people are gathering outside our home." Sujata gave him the necessary information and told him to make a written complaint about any threats or threatening crowd. "I am not defending a crime," Manoj's brother said, "but he has legal rights too." "He does," Sujata replied. "And those rights must be protected." The exchange did not quiet the uproar outside the station, but the work within continued according to procedure.

By evening an internal report showed that the payment called 'night security expenses' in the transport account was far greater than Manoj's regular wages. Virendra's office said that the amount covered the additional risks of transporting the vehicle and goods. Naresh had questioned the reason for that payment in his notebook. "This financial connection suggests a possible motive," Sujata told Arun, "but the direct question of who committed the murder remains unanswered." She reread the inspection report from near the canal and the available medical findings. The inquiry into the circumstances of death had not suddenly come to an end.

A fresh notice was sent to Ratan for questioning. His lawyer replied in writing that, as the owner, he did not personally supervise daily transport operations and knew nothing about private disputes between employees. Sujata recorded acknowledgement of the letter and asked for it to be compared with the dates of instructions written in Naresh's notebook. It would be wrong to halt an investigation because a person was publicly respected; it would be equally wrong to reach an immediate conclusion against him without sufficient grounds. Ratan's letter was another document whose truth required testing.

Meanwhile, Vibha sat alone in the large sitting room of her house. Outside, two reporters were trying to take photographs. A maid asked

whether to close the gate. “Close it, but don't quarrel with anybody,” Vibha said. On the telephone Ratan said only, “Manoj has been caught. Don't give anyone the papers in the house.” “Anything in my name that is lawfully required for the investigation will not be hidden from the law,” Vibha replied. Ratan raised his voice, but Vibha ended the call. The mistrust that had grown during the later years of their marriage had now become a question of financial responsibility.

Kiran received the news of Manoj's arrest at advocate Malati Sinha's office. She had brought a list of files she had signed herself. “This arrest doesn't mean that your responsibility has ended,” Malati said. “Give the information you have in its correct sequence.” “And if my statement brings threats from the owner?” Kiran asked. “There are ways to request protection. Fear does not make it right to add lies or conceal facts,” Malati replied. Kiran turned the pages of her diary again. Ratan's proposed branch, the altered lists and the original receipts Naresh had requested all needed to be set down with dates.

Among the labourers still working in the transport yard after the arrest, some thought Manoj innocent; others spoke of his harsh treatment. Fakira, an elderly employee, said, “Two months of my wages are still owing. I don't know whether the owner will change, but the cooking fire at home will have to burn tomorrow too.” Imran, a younger worker, replied, “The investigators have asked me for copies of receipts. I'll give them. But if I leave this job, who will buy Mother's medicine?” None of the reports of an arrest contained answers to those questions.

As Sujata returned from the office at night, she remembered something her father used to say: ‘When a name is written at the police station, that person's family too stays awake all night.’ She did not want sympathy for the accused to make her lax about the law, nor did she want a family's sorrow to decide someone else's guilt. Three scenes—Naresh's sister holding the notebook, Chandan's trembling testimony and Manoj's brother's anger—reminded her of the same thing. An officer's work was to gather evidence for justice, not put private feelings in place of judgment. She prepared the next morning's list of questions again.

The following morning Sujata checked arrangements for presenting Manoj before the judicial authority within the prescribed time. The period of custody and the next legal steps were being recorded in writing. Manoj's lawyer had made the necessary applications. Sujata told

the prosecution officer to set out both the strengths and weaknesses of the available evidence plainly. “I do not want the court to make a decision under pressure from the news,” she said explicitly. “Naresh's family's suffering will be respected through a just investigation.” Manoj's hesitant answers remained in the record, but they did not automatically establish his guilt.

That day Naresh's mother lit a lamp in the small shrine at home. Rekha tried to show her a newspaper cutting, but her mother said, “I don't want to read it. You just tell the truth.” Rekha folded the cutting and put it between the pages of her notebook. Outside came the voices of children returning from school. The emptiness left by her brother was still as immense as before, but at the doorway the police receipts and copies of documents were now arranged in order. The conviction that one day their significance would be tested in court helped her remain standing.

In the evening Sujata gave her assistant a fresh list of work: verify the original vehicle register, establish the sources of payments in the accounts, compare witness statements, examine the handwriting in Naresh's notebook, and obtain Kiran's available records by lawful means. Reading the list, Arun asked, “Will action be taken against Ratan now?” “Decisions will be made on the evidence as it emerges,” Sujata replied. “In both Naresh's death and the exploitation of Poonam, the part played by whoever is responsible will have to be established separately.” Darkness was falling outside. The crowd at the police station gate had thinned, but the real difficulties of the investigation still lay ahead.

Chapter 48: Before the Magistrate

Kiran slept little that night. After meeting advocate Malati Sinha, she had made two piles on the table at home: papers she had signed herself, and orders about which she had received only verbal information. In a third, smaller folder she kept Ratan's messages, the times of calls from unfamiliar numbers and notes about the receipts Naresh had demanded. She knew that, to escape the shame of her private relationship, she had often failed to read documents properly. She might now have to pay a price for that carelessness in the legal investigation as well. Yet one decision was clear in her mind: she would no longer lie at another person's bidding.

A message arrived from Dinesh in the morning. “Have you found the original loan agreement?” he asked. Kiran replied that a certified copy had been requested from the bank and would take a few days. Dinesh wrote another question: “Are you going to the police today?” Kiran stared at the screen for a long time. At last she typed, “Yes. I need to put what I know on record.” Dinesh did not reply. There was still no promise of reconciliation in their marriage. Kiran understood that answering questions about rights and responsibility truthfully could not guarantee the restoration of their broken trust, but refusing further falsehoods was a necessary first step.

Kiran reached Malati Sinha's office on time. The lawyer first explained that police questioning, a witness statement and a statement voluntarily recorded before a magistrate had different legal characters. “Don't understate your role or exaggerate it. Keep what you saw yourself separate from what you heard from others,” Malati said. “What if papers carrying my signature turn out to be part of a crime?” Kiran asked. “Then the facts and circumstances will have to be examined,” the lawyer replied. “Simply telling the truth does not automatically declare you innocent, but telling falsehoods will make the situation more complicated.”

Kiran opened her old diary. On one page, beside Ratan's name, the words ‘Naresh—asked for original receipt’ were written in red ink. Beside the date was a reference to the day when Ratan's presence at the office had been concealed. “That day I really did tell Naresh Babu to seek the owner's approval,” Kiran said. “The owner was in the office, but the

employees were told he had left town." "Did you see him yourself?" Malati asked. "Yes. He was in the back room." The lawyer marked this detail separately.

At the police station Sujata Kumari had Kiran's arrival entered in writing. Malati accompanied her. Kiran looked exhausted, but chose her own seat and asked for water. Sujata explained that possible financial irregularities involving Kiran herself were also under investigation, so she must understand the legal significance of whatever she said. "I won't run from responsibility for what I did," Kiran replied. "But I will tell you where the documents relating to the owner's instructions should be." Sujata ordered that Kiran's original appointment, the authority attached to her position and specimens of her signature be obtained through the proper procedure.

The first question concerned Poonam's appointment. Kiran said that Poonam's application had originally been on the office's ordinary training list. Later it was transferred to the list for an outside workplace on Ratan's special instructions. "Did you decide to transfer it?" Sujata asked. "No," Kiran answered. "But I forwarded the list after the order reached the office. I saw the owner's signature on the original letter, though I didn't keep that letter myself." "Where is it now?" "It should be in the organisation's records. The copy recovered during the investigation will have to be compared with the original."

Sujata showed her the entry for outside training expenses in Naresh's notebook. Kiran recognised the words. "When was this item approved?" Kiran said that Ratan had ordered three separate payments to be shown under a single heading. One was said to be for actual training, another for travel and accommodation, while the third had no clear receipt. "Did you sign for that third amount?" "I did. I ought to have questioned it then. I accepted what the owner said." Kiran's voice grew heavy as she admitted this. She did not minimise the part she had actually played.

When Kusum's name came up, Kiran said at once, "She is an ordinary office employee. She worked for her wages. She wasn't told about every decision." "We'll take her statement separately," Sujata replied. "Tell us only what you know yourself." Kiran said that Kusum had once questioned an oral order to add a new name to the original list. Kiran had herself permitted the name to be added without seeing the original order. "That was my mistake," she said. "I invoked the owner's name, but did not verify the instruction." Silence remained in the room for a while.

Malati listened but did not answer in Kiran's place. When the questions moved towards her personal relationship, she asked only for its legal relevance to be made clear. Without evasion, Kiran said that she had been in an extramarital relationship with Ratan, and that this was why she had failed to question his office orders adequately. "That was my personal wrongdoing," she said. "But I did not personally see him instruct anyone to commit murder because of that relationship." Sujata nodded. "A private relationship may provide context for a possible motive, but a murder allegation requires separate evidence."

Kiran remembered an important incident concerning Manoj. A few days before Naresh died, Manoj had gone into Ratan's back room behind a closed door. He came out carrying a blue folder. Kiran had seen the folder but did not know what it contained. Manoj had said, "Naresh Babu asks too many questions." She had not clearly heard Ratan's answer. "Only later did I think those words sounded dangerous," Kiran said. "At the time I thought it was a quarrel about accounts." "Did you see anyone strike another person?" Sujata asked. "No."

During the questioning Sujata gave Kiran a chance to rest. She went out and stood on the veranda. A small crowd of employees waited outside; one young woman had come to apply for her unpaid wages. Kiran recognised her: Shyamali's niece, who did cleaning work at the office. At the sight of Kiran the young woman stepped back a little. Kiran realised that to this family she was not merely a manager whose name had appeared in discussions of a crime, but a representative of the institution that had withheld their wages. "Have they accepted your application?" Kiran asked softly. "Yes, but when will I get my money?" the young woman replied. Kiran had no answer she could promise.

That afternoon Sujata began the process of matching copies of the available records. The source of every list Kiran mentioned was noted. Bank documents, specimen signatures and altered appointment lists were identified one by one. Some dates remained vague in Kiran's memory. She made clear that she remembered the week, not the exact day. Sujata ordered approximate dates to be recorded as such, not announced as certain. She knew that in a criminal investigation a confidently stated wrong date could sometimes do more damage than an honest admission of uncertainty.

Kiran told the police that Ratan had tempted her with responsibility for a branch in another town. During the preceding week, a call from an unknown number had used words that sounded like a threat. "Did you

recognise the voice?" Sujata asked. "No. It was a man's voice; that is all I can say." Kiran had recorded the time and number of the call. Sujata received the details but did not attach anyone's name by guesswork. "There are limits to the technical verification of such a call," she said. "If another threat comes, report it at once."

The next day Kiran was formally informed about recording a statement before a judicial magistrate. Malati again explained that such a statement had to be voluntary, not an answer shaped by anyone else's coaching or pressure. "If you are uncertain about something, say you are uncertain," she repeated. "Should I speak about my own mistakes too?" Kiran asked. "I won't advise you to conceal what is legally relevant and within your knowledge," Malati replied. "Understand your rights and possible liabilities before making the next decision."

Many people waited for their own cases in the courthouse veranda. Kiran sat in the queue, listening for notice of her turn to enter. She felt that she must now speak for herself.

After the preliminary procedures, the magistrate asked Kiran whether she wished to give her statement voluntarily. The possible legal consequences and the absence of pressure were explained. Kiran answered that she wanted to tell what she knew. She was not hurried. When Ratan's name came up, she paused. The magistrate gave her time. "I am afraid that I will have to bear the blame for the mistakes I made," Kiran said, "but that someone will also blame me for orders I was never given. I want to keep those two things separate."

In her statement Kiran gave her firsthand information about the altered list containing Poonam's original application, the separate heads of payment, the original receipts Naresh had demanded and Ratan's verbal instructions. She said she had not seen an argument between Manoj and Naresh, but had heard Manoj refer to Naresh's questions. She did not know what was inside the blue folder. She had never heard an explicit statement that Ratan wanted Naresh dead. No gap was filled with a conjecture. Precisely because of that care, the limits of what the statement could establish were plain.

Asked about her signature, Kiran said she had approved some payments without reading all the attachments. "What was your role in that process?" the magistrate asked. "I was the manager. Checking the papers was my job. In the name of trust, I failed to carry out my responsibility." She could not place all the blame for her own conduct on someone else. The magistrate conducted the recording of the

statement according to procedure. At its conclusion the sentences Kiran wanted corrected were examined carefully. In one place, 'gave the order' was clarified as 'said so orally'.

Outside the court, Malati told her that giving a statement was not the end of an investigation but an important stage in its beginning. "Independent confirmation of what you've said will be sought. You'll also have to answer the financial questions involving you," she said. "Could I be arrested?" Kiran asked. "Legal action will depend on facts and evidence. I am here to protect your rights, but I cannot guarantee an outcome in advance." Kiran sat on the veranda for a while. She felt both relief and fear. Neither feeling cancelled the other.

That same day, part of the certified record of Poonam's statement was duly received by the investigating team in Navgarh. Sujata compared it with Naresh's papers and Kiran's information. In the week Poonam had begun her journey, a payment for outside accommodation had been recorded. The signature on its receipt was unclear. "Which allegations against whom does Poonam's statement support?" Sujata asked Arun. He made a list: false appointment, withheld wages, restrictions on movement. "And murder?" Sujata asked. "Not directly, from this statement," Arun answered.

That day Poonam met the doctor again at the assistance centre. Even after completing her statement, weakness and sleeplessness sometimes returned. Seema said that the medical clearance necessary for travel was being arranged. "How much have you told my family?" Poonam asked. "Only as much as you approved," Seema replied. Poonam felt at ease. She wanted her statement to form part of the judicial process, not every sorrow of her life to become material for the town's gossip.

In Navgarh, Abhay heard that Kiran had gone to court, but did not know the confidential details of her statement. A colleague said that someone was claiming Kiran had revealed everything against the owner. "Write only what is officially known," Abhay replied. "Don't quote from a statement no one has verified." His report said only that a new judicial step had taken place in the financial crime investigation and that questioning of relevant persons was continuing. The editor had initially wanted a more elaborate headline, but Abhay explained that publishing an unauthorised account could put pressure on a witness.

Naina read the news and telephoned Kusum. "Is Kiran Madam all right?" "She didn't come to the office today," Kusum replied. "Everyone says the police will arrest her." "Don't repeat people's guesses," Naina

said. “If wage records are being investigated, keep proof of the work you did.” Kusum's voice shook. “My name appears on two lists too, Didi.” “That is all the more reason to say accurately what you know. Don't take their blame upon yourself, and don't hide what you did either,” Naina said.

Vibha received two certified copies of payments from the bank. The first bore her genuine signature approving payment; on the date of the second she had been out of town. She compared it with her travel documents. Ratan telephoned again. “There's no need to give the police the papers from our house,” he said. “My name is on those papers. I shall protect my financial rights myself,” Vibha replied. “You are treating me as an enemy,” Ratan said. “I was your wife,” Vibha answered calmly, “but that does not turn a false authorisation into a genuine one.” After the call she prepared to submit the necessary copies through lawful channels.

Sujata informed Naresh's sister Rekha that some new financial records were being verified. “Is the motive for the murder clear now?” Rekha asked. “The evidence shows that Naresh had questioned the accounts and that some people were uncomfortable with those questions,” Sujata replied. “But the order to murder him, the actual sequence of events and the roles of those involved still have to be established separately.” “I will wait,” Rekha said. “But I don't want any false stain left on my brother's name.” Sujata assured her that the verification of each document was being recorded.

Meanwhile, Manoj's lawyer challenged some of the grounds for the police's financial allegations. He argued that the money was a routine payment for company transport, and that attributing a criminal purpose to it was premature. The investigating team placed his objection on record. “If it was a routine company payment, for what work, for which customer, and against which receipt?” Sujata told Arun. “We shall look for the answers.” That day a bank officer supplied a fresh certified statement for comparing dates. It agreed with part of Kiran's account, but did not yet prove the whole scheme.

Near evening Sujata, Arun and the government legal officer sat down to examine three case files separately. The first concerned Naresh's murder: the vehicle, possible motive, witness testimony and medical findings. The second concerned employment fraud and exploitation of workers: statements of victims including Poonam, appointment letters and payments. The third concerned suspected illicit liquor and financial

protection: the warehouse, receipts, checkpoint registers and the movement of smuggled goods. “The same names may appear in different files,” Sujata said, “but we must not fill a weakness in one with conjectures borrowed from another.” Such discipline made the investigation seem slow, but it was the source of a case's real strength.

Analysing Kiran's statement, the legal officer said that independent confirmation would require the original approval letter, office attendance records and a chain of bank payments. “Prepare whatever orders are required to obtain these lawfully,” Sujata said. “Add the list of Vibha's documents too.” “When will Ratan make his next statement?” Arun asked. “When the questions are ready and the legal procedures are complete,” Sujata said. “Fame and pressure will not set the pace of the investigation.” One person had already been arrested; but in establishing the grounds for action against another, every new document mattered.

When Kiran returned home, the evening light fell on the hook where Dinesh used to hang his bag. Nothing hung there now. She lit the stove and put rice on to cook for one person instead of two. She wanted to telephone Dinesh, but did not send a long message defending herself. She wrote only the position concerning the loan papers: ‘I'll send you the certified copy as soon as I receive it.’ She understood now that a single statement could not make amends for the guilt she bore in their relationship. But today she had not allowed private shame to become a means of concealing public facts.

When Abhay came to Naina's home, Saraswati Devi asked, “After all these papers and visits to the police and courts, will justice be done?” “It's hard to say yet, Auntie,” Abhay replied. “But the statements being recorded and the papers being examined will one day be tested in court.” “It comforts me to know that Poonam has had the chance to tell her story in her own voice,” Naina said. Chandan listened in silence. He too was anxious about what might follow from his statement, but was beginning to understand that no one in this house saw justice merely as a means to their own advantage.

Late that night, before going home, Sujata reread the list of new documents on her desk. Since Manoj's arrest more people had come forward with information; some offered genuine facts, others repeated things they had heard. Kiran's statement before the magistrate might clarify certain dates and the sources of instructions. Vibha's bank records, Naresh's notebook and Poonam's statement revealed different portions of the same financial system from different directions. Even so,

Sujata wrote in the final line: 'Independent evidence required to establish the accused person's role.' She closed the file. The next day she would face the question of fresh action concerning Ratan Singh.

PART FIVE

THE SURVIVORS

Chapter 49: Ratan's Arrest

When Sujata Kumari reached her office early in the morning, a slip of red paper lay on top of the three files on her desk. Arun had brought certified copies of several bank statements during the night. The payments that Naresh Mandal had entered in his accounts under the single heading 'external facilities' turned out to have different actual recipients. Money leaving Ratan's organisation had first entered the account of Virendra Construction Services; part of it had subsequently reached the transport operation overseen by Manoj. One payment coincided with the date on which Poonam and other workers had travelled. Sujata struck out the word 'proof', which someone had hastily written beside the figures. The numbers showed a connection; the purpose behind it had yet to be established.

'The date on this bank statement matches the date of the special authorisation mentioned in Kiran's statement,' Arun said. 'Whose signature appears on the original instruction?' Sujata asked. 'The office file carries Ratan Singh's abbreviated signature, and the bank copy is certified.' 'We shall compare the two. The examination report concerning the signature has not yet come,' Sujata said. Arun placed another sheet before her. It contained Naresh's written request to stop the payment. Below it was a management note: 'Continue the payment.' Sujata remembered what Rekha had said when handing over her brother's notebook: 'My brother never let a paper go.' Little by little, the importance of that scrupulous habit was becoming apparent.

An important development came from the examination of the vehicle. The mechanic who had replaced the rear light of the old goods carrier seen near the canal bridge finally appeared with his original register of bills. According to him, Manoj's men had had the vehicle repaired at night, although the bill was written the following day. His recollection was checked against the payment entry and the invoice for the part. During the examination of the vehicle's interior, samples had been sent to the laboratory for comparison with certain minute traces associated with Naresh's clothing. The limits of any conclusion were clear: the fact that a vehicle had been near the scene did not, by itself, make anyone a murderer. Nevertheless, the gap between Manoj's earlier account of the vehicle and the documentary record was widening.

The employee at the bank branch who had supplied the certified statement drew the investigators' attention to something important. A payment from the company's regular account did not mean that its ultimate recipient had necessarily been engaged in company business. The further course of some of the money was recorded at another bank. Arun began the lawful procedure for obtaining the papers from that branch. It was becoming clear that the single entry 'payment to contractor' concealed a division into numerous smaller transactions. Naresh had been trying to reconcile those sums. It was increasingly difficult to dismiss his persistence as an ordinary office quarrel.

Sujata sat down with the legal officer. Before them were the papers relating to Manoj's arrest, the legally available portions of Kiran's judicial statement, Vibha's bank documents, and several independent records corroborating Poonam's testimony. 'We must state the grounds for arresting Ratan in precise terms,' she said. 'Being a businessman, having a personal relationship with someone, or seeing one's name in the news proves no crime. But the orders and sources of payment we have discovered raise matters that require investigation. There are also recorded concerns about the destruction of papers and attempts to threaten witnesses.' The legal officer checked the prescribed procedure and the list of rights to be observed. They agreed that action would be taken only after the requisite authorisation, entries and formalities had been completed.

At that hour Ratan Singh sat in the private office within his house. Awards and certificates of appreciation adorned the wall; the day's newspaper lay open on the desk. His organisation's name had appeared once again in the leading report. He folded the paper. Virendra was saying over the telephone, 'The police have got hold of the documents. I shall keep my accounts separate.' Ratan's voice hardened. 'Your vehicles were running. You will have to answer for those accounts.' Virendra fell silent for a moment, then said, 'The vehicle was mine; the written copy of the instruction was yours. Those are two different things.' The call ended. For the first time Ratan understood that the very people with whom he had shared the profits were now shutting their doors against him in adversity.

Vibha was seated at the other end of the drawing room. 'Make arrangements to withdraw the bank documents you gave them,' Ratan told her. Vibha raised her eyes. 'I did not fabricate those documents. My name was used, and I have the right to know why.' 'Do you understand

the price of letting the affairs of this house reach outsiders?' Ratan demanded. 'They would have remained household affairs if they had been spoken of within this house,' Vibha replied. 'Why does my name appear on a paper I never signed?' Ratan gave her no direct answer. Silence settled between them on the veranda. Vibha rose and went to her room. She did not wish to see her husband arrested; she merely wanted to regain authority over her own name and her own life.

In her room Vibha opened an old cupboard. She had still kept the first ledger from the little business Ratan had run at the beginning of their marriage. In those days they had counted the shop's daily takings together. Later the business grew and the papers in the house multiplied, but Vibha was kept farther and farther from every decision. She was asked for her signature as though it were a mere formality. Now, looking at copies of transactions made in her name, she understood what that distance had meant. Whether her husband went to prison or was released on bail was for the courts to determine; she decided that she would never again sign anything without reading it. The decision arose less from anger than from the exhaustion of years of humiliation.

Before noon a police vehicle arrived at the gate. Sujata was there herself, accompanied by a woman officer and other staff. When Ratan came out, he first telephoned his lawyer. Sujata clearly informed him of the grounds for the action and of his rights. 'The required legal procedure having been completed, you are being arrested in connection with this case. You may remain in contact with your advocate; please tell us if you need medical attention,' she said. Ratan asked, 'Have you already decided that I am guilty?' 'An arrest and a conviction are different things,' Sujata replied. 'The court will decide. At present this is action taken under the law on the basis of the investigation.'

Before the arrest procedure began, an employee came running from the rear veranda. He had heard that some office papers were to be sent to a safe place. 'Who told you that?' Sujata asked calmly. The employee was uncertain, but his statement was recorded. The officer explained that records covered by a lawful order must be produced in accordance with the rules. Ratan immediately objected, 'There are personal belongings here as well.' 'Your rights in personal property will be respected,' Sujata replied. 'Every item obtained will be listed, with its purpose recorded and a receipt issued.' This care somewhat eased the family's fear.

A few employees and neighbours had gathered outside the gate. Some raised their mobile phones; others called their children indoors. Ratan's

security guard tried to raise a commotion, but Sujata told him to remain calm. ‘Do not obstruct the proceedings, and there is no need to humiliate anyone,’ she said. Ratan wished to hand a small bag of papers to his lawyer, but the officer first explained the examination required by law. A list of the necessary items was prepared, and receipts acknowledging their collection were issued. Vibha watched without moving her gaze. What she felt was not surprise but the sense that something had broken within her. So many things she had silently endured in the name of protecting her family had now come and stood openly at the threshold.

As he entered the vehicle, Ratan looked once at the high gate of his house. Politicians, traders and officials of the town had once arrived through that gate to receive his hospitality. Today it was the scene of a legal notice being pronounced. He wanted to tell Vibha, ‘Everything will be all right,’ but the look on her face stopped the words. She wanted no more assurances whose foundation might again prove false. When the gate closed, Vibha told the domestic worker, ‘Put all the papers inside in proper order. No one is to destroy anything.’ The awards on the wall still gleamed, but their brightness offered no answer to the difficult questions now facing the household.

The time of Ratan's arrival at the police station was entered in the record. His lawyer came and sought information about the reasons for arrest, access to documents and the allegations. Sujata answered in accordance with the legal procedure. Someone proposed seating Ratan face to face with Manoj to exert informal pressure, but Sujata refused. ‘Ask whatever has to be asked in an orderly fashion. Violating the rights of witnesses and accused persons will not lead us to the truth,’ she said. Ratan assigned responsibility for several payment decisions to his employees. When the original authorisation was raised, he said he would not answer without seeing the papers. That request, too, was recorded.

Arun re-examined a copy of an old register received from Bhanu Pratap's police outpost. The timings on two pages had been corrected in a different ink. The outpost employee said that the time of the night patrol had been corrected afterwards. ‘Ask for the reason for the correction in writing,’ Sujata said. ‘Do not declare corruption merely because the ink differs.’ Rumours were also circulating about calls from Jagdish, the politician associated with that outpost. After consultation, Sujata settled on the procedure for making the necessary records available to a separate investigating authority. The investigation's reach

was expanding, but each new name also increased the obligation to establish responsibility properly.

Outside, the crowd of reporters grew. Abhay paused while composing the opening line of his report. The newspaper's editor asked over the phone, 'We need a big headline. "The City's Great Benefactor Caught"—will that do?' 'Write that he has been arrested,' Abhay replied. 'Neither "benefactor" nor "criminal" is a judicial finding. We shall state clearly what is alleged in the investigation.' The editor was impatient, but Abhay refused to turn verified information into theatre. His report explained the links among Manoj's earlier arrest, the workers' statements and the inquiry into the organisation's finances; he did not publish Poonam's private medical details.

A colleague showed Abhay a message circulating with Naina's photograph, claiming that she had taken money from Ratan's office and gone silent. Abhay did not laugh on reading it. 'That is an outright lie,' he said. 'Before making news of anything circulating on social media, find its original source.' The colleague asked whether Abhay's romantic relationship with Naina might call his impartiality into question. Abhay acknowledged that, because of their personal connection, another editorial colleague should independently verify his reporting. He did not want to conceal facts in order to protect Naina's name; he wanted his reports to be trustworthy without depending on anyone's personal relationships.

Naina learned of the arrest from Kusum's telephone call. 'Everyone is making a commotion at the office,' Kusum said. 'Some say we shall never get our wages now; others say the owner will open the business again under another name.' 'Do you have your appointment letters, wage receipts and proof of attendance?' Naina asked. 'Some of them; others are in the owner's cupboard,' Kusum replied. Naina did not advise her to break open a lock or steal papers. 'Keep safe whatever copies you lawfully possess. Make a written request for the rest. An owner's arrest does not extinguish the employees' rights,' she said. As soon as the call ended, Saraswati Devi asked, 'Has Ratan been caught?' 'Yes,' Naina answered, 'but the case will now go to court.'

Chandan remained silent on hearing the news. He remembered Manoj saying that night, 'The vehicle is empty. Come along.' He had not asked what an empty vehicle meant, but the events that followed had taught him the weight of his silence. 'Didi, shall I go to the police again?' he asked. 'Tell them truthfully whatever new thing you

remember,' Naina said. 'But do not add guesses to protect yourself.' Chandan opened his old diary. The name of a place was written there incompletely. He could not remember whether it had been on the vehicle's route or somewhere he had heard mentioned in Manoj's telephone conversation. On a separate sheet he recorded it, together with that uncertainty. Once he had concealed the truth for fear of being implicated in a crime; now he also wanted to avoid dressing imagination up as truth.

Chandan's creditor telephoned again that day. 'Your boss has been arrested. How am I to get my money?' he demanded. Chandan replied that the debt he had personally incurred was a separate account; the criminal investigation did not release him from it. The creditor advised him to find other work but refused to reduce the interest. 'I never thought one wrongful transport job could affect so many days of our lives,' Chandan told Naina. She supported him but made it clear that postponing another search for work was no solution. Their mother's empty strip of medicine lay on the table; the real clock of a household did not stop to await the clock of the courts.

When a colleague came hurrying to tell Naresh's sister Rekha of the arrest, she was serving rice to her mother. 'Now justice has been done,' the colleague said. Rekha set the plate down. 'My brother will not come back. And the case has yet to be proved,' she answered. Her mother asked, 'Have they written my son's name correctly on all those papers?' Rekha nodded. There was no triumph for her to celebrate. Her only relief was that Naresh's questions could no longer be dismissed as some ordinary dispute in an office.

Rekha spoke to Shanti, an old colleague of her brother's. Shanti said Naresh had not raised his questions to bring the office into disrepute. 'He used to say, "Whose money was collected in the name of jobs? Every last account must be clear,"' she recalled. Rekha asked whether she had told the police. Shanti said that if summoned for a formal statement, she would tell them precisely what she had heard herself. Rekha did not ask her to exaggerate anything in her brother's favour. That was one stern way of protecting his memory: refusing to sustain it with lies.

At the assistance centre, a woman officer brought Poonam the news. 'There has been an arrest in the investigation,' she said. 'Some documents are also being corroborated in the light of your statement.' 'Does that mean we shall receive our unpaid wages?' Poonam asked. The officer explained clearly that compensation and the recovery of

outstanding wages involved separate procedures. Poonam lowered her head. 'I don't want people celebrating in my name,' she said. 'I want a safe way home and my documents back.' Seema told her the time of her next scheduled medical appointment. For Poonam, that small and ordinary certainty today meant more than the arrest of Ratan, far away from her.

That evening Sujata called the three investigation teams together again. The papers concerning the exploitation of workers, the file on Naresh's murder and the financial links in the illicit liquor trade were laid on separate tables. Virendra's name also appeared in legitimate accounts relating to the construction business; he could not be treated as an accused merely because of an association. Certain telephone contacts involving Jagdish Chaudhary were mentioned, but what had been said in those calls was not known. Irregular entries in the register of Bhanu Pratap's outpost still needed scrutiny. 'Ratan's arrest has not halved our work,' Sujata said. 'Each allegation now needs its own independent examination.' Arun agreed.

At night Ratan's advocate gave him the necessary advice about the process of applying for bail and the documents relating to the charges. 'What if Kiran changes her statement?' Ratan asked at one point. 'Do not even think of pressuring anyone to change a statement,' the advocate replied. 'Your defence must rest on the available evidence and the law.' Ratan fell silent. Among all the papers now surrounding him were some that he himself had signed, and others for which he had put his employees' names forward. Old photographs of his public honours shone in his memory, but the questions before him were simple: who had given the instructions, and what had followed from them? It was becoming harder and harder to answer.

The next morning buses ran as before on Navgarh's roads, street stalls opened and unemployed young people stood in queues. Ratan's picture appeared on news posters, but the applicants gathered outside the Nai Disha Employment Centre were asking about the money shown on their receipts. 'The owner has gone to jail. Where has my thirty thousand gone?' a woman demanded. At her question, an elderly employee's eyes filled with tears. The town had heard the news of an arrest; the daily accounting of justice and ordinary life still lay ahead. In her office Sujata opened the list of inquiries for the following day. The first entry concerned the evidence needed to reconstruct the events of Naresh's murder.

Chapter 50: The Truth of the Murder

On the day after Ratan's arrest, Sujata Kumari opened the file on Naresh's murder separately. The records of employment fraud and illicit transport suggested possible motives for murder, but they did not yet form a complete picture of what had happened. When had Naresh left home? Whom had he met? Where had he been injured? How had his body reached the canal bank? Without answers to these four questions, the case could prove weak in court. ‘We have arrested the accused,’ Sujata told Arun, ‘but our investigation must now be more careful than ever. However attractive an inference may be, we must never give it the place of proof.’ Arun began constructing a chronology on the first page. In their effort to answer the questions troubling Naresh's family, the difficulties of the investigation were coming clearly into view.

Naresh's sister Rekha was called again. This time the police asked not for sensational details but for the smallest particulars of his ordinary routine. Rekha said her brother had spoken of coming home that evening, but his tone had changed after a telephone call in the afternoon. ‘He said he had to meet someone and take the original receipt for a payment,’ she said. ‘Whom?’ Sujata asked. ‘He didn't give a name. When I asked again, he said it was an office matter.’ Rekha was scrupulous about the limits of her memory. She remembered the colour of the shirt her brother wore that day, but not every word spoken on the telephone. Sujata recorded that distinction too.

The company's old watchman, Dinanath, had lived in fear for a month. After Naresh's body was found, he had said in his statement only that he had heard the sound of a vehicle. Now, following Manoj's arrest, he came to the police station of his own accord. He held a folded gamchha in his hand and was afraid of being seen. ‘My son works for that company on contract,’ he said first. ‘If I speak, he may lose his job.’ Sujata told him the available legal arrangements and measures for witness protection would be explained to him, but she could not give him false promises of safety. Dinanath remained silent for a long time. Then he said, ‘I did not tell you everything I saw. That was my mistake.’

Before leaving for the station, Dinanath had sat in his house for a long while. ‘Why are you going now?’ his wife had asked. ‘So many days have passed since it happened.’ ‘I was frightened then,’ he answered. ‘But

his sister goes to the police station every day. Am I to keep hiding what I saw?' His wife did not stop him, though she made her anxiety about their son's employment plain. Dinanath took out an old duty slip wrapped in his gamchha, showing his hours on the night in question. He knew the paper did not answer every question, but it offered something against which his memory might be checked.

Dinanath said that the light in the warehouse's rear room had remained on late that night. Naresh had gone inside with a file in his hand. Some time later he heard a loud noise and a voice demanding, 'Give back the receipt.' He approached the door, but Manoj shoved him away. 'When I went near again, Naresh Babu was lying on the floor,' Dinanath said. 'Manoj told me, "He slipped and fell. Go outside." I saw an injury on his head.' 'Did you actually see Manoj strike him?' Sujata asked. Dinanath lowered his head. 'No. I heard the noise and saw the injury afterwards. I did not see the blow with my own eyes.'

The statement mattered, but it required caution. The police sent samples from the old scene for further laboratory examination. The rear room of the warehouse had been repainted, but traces of old biological material were found in the joint between wall and floor behind a heavy cupboard. Their origin could not be established without scientific tests. 'Where memory is incomplete, we must await scientific findings,' Sujata said. The discrepancy between Dinanath's earlier statement and his new one was also recorded, so that the defence could question his credibility. Standing with the truth did not mean running away from difficult questions.

Manoj's advocate was present when the police asked questions arising from the new records. At first Manoj said he had not seen Naresh that night. Later, on hearing of the vehicle register and Dinanath's statement, he said, 'He came to the warehouse himself. He owed me an account.' Sujata had the difference between the two accounts recorded. She did not threaten Manoj to obtain an answer. 'What account?' she asked. 'The everyday transport charges,' he said. 'Where are the papers?' 'They must be in the office.' After he was shown the dates in the original file and the names attached to the payments, Manoj fell silent. His silence was not a confession of guilt; nevertheless, the discrepancy in the written accounts helped establish the direction of the inquiry.

Manoj's brother was waiting outside the station. He feared that the police would put all the blame on a small man to protect the wealthy owner. Hearing of Ratan's arrest did not dispel that suspicion. He told

Abhay, 'If my brother has done wrong, let him be punished. But the name of the person who gave the order must come out too.' 'Do you have direct knowledge of this?' Abhay asked. The brother shook his head. 'No. It is my suspicion.' Abhay did not turn that suspicion into an accusation in his report. Justice was not a process of choosing a single name and being satisfied with it.

That day the investigating team received a supplementary explanation of the medical report on Naresh's death. The doctor clarified that the injury to the head was strongly likely to have been fatal; the discovery of the body by the canal did not mean that death had occurred by drowning. There was a limited scientific assessment of the nature and approximate time of the injury, but no exact hour. 'Read this finding alongside Dinanath's account,' Sujata told Arun. 'If the injury occurred in the warehouse, we must examine the role of the vehicle in getting him to the canal.' Arun reopened the vehicle's travel records. The pieces of the event were now beginning to fit together.

The mechanic who had replaced the vehicle's light was questioned again. This time an old assistant came with him, a man who had brought the vehicle to the workshop that day. He said there had been stains of mud and water along the edge of a blue tarpaulin. 'Did you lift anything and look beneath it?' Arun asked. 'No. I only helped change the light,' he replied. Sujata made sure this limitation of his evidence was stated clearly. A deadline was fixed for completing the laboratory report on the material recovered from the vehicle. No one should be able to say in court that the entire incident had been imagined on the strength of the colour of a vehicle and its tarpaulin.

The hardest question concerned Ratan's orders. Kiran had earlier said that Naresh repeatedly demanded the original receipts and that the owner was displeased. But displeasure was not an order to kill. The examination of Ratan's business telephone showed the times of three successive contacts with Manoj that evening. The words spoken in those calls were not available. An unexpected additional amount was recorded in the payments list under the heading of night transport. 'This could have been payment for the murder,' Arun suggested. 'Could have been,' Sujata stopped him, 'but it must be proved.' She directed them to obtain an independent statement from the employee who prepared the bill and to examine how the money was actually used.

On the strength of the payment register, the police summoned Harihar, who drove Ratan's private vehicle. He said that the day before

Naresh died, Manoj had been in Ratan's room. The door was half open. Harihar had heard Ratan say, 'Silence Naresh now. He must not go out alive with those papers tomorrow.' 'Did you hear the whole sentence?' Sujata asked. 'Yes,' Harihar said. 'I was frightened and moved away.' That evening Harihar had sent his brother a message saying, 'The boss is very angry.' The date on the original message was checked. Independent verification was still needed.

Meanwhile Chandeshwar Mahto, a former driver for the company, submitted a written application on his own initiative. He had previously concealed certain matters out of fear. According to his new statement, on the night Naresh disappeared he had been standing on the warehouse veranda to collect an account of unpaid freight charges when he heard some of Manoj's words on the telephone: 'The owner's orders are that Naresh's file must not leave.' Chandeshwar made it clear that he had not himself heard Ratan's voice. 'Say exactly what you heard Manoj say,' Sujata instructed him. 'Whether there really was an order from the owner or Manoj was lying is a separate question for investigation.' At the mention of his son's name Chandeshwar grew frightened again, but he signed his statement.

Chandan was questioned again as well. He showed the police the unfinished name in his old diary. 'I wrote this that night, but I cannot say with certainty why I wrote it,' he said. Sujata did not reproach him for admitting ignorance. 'When did Manoj tell you to leave the vehicle?' she asked next. Chandan recalled that he had gone as far as the bend in the road, after which Manoj had taken the vehicle himself. There were some discrepancies in the times he gave; it was decided to check them against the police outpost register and records relating to the location of his mobile phone. On his way home Chandan felt how difficult it was to speak the truth about an old mistake—but that a lie would be more terrible still.

Naina was worried when she learned that Chandan had been questioned again. 'Will they decide my son is a criminal?' Saraswati Devi asked. 'What he did will be investigated,' Naina replied. 'But if he does not tell the police lies, he will have the opportunity to explain the truth about his position.' Abhay came just then. He had wanted to speak to Naina alone, but seeing the family's anxiety, he remained silent. 'Bhaiya, you won't print my name in the newspaper, will you?' Chandan asked. 'I understand the confidentiality of your statement and the stage the investigation has reached,' Abhay replied. 'I won't sell you for a

sensational story.' For the first time, something like trust appeared in Chandan's eyes.

During questioning Ratan's advocate argued that the chairman of a company could not know the purpose of every payment. The prosecution prepared to produce the original authorisation and the employees' statements. One document contained the findings of the handwriting examination, another traced the money from the bank, and a third supplied information on the orders governing access to the particular warehouse. Sujata checked especially carefully that the police had nowhere presented their inferences as facts established by documents. 'If we allege that Ratan instructed someone to commit murder, there must be a reliable basis for the instruction itself,' she said. 'The fact that Manoj may be guilty does not automatically make the owner the man who ordered a killing.'

Another piece of evidence emerged, not through a sudden surprise but through persistent examination of papers. In Naresh's small notebook, the date beside the words 'authorisation cancelled' was missing from the office's principal register. Kusum remembered that Naresh had taken the original file into Ratan's room that day. She had not been inside the meeting, but she saw Naresh's face flushed red when he came out. She had personally heard Ratan say, 'Do not raise so many questions before me over a single piece of paper.' Kusum's statement corroborated the dispute, but the alleged order to murder still required independent proof.

The preliminary test of the biological sample found behind the warehouse cupboard indicated a possible match with the relevant reference sample from Naresh; the tests needed for final confirmation remained outstanding. Sujata had its significance recorded without exaggeration. Dinanath was told not to discuss his statement unnecessarily with anyone. Leaving the station, he said, 'Once, when my son needed treatment, Naresh Babu helped me obtain an advance on my wages. I could not save him.' 'Do not burden yourself with what you did not see,' Sujata answered. 'But it is important to tell the truth about what you did see.' Tears ran down Dinanath's cheeks.

The laboratory officer said by telephone that the chain of custody of the samples had been maintained, but that two separate kinds of testing were required for the traces recovered from the old location. Sujata did not demand an immediate announcement for the news. She asked Arun whether the photographs taken when the samples were collected and the

register of signatures were complete. Arun checked every page. ‘Scientific truth will have force in court only if the path by which a sample was collected and preserved is clear,’ Sujata said. Several hours of the afternoon passed in this painstaking work, while television presenters outside were delivering instant verdicts on the arrests.

Rekha was informed of the progress of the investigation. She did not repeat every technical detail to her father; she merely told him that the sequence of events leading to her brother's death was beginning to emerge. ‘Why didn't he telephone me that night?’ her father asked. Rekha had no answer. She sat beside him and took his trembling hand. Naresh's old spectacles lay on the table. Scientific analysis of the cause of his death could not bring back his habit of putting on those spectacles to read the newspaper. Yet the truth was necessary, if only to ensure that such a killing would not again be concealed beneath the name of an ordinary accident in another household.

The legal officer prepared a written account of the possible sequence of events. Naresh had reached the warehouse to seek financial documents; an argument had taken place there; he had sustained a violent blow to the head; a vehicle under Manoj's control had been used to take the body to the canal bank; and Harihar's direct testimony had brought to light an alleged violent order from Ratan, for which corroborating phone and payment records were being collected. The nature of the supporting material was noted beside each assertion—eyewitness testimony, circumstantial fact, laboratory examination, or a matter still under inquiry. ‘Will charges be framed on this sequence?’ Arun asked. ‘That is for the court to determine,’ the officer replied. ‘We shall present our case with evidence.’

In the course of that discussion Arun raised a cautionary question. ‘Dinanath saw a head injury, but he does not know whether Naresh was alive or dead. What if there was an attempt to take him to hospital after the injury?’ Sujata immediately directed them to compare the medical time frame with the available call records. The registers contained no indication of a call for emergency treatment, but that absence was not in itself treated as conclusive. The investigators continued to examine every possibility. In this way, the explanation of the motive, the person responsible and the effort to remove the body gradually grew stronger without resting upon a single, untested narrative.

That evening Sujata read the notes of Ratan's questioning again. Ratan had admitted disagreements with Naresh but denied wishing him

dead. Manoj, too, continued to deny the murder. The accused men's denials had to remain on the record. So did the reasons for Dinanath's frightened silence and the lateness of Chandeshwar's account. Amid these contradictions, Sujata was coming slowly to understand the reality of the crime, but she had no right to pronounce judgment before the court. The murder was no longer merely a rumour, yet the road to final justice remained long.

Abhay wrote that the investigation was moving towards establishing connections between the warehouse, the vehicle and the financial records. He did not make public the most minute details of the possible sequence of death, lest he endanger the witnesses. 'People want a definite answer,' the editor asked again. 'A definite answer does not mean presenting conjecture as a final verdict,' Abhay replied. At the end of his article he gave space to Naresh's family's question: whose responsibility had it been to protect an employee paid a modest wage to keep the accounts? Readers were invited to see the murder not merely as a mystery but as an event within unequal relations of labour and power.

Late that night Arun showed Sujata one final list. The telephone contacts on the day of the murder, access to the warehouse, the original payment documents Naresh had demanded, the departure of the vehicle and the medical report were all being corroborated with equal care. 'No witness in the next stage of the investigation must be put in a position where fear forces them to change their statement,' Sujata said. Poonam's statement lay secure in a file behind them. Naresh had been trying to expose discrepancies in the accounts; Poonam had endured exploitation in the name of employment. The two events were different, but the same tendency to treat human lives as instruments ran through that business network. Sujata turned off the light and went out.

Chapter 51: The Closed Office

On the day a lock was put on the gate of the Nai Disha Employment Centre, people began gathering there from early morning. Inside the gate, the old advertisement still hung on the noticeboard: training, appointment, an assured future. Directly beneath it, a fresh sheet announced that regular operations at the office were suspended because of the ongoing investigation and administrative action. The paper gave a place and time for submitting complaints, but promised nothing about when deposited money would be returned. Reading the advertisement, a young man said, 'When they took our money, they promised a job within two days. Now the paper tells us to wait.' His father, who had come with him, rested a hand on the adjoining wall and fell silent.

Kusum reached the gate early. In her hand were photocopies of the attendance records, wage slips for three months and a small bag. In the bag she carried a list of the other employees' names. Certain records had been lawfully secured during the police investigation; the building's owner had also stopped ordinary activities on the premises because of unpaid rent. 'From whom should I ask for certified copies of my wage papers that are still inside?' Kusum asked the guard at the gate. He could give no clear answer, speaking only of making a written application. For the first time Kusum understood that receiving notice of the end of a job and gathering proof of unpaid wages were two different struggles.

Fakira had come too. Two months' wages were owing to him, and the time had arrived to pay his young granddaughter's school fees. 'Who will employ me in another factory at my age?' he asked Kusum. 'I never prepared false appointment letters. I swept the warehouse and carried loads. Now people hear the owner's name and won't even give me work.' 'Let us bring our wage papers together,' Kusum replied. 'If each of us goes alone, it will be harder to get anyone to listen.' Fakira took an old receipt from his pocket. Its edges were stained with oil, but his name and the amount due were clearly written.

Imran's circumstances were different, but the hardship was the same. He had counted stock in the warehouse; since Naresh's murder, he had been willing to provide the police with the ordinary transport entries. 'People are asking me what I told the police,' he said to Kusum. 'Now

every shopkeeper thinks I was involved in crime.' 'You gave them a written account of what you saw, didn't you?' Kusum asked. 'Yes. But whenever I go somewhere else for work, they hear the name of my former company and shut the door.' 'Speaking the truth ought not to destroy a person's reputation,' Fakira said, 'but rumours about a name travel much faster than the truth.' The three moved away from the gate, sat beside the road and considered how to submit their applications.

By noon the queue of applicants who had been cheated was growing long. Savita Kumari arrived carrying her old notebook. She was preparing for competitive examinations herself; when an examination was cancelled, she had once applied to this employment centre in order to help with the household expenses, but stopped after examining the terms, before paying the fee. Now she was advising other applicants to keep separate copies of receipts, advertisements, bank payments and messages received. An elderly man showed her his son's photograph and asked, 'What if I have none of those papers?' 'Preserve whatever evidence you do have,' Savita replied. 'Write truthfully about what you don't have. Making a false receipt will only make matters worse.'

A woman in the queue showed Naina a bundle of documents. Her son had gone to town five times in the hope of work at a sewing factory, and each visit had brought further expense in the name of another examination or training course. 'I borrowed all that money at interest,' she said. 'The man who cheated us may go to prison now, but the moneylender will knock at my door every day.' Naina wrote down the address of a nearby legal aid centre for her. She could not afford to give the woman financial help, but the woman grew a little calmer at finding somewhere she could show the papers of her distress without being humiliated.

When Naina arrived amid the crowd, several people surrounded her. Some asked about Poonam; others wanted an account of their deposits. 'I was not the owner of the company,' Naina said. 'I have already reported the discrepancies I found in appointments and receipts. I can explain the procedure for submitting a complaint, but I cannot tell you when your money will be returned.' An angry young man said, 'You worked inside, and we stood outside. Why didn't you stop it then?' His raised voice shook Naina. 'You have every right to ask whether I spoke in time about what I knew,' she replied. 'But I will not accept false accusations made in my name.' The young man's anger did not vanish at

once; nevertheless, he received the correct information about where to register his claim.

Abhay stood to one side, taking notes. For his report he was trying to understand the difference between unemployed employees and applicants who had been defrauded, not merely count the crowd. 'If you publish our faces, other employers will be frightened of us too,' Fakira said. 'Would you prefer your name not to appear?' Abhay asked. Fakira nodded. Abhay took no photograph without permission. Instead of a name, he recorded the nature of Fakira's work and the amount of unpaid wages. A woman broke down while telling him how much her daughter had deposited. Abhay asked someone to bring her water, closed his notebook and simply listened for a while. There had to be room in the facts of a news report for human exhaustion too; he understood that.

The building's owner arrived with his advocate. He said the institution had owed rent for a long time and that the legal position regarding the goods inside must now be clarified. Someone shouted from the crowd, 'Sell the chairs and give us our money!' The officer explained that the records required for the investigation, the rent dispute, employees' wages and applicants' claims were subject to different legal processes. Breaking the lock and distributing the property was no solution. The answer disappointed people, but Kusum understood that if papers were destroyed in a commotion, proof of her own wages might disappear too. She asked Fakira to help keep the queue in order.

At home, Kiran heard that the office had closed. She looked at pictures of the place where employees had greeted her as 'Madam' every day, and where people were now demanding their dues at the gate. She recalled how many wage receipts she herself had signed late. She telephoned her advocate, Malati Sinha, to ask how she should properly provide the information she possessed about unpaid wages. 'Preserve the lawful copies in your possession,' Malati replied. 'Give the appropriate authorities whatever information the papers substantiate. Do not make personal approaches to witnesses now and risk influencing their statements.' Kiran understood that regret would be useful only if she did not evade the evidence of her responsibilities.

Even after Ratan's arrest, some people from his old network were making new plans. Virendra argued that the work of his construction company should not be stopped; an inquiry was under way into the same expenditure headings used for workers' payments. An agent told the unemployed applicants that if they paid him a brokerage fee, he could

recover their money before the investigation was over. Savita objected. 'If someone asks you to pay more money merely to get your money back, see his papers first,' she said. The agent slipped away from the crowd. But Naina realised that closing one institution did not end the appetite for fraud; among desperate people, new middlemen were already trying to establish themselves.

Chandan sat at home making a list of his debts. The cessation of his driving work had reduced his daily income. The owner of a legitimate transport business had offered him temporary employment, but on hearing of the earlier investigation had asked him to wait. 'Where am I supposed to go?' Chandan asked Naina. 'The expenses of a house never stop.' 'Whatever work you take next, get all its terms in writing,' Naina replied. 'Don't let the urgency of finding a livelihood drive you back into the hands of the wrong people.' Chandan grew despondent. He knew his sister's advice was sound, but the sight of less rice in the cooking pot was harder to bear. Saraswati Devi watched them both and, without delivering a lecture, added a little more water to the dal simmering on the stove.

That evening Madhavi Devi stopped in Naina's courtyard on her way home from work. She spoke of women in the neighbourhood who, during the first months of prohibition, had used the money saved at home to buy their children books, clothes and medicine. 'I thought the quarrels in our homes would lessen,' she said. 'In some homes they did. But within a year illicit liquor was coming into the lanes again. Higher prices, heavier debts.' 'Where do people say the liquor comes from?' Naina asked. 'Everyone names a different person,' Madhavi replied. 'I won't accuse anyone without proof. What I see is that men are coming home drunk with empty pockets again.' The distinction between the family's troubles and the investigation into the trade remained clear.

Seema, the support worker, told Poonam that the employment centre had closed. Poonam said nothing for a while. 'The first time I went through that gate, I was hoping for a job,' she said. 'Now how many people must be standing there asking for their money?' Seema asked whether she wanted to write something for the information of the other victims. 'Not today,' Poonam replied. 'I need to take my medicine and rest. Later I'll write about what happened to me.' Seema respected the decision. Rehabilitation did not mean that a victim was obliged to tell the public story of her wounds every day.

The following day a group of employees reached the designated labour-department office to submit their claims. Kusum had written each person's name with the period for which wages were owed. Fakira's receipt, Imran's attendance records and other employees' bank deposit statements were attached separately. 'Were any of you paid in cash?' the officer asked. Two women raised their hands. They had no regular receipts. The officer asked them to write down their days of work, estimated payments and the names of possible witnesses. Kusum was tired by the lengthy procedure, but no one gave her a false promise of an immediate result. On coming out, she said, 'At least our names are in the register now.'

At first, a clerk in the corridor made a vague suggestion that an application could be arranged through an agent instead of submitted in writing. Kusum went directly to a senior employee and asked about the procedure. The senior officer explained the publicly prescribed way to submit the application and receive an acknowledgement. Outside, Kusum told the women workers, 'Our wages are small enough. Why should we pay extra money merely to claim them?' The workers were not unanimous; some were ready to pay a fee in the hope of quicker results. But Fakira said, 'Let us use the lawful route first. We must not lose a third month's earnings in the name of recovering two months' wages.'

When Naresh's mother heard that the office had closed, old memories returned. 'Your brother used to say no one should be cheated in the accounting of their labour,' she told Rekha. 'Those are the very accounts he questioned,' Rekha replied. 'What will happen to the workers whose money is still owing?' her mother asked. 'They're making claims,' Rekha said. 'I shall provide the authorities with whatever lawful copies of my brother's papers they ask for.' Even within the grief of this household, the hunger of other households had found its way in. Rekha understood that justice for Naresh was not only a matter of proving responsibility for his murder; it also meant remembering his integrity.

That night Naina opened a blank notebook. On its first page she wrote: 'What to check in a recruitment advertisement.' On the second she listed fees, written contracts, the true employer and the right to complain. She was not announcing the creation of a new organisation; she still had no arrangement for a steady income with which to run her home. Yet one question asked by the unemployed young people stayed in her ears: where could they find reliable information about real jobs?

Abhay telephoned and asked what she was writing in the notebook. 'I'm trying to understand the mistakes we made earlier,' Naina said. 'The next person should at least be able to decide after reading the papers.' 'I'll help you verify the information,' Abhay replied.

Savita showed Naina an old government advertisement that clearly set out an official recruitment website and the process of verification. 'Not every advertisement is fraudulent,' she said. 'But finding genuine information is difficult for poor people.' Naina understood that a future effort could not simply consist of a list of cheats. People needed information about legitimate jobs, help completing applications and support in reading written terms. She added a new line to her notebook: 'List of verified opportunities.' She did not know whether such work would bring any income. But after Poonam's experience, an idea was being born: to share information instead of selling hope all over again.

Savita herself was once again filling in an application for a competitive examination. No one had yet received a result from the previous examination, cancelled after allegations of a paper leak. Another journey, another fee, another round of preparation awaited her. Kusum's workplace had closed, Chandan's driving work had stopped, Poonam's wages remained unpaid—the three stories were different, yet the suffering caused by the scarcity of work spread through the same town. 'Don't you get tired of sitting examinations so many times?' Savita's mother asked. 'Of course I do,' Savita answered. 'But if I give up the wish that someone who has studied should find work, what will be left?' She put a copy of her admit card in her bag.

After evening fell, the gate of the Nai Disha Employment Centre stood deserted. One corner of a poster had torn and fluttered in the wind. The tea stall opposite the gate had fewer customers; counting his takings, the vendor said, 'When there was a crowd, there was business. Now it's all closed.' Fakira could not even smile at the remark. Until yesterday the building had taken money in the name of hope; today even its closure affected the small businesses around it. Inside, the chairs, computers and files were subject to legal process. For those outside, the visible question was simple: how would they run their homes next month?

Sujata read the report on the closure of the office. She made it clear to the investigators that the employees' wage claims, the victims' deposited money and the evidence of criminal acts had to be dealt with through their respective institutions and processes. She instructed them not to

treat innocent employees as suspects merely because they were associated with the accused. The investigation into Naresh's murder was progressing, but the living faced immediate questions of food, reputation and livelihood. Closing the report, Sujata wrote that access to financial records must not be obstructed and labour-related complaints must reach the proper authorities.

A question arose concerning the contents of a computer retained during the financial-crime investigation. Innocent employees needed proof of their wages; at the same time, the machine held possible records of the recruitment fraud. Sujata proposed working with the relevant authority to establish a lawful way of supplying certified copies. ‘We must not deprive employees of their rights in the name of an investigation,’ she said. Arun recorded the instruction separately. Here even an ordinary copy of a document could be of vital importance to a family.

At night Naina sat in the courtyard. Saraswati Devi brought her rice on an old plate. Chandan was talking again about searching for legitimate work. Abhay had sent a message containing the headline for the next day's newspaper: ‘Unpaid Wages at Closed Institution; Defrauded Applicants Still Waiting.’ Naina read it and put down the phone. She remembered Poonam's first smile on the day she was about to receive her appointment letter. How many places had the words ‘assured future’, printed on a piece of paper, broken apart? Yet even after trust had been shattered, the desire to make a new path through reliable information, labour and patience had not died.

Chapter 52: Vibha's New Life

Morning sunlight slanted across the veranda of Sumitra's house. Washed clothes hung from a bamboo pole in the courtyard, and the smell of roasted cumin drifted from the kitchen. Sitting by the window, Vibha Singh was separating two envelopes from the bank. One contained details of a joint account; the other concerned payments of which she had never been informed. The envelopes were made of smooth paper, but the sight of the figures printed on them left her palms damp with sweat. In the house she had always thought of as her own, documents bearing her name had been put to use without anyone asking her.

Sumitra brought two cups of tea. 'Were you awake late again last night?' she asked. Vibha tried to smile. 'Whenever I closed my eyes, I heard the sound of the gate. I lived in that house for so many years, yet sometimes even my own key did not feel as though it belonged to me.' Putting down the cup, Sumitra said, 'You need not account for your stay here. But think about the future with a steady mind.' Vibha lifted the tea to her lips. More than her sister's kindness, she needed that simple assurance of trust.

Sumitra's son was getting ready for school. He had torn a page from his notebook to make a paper aeroplane, which the breeze carried straight on to the bank statement. Vibha picked it up and gave it back. The child laughed. Not everything in the world was as grave as adults made it. Yet when Vibha saw his school-fee receipt, she realised clearly for the first time that her sister's household, too, had its own monthly budget. It would not be right to live here without calculating how much she had in savings. 'Add my share to the cost of the groceries,' she told Sumitra. Her sister tried at first to dismiss the suggestion, then said, 'Very well—but not as rent in exchange for food. Think of it as your first account towards standing on your own feet.'

Anushka, too, was staying with her mother at Sumitra's home. She had to leave a little earlier for school, but had not been forced to leave her old classroom and friends. 'Is it uncomfortable here?' Vibha asked. 'There is a little less space, but I feel lighter,' Anushka replied. 'Everyone asks about Father. I don't want to answer all those questions.' Vibha took her hand. 'You owe no one an explanation for disputes within our family. Your studies and your own peace of mind come first.'

That afternoon Vibha was to meet a lawyer. She placed the certified bank papers, the old passbook for the joint account and the documents she had found relating to ownership of the house in a carefully arranged file. Sumitra offered to accompany her. 'Today I shall speak for myself first,' Vibha replied. 'If something is unclear, we can go together another time.' Sumitra watched her for a moment. Today Vibha was preparing to ask her own questions.

The lawyer's office occupied an upper floor above Navgarh's old market. People sat along the corridor with disputes about marriage, land, loans and wages. Vibha wrote down her name and took her place in the queue. An elderly woman in the next chair was struggling to read a land-measurement document. 'Daughter, could you look at these figures?' she asked. Vibha read out the numbers on the paper but, before attempting to explain their meaning, advised her to have them confirmed by the relevant office. The woman blessed her. For the first time Vibha saw that the caution she needed with her own papers was just as necessary for someone else.

Advocate Shailaja Thakur examined the documents closely. She wrote each date on a separate sheet. 'Your name appears on this account, but we cannot assume that you authorised every withdrawal,' Shailaja said. 'Any disputed signature must be examined through the bank and the required procedures. Ownership of the house, partnership, bank liabilities and matrimonial matters must also be understood separately.' Vibha had brought written questions. 'If my name has been misused, must I bring an accusation against my husband?' she asked. 'You have the right to make a lawful complaint based on the facts,' Shailaja replied. 'It would be wrong to predict every consequence at this stage. First establish your safety, your documents and what you need.'

Vibha asked about her marriage as well. Some weeks earlier, news of Ratan's illicit relationship had wounded her; now the possibility of financial deceit caused a different pain. 'Should I consider the marriage over?' There was more exhaustion than anger in her question. Shailaja paused. 'You will decide when the time for that decision has come. My task is to explain your rights, obligations and available remedies. If you wish to live separately, we shall also need to examine the practical arrangements.' For the first time, Vibha felt that no one was demanding that she choose one path in haste.

At the end of the consultation Shailaja gave her a list of documents to be copied. Vibha asked for a receipt for the fee. While she stood in the

queue, she remembered Naresh Mandal's family. He had died in the course of trying to make his accounts clear. Vibha had known him only slightly, yet his death had also given her a reason to read the papers governing her own life. It would be unjust to draw an equivalence: the loss suffered by Naresh's household could never be repaired. Nevertheless, remaining silent after all that had happened now felt to Vibha almost like a crime.

Outside, she came face to face with a businessman who was an old acquaintance of Ratan's. With folded hands he said, 'Bhabhi, things would have been better if family matters had stayed within the family. Ratan Babu is under great pressure.' Vibha looked directly at him. 'An account bearing my name is a matter concerning my home; but the people whose money has gone missing have homes too. Is there anything you wish to say in writing?' The businessman fell silent for a moment, offered a vague assurance and moved aside. Vibha knew that, in the name of 'family matters', outsiders would ask for her silence many more times.

On her way back to Sumitra's house, she bought milk, lentils and vegetables. 'Madam, why don't we see the old car any more?' the shopkeeper asked. 'I came on foot today,' Vibha answered simply. One did not have to recite the story of one's life every time someone was curious. Holding the bag of lentils weighed on the shopkeeper's scales, she remembered how long it had been since she knew the actual cost of a household's bulk purchases. She checked the amount he had written and paid with her own hand. It was no grand victory, merely direct knowledge of the day's expenditure.

That evening Vibha was kneading dough in Sumitra's kitchen. 'What did the lawyer say?' Sumitra asked. Vibha told her everything at length, then added, 'She will not decide for me.' Sumitra laughed. 'That's good. I am not going to decide for you either.' The sisters spent some time recalling the old days in their parents' home. Their mother used to keep clothes and papers separately in an ancestral trunk; they had laughed then at her anxiety over so many documents. Vibha now understood that papers mattered no less than clothing.

A telephone call came at night from an unfamiliar number. Vibha answered and heard a woman's voice. It was Kusum, an employee of the closed employment centre. Politely she asked whether Vibha knew anything about the office's unpaid wages. 'I am following the legal procedure,' Kusum said, 'but several receipts were left awaiting the

owner's signature.' 'I did not manage the office,' Vibha replied. 'If I find any lawful copy in my possession that can help, I shall give it to the appropriate officer. Keep the acknowledgement of your application safe.' After ending the call, Vibha understood that because of her husband's former position, people still regarded her as someone who must answer for the institution. She could not answer every question, but she would not run away from those to which she knew the answer.

The next day Vibha made a list of her belongings in the old house. She did not intend to rush in and take everything away. Clothes, books, a silver bowl given by her mother and certain personal documents were what she needed immediately. Shailaja had told her to use the lawful process for disputed property. Vibha prepared an application arranging the collection of her personal possessions, accompanied by a list of the items. She had no wish to quarrel at the gate and carry things off. It was painful to have to give written notice before entering a house that had once felt like her own. Yet going in without clarity could aggravate the earlier dispute.

Sumitra accompanied her on the day she went to collect the belongings. At the gate they met the old gardener, Ramdas. He folded his hands. 'Mistress, the hibiscus is in bloom.' Vibha looked towards the plants. Rain had been scarce, yet two flowers had opened. There was a question in Ramdas's eyes, but he did not ask it. Inside, the furniture in the drawing room had been rearranged; the photographs of Ratan receiving honours still hung in their places. Vibha did not approach them. She entered her room and opened the cupboard. The bowl her mother had given her was wrapped in cloth. Tears came to her eyes when she saw it, but she had not come there that day to weep.

Kamla, the old domestic worker, quietly brought water. 'Are you getting your wages on time?' Vibha asked. Kamla lowered her head. 'Five days from last month are still owing. The new manager says he will examine the account.' 'Have you a receipt?' 'Who gives receipts for household work?' Kamla's question struck Vibha deeply. 'Keep a record of the dates you have worked,' she said. 'Never put your thumbprint on a paper without asking what it says.' She did not falsely promise that she herself would pay Kamla everything owed; she did not yet know the full state of the household's finances.

Ratan was then subject to the judicial procedures arising from his custody. One of his associates telephoned and said Vibha should withdraw her public statement. 'I have supplied written information

about what I saw,' she replied. 'If there is an error of fact, let the relevant document be shown. I will not change my account because of a name or a threat.' 'This will affect the property,' the associate said. Vibha ended the call. Sumitra looked at her face. 'Are you frightened?' 'Very,' Vibha answered. 'But I shall not sign things again merely because I am afraid.'

While collecting her belongings, she had found an old diary. In the first year of their marriage, Ratan had used it to record household expenses. On the first page was the price of a chair they had bought together; on the second, a compliment about the kheer Vibha had made. She closed the diary. That there had been love was not a lie; nor were the later deception and questions of crime lies. Both truths could inhabit the same life. She did not destroy the diary. She wanted to make a clear distinction between her personal memories and the papers bearing on public wrongdoing.

Meanwhile Sumitra had placed Vibha in charge of a small part of the household expenses. After coming back from the market, the sisters wrote down the prices of the vegetables. A kilo of potatoes, half a kilo of pointed gourds, the child's notebook and a small bottle of oil—everything had its own price. 'Did you always remember these things in your head?' Vibha asked. Sumitra laughed. 'No, I kept forgetting. That's why I started a notebook.' Vibha studied it. Here a little credit, there school fees, elsewhere the fare to visit their mother's family. She saw that responsibility for a household was not merely a question of income, but of knowing its expenses regularly.

The following week an acknowledgement arrived from the bank concerning the examination of the disputed signatures. The process had begun for obtaining whatever information the bank could lawfully provide about the questioned transactions. Vibha faced temporary restrictions on immediate use of certain funds, and the bank explained the applicable rules. 'How will you meet everyday expenses for now?' Sumitra asked. Vibha showed her the statement of a separate savings account. The amount was small, but enough to cover two months' expenditure. She would need a regular income beyond that; this was now clear.

Vibha remembered her education. Before marriage, after graduating, she had undertaken training in accounts. As Ratan's business expanded, household demands and family expectations had left that training gathering dust. She did not think it sensible to announce a new business of her own on the first day. Instead she went to the town's women's

support centre, where employment information was available. On hearing who she was, the employee at the centre initially treated her with unusual deference. 'Please explain the procedure as you would to any ordinary applicant,' Vibha said. She learned about options for training in checking accounts, organising documents and managing a small business.

On the first day of class she sat at the back. One young woman did sewing work at home; a widow had come to learn how to keep accounts for the produce of her own fields. 'Who here knows how to read an account statement?' the trainer asked. Vibha raised her hand, then looked at the other women. Here she would be recognised for what she knew how to do, not for the identity by which she had once been known. At the end of the session, the young seamstress asked, 'Will you teach me to make a simple account book?' 'Let us sit together and look at what I know,' Vibha answered.

Vibha's routine at Sumitra's house was changing. Tea in the morning, some household work, then training, the bank or the lawyer's office. In the afternoon she drew up lists of expenses. Some nights memories of her old house surrounded her, and she sat silently in her sister's courtyard. 'If it takes time, let it take time,' Sumitra said one day. 'Don't change a decision that feels right merely out of haste.' 'I am learning how to live an ordinary day with the decision I have made,' Vibha replied. She did not proclaim that this was the meaning of a new life; she simply laid out the next day's clothes the night before.

Meanwhile a formal notice arrived from Inspector Sujata's office. Vibha was asked to clarify a particular entry in the bank records she had submitted. She went on the appointed day, Sumitra accompanying her as far as the gate. 'Were you outside town on this date?' Sujata asked. Vibha showed her the evidence of her journey to her sister's home. 'Yes. I am telling you what I presently remember; the copy of the written proof is separate.' Sujata recorded the two separately. On returning home, Vibha wrote in her notebook: 'Memory and documents are different.' She resolved to keep that thought in mind in all her future dealings.

Ramdas called again. A pipe in the garden had burst, and the people newly responsible for looking after the house were blaming him. 'Keep a written account of the work for which you were responsible,' Vibha told him. 'If the pipe was old, say so. Don't quarrel with anyone in my name.' 'When you were here, Mistress, such things used to be settled,' Ramdas

said. Vibha told him to contact the appropriate person and ended the call.

At night a message came through Ratan's advocate: he wished to meet Vibha and discuss their marriage. She read it and sat silent for a long time. She had spent a large part of her life with that man. Time spent with someone could not be abolished by tearing up a sheet of paper. But talking did not mean accepting his control again. After consulting her own lawyer, she sent a reply specifying the proper process and boundaries for any meeting. That night, lying awake, she wondered what her first question would be if they met. An answer came: 'Who authorised the signature on the documents bearing my name?'

The next day there was an accounting exercise at the training centre. The instructor handed out a sample of the income and expenditure of a small institution. As Vibha added the figures, the woman beside her said, 'At the end of the day, I can never make my expenses tally.' 'Write down even the small amounts that leave your hand,' Vibha told her. 'Knowing where your time goes and knowing where your money goes are connected.' Hearing herself say this, she remembered Naresh's patience. Keeping an account book was such an ordinary activity, yet the trust of so many people rested on that ordinary work.

On her way back from the centre, she met an acquaintance who whispered, 'What will happen to your marriage now?' 'When I decide, I shall do so after thinking carefully,' Vibha replied. 'For the present, I am arranging my financial rights and my safety.' The acquaintance began to say something else, but Vibha changed the subject and asked when school ended. Establishing the boundary that other people's curiosity must not determine the course of her life was difficult, but not impossible. Reaching Sumitra's door, she found the child running towards her with his homework. Vibha put down her bag and opened his notebook.

The dal was thin at dinner, and there was little vegetable. Sumitra apologetically said that prices at the market had risen. Vibha laughed softly. 'I know what this dal costs. Don't worry.' From her savings she set aside her share of the following week's groceries. People outside still called her the woman from a wealthy household, but the real details of her life again included the price of lentils, travel fares and training fees. Accepting that truth was no humiliation; it was the basis on which she could make her own decisions.

Before sleeping, Vibha looked on her phone at a photograph of the hibiscus in the old garden. Ramdas had sent it: two more flowers had opened. She showed it to Sumitra. 'I planted that garden,' she said, 'but the flowers will stay there.' 'Doesn't that hurt?' Sumitra asked. 'It does,' Vibha answered. 'But whatever I must leave behind, I shall leave. What is rightfully mine, I shall protect through documents, work and patience.' Night deepened beyond the window. One shelf in the cupboard was still empty. Vibha gazed at it for a while, then placed there the files she would need the following day.

Chapter 53: Dinesh's Admission

When Dinesh opened the gate of his workshop in the morning, a layer of sawdust lay inside. Tools were scattered across the table, but no one had used them for four days. After losses at his motor-parts shop had mounted, Dinesh had closed it over the preceding months. With an old acquaintance, the carpenter Shambhu, he had begun taking small contracts for repairs to houses; during the past month, customers for this new work had also grown fewer. Shambhu peered through the doorway. 'Will we work today, or close again?' Dinesh called him inside. 'We shall work. Finish the unfinished doorframe first.' Shambhu heard the weariness in his voice but asked no questions.

In a drawer of the table lay an old message on Dinesh's phone. In anger, he had once sent it to Ratan, threatening to make an illicit relationship public unless he received money. At the time it had seemed to him a way of avenging his humiliation. Now Ratan was under arrest, Kiran was living a life apart from their household, and the message Dinesh had sent remained undeleted. He read it and remembered the tone of his own voice that evening. Words spoken in anger could continue to work upon other lives long after the anger itself had subsided.

Ravi, his cousin on his mother's side, arrived around noon. Dinesh had earlier shown him the papers relating to his debts. While helping with the tools, Ravi asked, 'Have you heard anything from the bank about the loan?' Dinesh held out an envelope. 'My name is on the papers. But first I must check which payments I actually authorised.' Ravi read the document. 'And what about the money you demanded from Ratan?' Dinesh did not raise his eyes. That was the subject he found hardest to discuss.

'Were you really asking him to settle a debt?' Ravi asked softly. 'Or were you demanding money in exchange for keeping Kiran's affairs secret?' Dinesh was silent for a while. 'At first I was asking for an account of the debt,' he said. 'But the message I sent later was wrong. I wrote plainly: give me money, or I will tell everyone.' Ravi drew a long breath. 'That message may weaken your own claim.' 'If this raises a legal question, I ought to speak of it myself,' Dinesh replied. 'Hiding the message will not change it.'

Three different events were tangled together in Dinesh's mind. Kiran's extramarital relationship had felt like betrayal. The discovery of loan papers in his own name had deepened his fear about money. And on the day he quarrelled with Ratan, an impulse for revenge had turned his demand into a threat. The reality of the first two injuries did not justify the third act. Dinesh understood this, but it had taken him time to acknowledge it. 'I shall have the right to call a crime by its name only when I also speak clearly about my own conduct,' he told Ravi.

Rather than offer easy reassurance, Ravi advised caution. 'See an advocate. Keep your phone, messages and loan papers safe. Don't try to persuade any witness.' 'It seemed so simple before. I could go to the police station and say Ratan had ruined me. Now I understand that they will ask about the accounts of what I did too.' From behind them Shambhu called out that the measurements of the doorframe were short. Dinesh went to inspect them. To correct an error of two inches, they would have to cut the wood again. Mistakes made in work could be repaired; errors of trust were not so readily set right.

The next day he met Advocate Nilima Jha. Nilima first heard the details of the loan dispute, then asked to see the telephone message. Dinesh placed the phone before her. 'I wrote this.' 'Threatening to demand money in return for concealing a personal humiliation may be a serious matter,' Nilima said. 'I shall not offer a legal conclusion yet; we must examine the whole sequence of events, the original message and who knows about it. But it would be better for you not to conceal the truth.' Dinesh kept rubbing the corner of a sheet of paper between his fingers.

'Did you receive any money?' Nilima asked. 'No,' Dinesh answered. 'Ratan said on the phone that he had no time to discuss the loan. I threatened him again. After that there was no further contact.' 'Was there any witness?' 'I spoke to him by telephone. I told Ravi afterwards.' Nilima wrote, 'Keep statements and evidence separate. The question of any personal remedy for the humiliation you suffered is distinct from the loan dispute. The question of the threat is distinct again.' Dinesh nodded.

On the day he went to the police station, perspiration broke out across his body. At a tea stall on the way, several people were discussing Ratan's arrest. Some said everyone had been in league together; others said people connected with politicians would protect one another. Dinesh said nothing. The weight of being responsible for a single

message of his own was enough. When he entered Inspector Sujata's office, she was examining several files. Dinesh gave his name. Sujata gestured for him to sit.

'I threatened Ratan Singh in order to make him give me money,' Dinesh began. Sujata took up her pen. 'When? By what means? And what reason did you give?' Dinesh described the events in sequence. Where his memory was uncertain, he said plainly that the dates would have to be checked against his phone. 'There was a dispute at home. I became angry when I learned of his relationship with Kiran. There were also loan papers. I said that if he didn't pay, I would expose the affair.' Sujata listened attentively.

'Did you actually try to collect money from Ratan?' Sujata asked. 'I demanded it, but received nothing. I went near his office once, but did not meet him inside.' 'Did you meet Naresh Mandal or Manoj in the course of this?' 'I saw Naresh at the office but never spoke to him. I heard Manoj's name in the news.' Sujata asked again where Dinesh had been on the night of Naresh's murder. He gave the times he had been at his workshop and Ravi's house, without claiming certainty about some dates. Sujata recorded that the details would require independent verification.

At the end of the statement, Sujata said, 'This admission does not automatically establish either your innocence or your guilt. The facts will be examined. A separate investigation may be necessary into the loan documents.' Dinesh lowered his head. When he came outside, he was surprised that he felt no lighter. Speaking the truth did not instantly remove fear. But his fear now concerned not merely being caught, but the actual consequences of what he had done. He telephoned Ravi. 'I've said what I needed to say. I shall answer whatever questions come next.'

Kiran learned of the development through her advocate, Malati Sinha. Malati told her only that Dinesh had made a statement about his threat and that the loan records might require a separate examination. Kiran leaned back against her chair for a moment. She felt compassion for Dinesh's suffering, but the threat arising from that suffering was not justified. 'Do you have copies of any of Dinesh's messages?' Malati asked. 'I have copies of the loan papers. I have kept the messages from our private arguments separately. I shall give the relevant copies to the authorities if they ask for them.'

That evening Dinesh telephoned. Kiran fell silent as soon as she heard his voice. 'I went to the police station,' Dinesh said. 'I heard,' she

replied. ‘I admitted my threat. But that doesn't make what you did any less serious.’ ‘I'm not trying to make it less serious,’ Kiran said quietly. ‘You regard the breaking of your trust as a wrong against you, and I cannot deny that wound. But I too must answer for what I have done.’ For a while Dinesh said nothing; Kiran could hear him breathing.

‘I cannot live together with you any longer,’ Dinesh said at last. It was not the first time he had spoken of living separately, but today his tone carried the firmness of a decision. ‘We shall settle the loan dispute through the law. We'll make a list of the household belongings. And we'll seek proper advice about the marriage too.’ ‘Shall we meet and talk?’ Kiran asked. ‘For the documents, with our advocates present. Not in the hope of restoring the old relationship.’ ‘All right,’ Kiran said and ended the call. It had taken her a long time to utter those two words.

After putting down the phone, Dinesh went into the back room of his workshop. A plate from the time of his marriage to Kiran was lying there. Ravi had stored some belongings in the room when the household was divided. Dinesh picked it up. A faint stain marked its edge. He remembered the meal on his wedding day: all their friends seated together, mehndi on Kiran's hands, both families laughing. What did that memory mean now? He put the plate down again. The more beautiful a memory, the harder a decision in the present could become.

That night Ravi brought food. Dinesh left part of his meal uneaten. ‘Will you finish the workshop contract or not?’ Ravi asked. ‘I shall,’ Dinesh replied. ‘Shambhu has been asking about his wages for two days. My private troubles ought not to leave his stomach empty.’ Ravi looked at him with a little relief. For the first time, Dinesh was thinking through the obligations of work without putting the blame on someone else. That night he calculated the wages he owed. There was some money left; he wrote down the dates on which he could pay what was possible.

The following week he received certified copies of the loan papers from the bank. He read them closely. One page bore his signature, but the amount and repayment terms differed from what had been discussed that day. He called Nilima and said that clear questions needed to be raised about the document. Nilima explained the lawful procedure to follow. Dinesh felt an urge to blame Kiran immediately, but stopped himself. If someone had altered a page, that required investigation; anger could not turn an inference into evidence.

Kiran emptied a small cupboard in her house and set aside Dinesh's clothes and personal papers. She did not throw them away in contempt. She also found old letters from his village and the warranty papers for his tools. She made a list and sent it to Dinesh. The answer came: 'I shall collect them through the advocate. Thank you for the list.' In that short formal reply, she heard the distance of many years. She put tea on the stove but took out no second cup. In disagreement and separation, the objects of a house remain in their places; it is their places within people that change.

One day Shambhu stood at the workshop gate and asked, 'Master, people in the village say your name may come up in Ratan Singh's case. If I keep working here, will I be in trouble?' Dinesh laid down his tools. 'I shall answer for what I did. I shall keep your work accounts clear. If the police question you, tell them what you have seen. Don't lie because someone tells you to.' 'I only want my wages on time,' Shambhu replied. Dinesh wrote the date on a receipt.

Meanwhile Abhay was seeking reliable confirmation of Dinesh's statement. He had no intention of publishing the details of someone's private dispute merely because they existed in a police record. The central questions in the news remained Ratan's business, the exploitation of workers and Naresh's murder. Dinesh's threat could be relevant to legal proceedings, but turning it into a sensational headline would obscure the concerns at the heart of Poonam's and Naresh's families' cases. Abhay wrote in his notes: 'Confirmation of the threatened demand; relevance to the case; necessity of publication.' For the third question, his answer at present was 'No.'

One evening Dinesh saw an old friend riding a motorbike back from Kiran's parents' village. 'Won't there be a reconciliation?' the friend asked. 'I have decided that we shall live apart,' Dinesh replied. 'Tell those who gossip about it that gossip builds no one's home.' The friend stopped smiling. Dinesh rode on. Old acquaintances and social expectations could not repair the broken trust within a marriage. That night he wrote down the due date of his next loan instalment and reconciled Shambhu's wage account.

The electricity bill arrived at Kiran's house. Dinesh had paid it before; now she had to pay it herself. Several times she opened his old contact on her phone and closed it again. At last she paid the bill from her savings. When the bank's confirmation message arrived, she understood that an independent life was not merely an emotional

decision; it was a succession of small responsibilities. She added a copy of Naresh's old, incomplete wage papers to the list of documents she would give the relevant officer. Her guilt towards Dinesh did not free her of responsibility for what she had done at the office.

One morning Dinesh passed the house where Kiran was living. He did not stop at the gate. The kitchen window was open, and inside he could see a flower vase they had bought together after their marriage. He looked at it for a moment, then rode on. A little farther along, a schoolchild hesitated while crossing the road. Dinesh braked and waited until the child had crossed safely. Even when anger remained in one's heart, it was possible to act with care towards another person. This small truth seemed necessary to him for the day ahead.

A formal notice from the police station summoned Dinesh again to confirm the original telephone messages and the loan documents. He appeared on the appointed day. 'We are matching the dates and sequence of your earlier statement against the mobile-phone records,' Sujata said. 'If you made any mistake, say so clearly.' Dinesh corrected two dates. He added one sentence: 'I did not receive the money, but I made a threatening demand for it.' Sujata entered his words without comment. In that moment Dinesh heard the full and proper name for what he had done.

Ravi met him at a tea stall near the station. 'Do you feel any lighter?' he asked. 'Not lighter. But now I can make a list of the work still to be done.' 'What list?' 'The loan papers, the workers' unpaid wages, the court dates, the unfinished orders in the workshop.' 'And your home?' Ravi asked. Dinesh put down his cup. 'What I told Kiran still stands. The old trust is not returning. Living together without trust would be a punishment for us both.'

Kiran thought of Vibha. The two women had been caught up in Ratan's life for different reasons. Vibha's trust had been broken by her husband's deceit; Kiran herself had broken the trust of her marriage and had also made mistakes in some business decisions. She wanted to ask Vibha's forgiveness, but knew that asking would not undo the damage. She wrote a short letter: 'The papers I have undertaken to provide will be handed to the appropriate officer as soon as they have been certified.' She kept the letter limited to the facts rather than turning it into a personal plea for pardon. She did not send it yet, but set it aside for her lawyer to examine.

At last Dinesh's small contract was completed. The customer examined the doorframe. 'The measurements that were wrong before are correct now,' he said. Dinesh paid the wages due to his workers. Shambhu signed the receipt. Very little money remained in Dinesh's pocket, yet for the first time in many days an account for a day's work had been settled. On the way home he bought lentils, oil and medicine. He had rent to pay for a small house with an old chair and paint peeling from the walls. Even so, that home would now be maintained through the responsibilities of his own choices.

Dinesh remembered his father. When there was a quarrel at home, his father used to say, first see that there is bread to eat, then attend to what is spoken. The saying had once seemed ordinary. Today, after paying Shambhu, Dinesh had less rice for his own plate, but he had withheld no one's rightful wages. He sent Ravi a message about the bank appointment the following week. 'We'll go on time,' Ravi replied. Dinesh put down the phone and wrote the names of all the necessary documents on a sheet. Each line brought a different worry, but he no longer wanted the option of concealing any of them. There was no revenge in this ordinary list, only preparation to answer for his responsibilities.

That night Dinesh took down his wedding photograph, wrapped it in paper and placed it in a box. He neither tore the picture nor publicly humiliated anyone. Once already, in the name of suffering, he had made the mistake of threatening someone. He did not wish to strike at another life again in revenge for his own wound. His responsibility before the law remained unresolved; the truth about the loan was not yet fully clear either. Before extinguishing the lamp, he wrote down the hours of the next day's work. His life apart from Kiran began with this ordinary page of a notebook.

Chapter 54: The Ethics of Reporting

When Abhay Paswan reached the town's small newsroom, three photographs lay on the desk. The first showed the locked gate of the Nai Disha Employment Centre; the second, a police vehicle; the third, Poonam's face beside her old appointment letter. Someone had sent the third picture from a mobile phone into the office group. A few weeks earlier, after Manjari Jha had been assigned responsibility for editing another edition, Naval Kishore had taken charge of the newsroom's day-to-day editing. Now the editor, seated behind the desk, said, 'People want to read Poonam's story. If we publish it now, a great many people will see it.' Abhay turned the photograph face down. 'She is a victim, not an object for display. We shall not print this picture without her consent.'

'Half the town already knows her name,' Naval Kishore said. 'A name circulating around town does not amount to permission to publish it,' Abhay replied. 'If someone has spoken of an experience under pressure, in fear, or because there seemed no other choice, we need not expose that person over and over again before everyone.' The editor removed his spectacles. 'Then what news will be left?' Abhay laid separate notes on the desk concerning the inquiry into Naresh's murder, the workers' unpaid wages and the money collected for fraudulent appointments. 'There is plenty of news. We only have to decide whether we want easy sensationalism or the real matters at issue.'

Ritesh, a newly appointed assistant in the newsroom, sat with a notebook. 'I saw a photograph of Poonam's house on an online page,' he said. 'No one is asking that page to remove it.' 'Does that mean we must do the same thing?' Abhay asked. Ritesh fell silent. Abhay explained that once an image reached an internet page, it could travel far beyond its original setting. The rush to report news did not create a right to publish a judicial statement, medical information or details identifying someone's home. 'Help readers understand the issues,' he said. 'Do not turn the victim into a target again.'

In the middle of their discussion the telephone rang. It was Poonam's maternal uncle. 'Two young men came to the door with a camera today. They said they would help if she told her whole story. Poonam would not come out.' Abhay asked what names the men had given. The uncle

said neither had properly identified himself. Abhay advised that the family could state its wishes clearly and report any unwanted intrusion to the appropriate authority. He refused to go to the family's door with a camera himself.

Naina went to visit Poonam that day. Under the doctor's supervision, Poonam had slowly begun walking again, but she still startled at voices from outside. She sat on the veranda sorting an old cloth bag. 'Have the people who came outside returned?' Naina asked. 'No,' Poonam replied. 'But a child in the neighbourhood was showing my picture on a phone. I'm at home, yet it feels as though I've been surrounded and trapped somewhere all over again.' Naina helped her loosen the knot in the bag but did not ask to see the photograph.

Poonam's mother brought water. 'I want those responsible to be punished,' she said, 'but I don't want my daughter made into the subject of everyone's gossip.' 'Abhay is being careful about that,' Naina replied. 'The names of other victims will be withheld too.' Hearing this, Poonam said, 'I gave my statement to the officer. What I said is true. But my illness, what happens inside my home, and the hours when I can sleep—none of that belongs in anyone's news report.' The boundary her friend had drawn seemed entirely right to Naina.

Back in the newsroom, Abhay began to write his report. The opening line mentioned the owner's arrest, but also stated that the charges had yet to be examined judicially. The second section dealt with evidence concerning altered appointment letters, withheld wages and restrictions on workers' movements. Beside each passage he noted the status of the source: a victim's statement, an office record or authorised information. He did not convert facts that lacked independent corroboration into unequivocal assertions in the news. Time was short, but delay in the service of accuracy was better than the speed of a lie.

Reading the new draft, Ritesh asked, 'If Naresh's murder and Poonam's exploitation are linked to the same business, why not make one story out of them?' 'State the fact that financial papers connect the two,' Abhay replied. 'But the complete circumstances of Naresh's murder will be tested in court. What Poonam suffered is a separate experience of crime. Link the evidence only as far as the evidence itself allows. Do not tie together conjectures merely to attract readers.' Ritesh wrote down the meaning of those words in his notebook.

In the afternoon a local advertiser arrived at the office. The name of his contracting business appeared on a list of Virendra's acquaintances.

'If you write so much about the workers, all contractors will acquire a bad name,' he told the editor. 'Write about development work instead.' 'What proof do you have of how many workers have been paid?' Abhay asked calmly. 'I haven't come here to account for my business,' the man replied. 'Then we have no reason to treat your statement as evidence in our inquiry,' Abhay said. 'If you have a factual objection, send it in writing.' The man rose and left. Lines of worry appeared on Naval Kishore's forehead. Advertising revenue mattered greatly to their small newsroom.

Naval Kishore called Abhay aside. 'There is rent, electricity, printing. All of it costs money. How will we pay the staff if the advertisements go?' Abhay did not dismiss his anxiety. 'The business must survive,' he said. 'But if we suppress news about workers' rights to save the business, what purpose will this newsroom serve? We shall correct anything factually wrong. We shall not remove what has been verified for the price of an advertisement.' Naval Kishore studied the accounts notebook for a while. At last he said, 'Check the report again before publication. But make sure the headline clearly distinguishes an allegation from a proved offence.'

Abhay wrote the headline: 'From the Hope of Employment to Exploitation: Questions about Workers' Rights.' 'It's very ordinary,' Naval Kishore said. 'Let the weight of the events carry the story, not words that shout,' Abhay replied. Beneath the headline he included basic information about available government assistance, written complaints and legal aid. He supplied only those addresses that the institutions concerned had publicly authorised for use. The lane where Poonam lived and the name of her treatment centre were unnecessary and were left out.

Another telephone call followed. It was Seema, a worker with the women's assistance organisation. 'Some reporters are telling the family that the victim must speak publicly, or her case will appear weak,' she said. 'Making a public statement is not a condition of completing legal proceedings,' Abhay answered. 'The victim will decide according to her comfort, wishes and safety.' 'Please state that clearly,' Seema said. 'The family is under great pressure.' Abhay added the information to the final section of his report, without including details of Poonam's private treatment or the specific forms her fear took.

Naina telephoned in the evening. 'Poonam's picture won't appear in the newspaper, will it?' she asked. 'No. There is no need to print it,'

Abhay answered. Naina was silent for a moment. 'When we were searching for her, it seemed necessary to ask everyone publicly, using her name. Now she has returned alive, it is also necessary to keep her name out of public discussion.' 'Sharing information while searching for someone and respecting their privacy after their safe return are different circumstances,' Abhay said. Naina heard the tiredness in his voice. 'Have you eaten?' she asked. Abhay laughed. 'Not yet. I'm finishing the draft.'

The report was published that night. At tea stalls the following morning, some people said there was too little drama in it; others said that for the first time they had read a clear account of the workers' unpaid wages. An elderly woman cut out the address of an assistance office printed at the foot of the page and put it in her bag. Her granddaughter had gone away to work as a domestic helper and had not received her full wages for months. 'Will I get information if I go there?' the woman asked the shopkeeper. 'It's a government address,' he replied. 'Telephone first and ask.' The practical value of the report could be seen in that small exchange.

But soon after publication, some people added Poonam's name in comments online. Ritesh saw them on the screen and was alarmed. 'We didn't publish her name, but people are writing it in the comments.' Abhay instructed the person who administered the newsroom's online page to remove personal information and abusive material in accordance with its rules. Naval Kishore agreed. It was impossible to control everything strangers posted, but they could accept responsibility for reducing the harm caused through their own platform.

Two young men stopped Poonam's younger brother as he returned from school. One asked what had really happened to his sister. The boy did not wish to answer. As soon as he reached home he told his mother. The family sought advice from Seema at the assistance organisation. Seema explained to the child that he was under no obligation to answer unwanted questions and should tell a trusted adult immediately if someone blocked his way. Hearing this, Poonam rested a hand on her little brother's head. She now worried that the burden of what she had endured might fall upon his everyday life as well.

One online page had placed a false headline above an old photograph of Poonam's home. Abhay sent a factual objection to its administrator. The reply was that the photograph had already appeared on social media. 'Redistributing material that has already gone astray does not make its circulation justified,' Abhay said. 'Produce evidence for the assertion in

your headline.' He formally requested the removal of the unsupported allegation and preserved copies of the messages and their dates. He did not turn the disagreement into an exchange of public insults.

Naresh's sister Rekha telephoned Abhay after reading the report. 'You printed my brother's name, but people calling my mother still think someone has already been convicted,' she said. 'I wrote the distinction between an accusation and a judicial decision,' Abhay replied. 'If any line is wrong or unclear, tell me.' 'You did write one thing correctly: my brother questioned the accounts,' Rekha said. 'But don't remember him only as a dead man. He helped me with my studies and brought medicine for our mother.' Abhay wrote down what she said. He did not ask permission to turn her private grief into another news story.

At an editorial meeting the next day, Abhay raised the matter of correcting an error. In the first edition, Ritesh had written the thirteenth as the date of a payment instead of the third. That did not change the nature of the incident, but dates mattered in the examination of Naresh's accounts. 'Print a clear correction of what is wrong,' Abhay said. 'If we silently change it, readers will never know.' Naval Kishore agreed. Ritesh checked every name in the draft again. A brief correction appeared in the next issue. A newsroom's credibility arose not merely from never making an error but also from acknowledging one.

One evening Abhay went to Naina's house without visiting Poonam's family. Saraswati Devi brought tea. Chandan had gone out to look for work, and there was anxiety in the house about his return. 'After the report the crowd near Poonam's home has grown smaller,' Naina said. 'But people are still asking for every detail of what happened.' 'It is right that some questions should have no public answer,' Abhay replied. 'Her life belongs to her.' 'People take pleasure in hearing of another's misery,' Saraswati Devi said. 'How difficult it must be for the person who has suffered to have to tell it all again!' They fell silent.

Naina showed Abhay a new page in her notebook. She had written down some principles for checking reliable employment information. 'I have been thinking that if we hear someone's complaint, we should not put the person's name on a list without permission,' she said. 'Exactly. Collect only the information you need, and explain beforehand what it will be used for,' Abhay replied. 'I saw so many forms filled in without asking people when I worked in that office,' Naina said. 'I don't want to

repeat that mistake in a new form.' There was the closeness of love between them in this conversation, but also the freedom to disagree about each other's work.

One evening Poonam told Seema that she might wish, in the future, to write down part of her experience, but not yet. 'If you want, you can write it for yourself,' Seema said. 'There is no obligation to make it public.' Poonam asked for a notebook. On the first page she wrote her name, then wrote nothing for a very long time. She closed it and placed it beside her pillow. The right to choose the time for telling her story was beginning to return to her own hands. Its pace had nothing to do with the hurry of the news outside.

One day Ritesh asked Abhay, 'We have to hold readers' interest in the news. Where is the boundary between propriety and appeal?' 'Ask one simple question,' Abhay replied. 'Could the reader understand the main event without that detail? If so, and if including it would cause unnecessary harm, leave it out. Ask another: is what I'm writing verified, or is it merely something people are curious about? And a third: have I given the person I am writing about a fair chance to respond?' Ritesh kept writing. He understood that producing news was not merely a matter of writing quickly.

Abhay requested fresh information from the police about Ratan's case. Sujata said that parts of the inquiry were subject to judicial proceedings, so public details would remain limited. Abhay asked whether information about legal aid for the victims was available to the public. Sujata said they would identify an appropriate public channel. Abhay did not insist on extracting confidential details of the investigation. He wrote the information he obtained with its context, and made no guesses about what he had not obtained. The right to receive information and the need to protect an investigation did not have to be opposing principles.

Reading the report, Madhavi Devi told Naina that the voices of poor women were usually heard only when someone had been beaten and injured. 'Who writes about the money saved and the children's schooling on the days when there is peace at home?' she asked. Naina passed the question on to Abhay. 'The relief during the early days of prohibition and the effects of the later illicit trade were not the same in every household,' Abhay said. 'The more people we speak to, the more different truths we shall find.' He decided that his next report would set

out several families' independently corroborated experiences, without making any one person's account stand for all.

Late at night only two lights burned in the newsroom. Naval Kishore read Abhay's next report and said, 'This time the headline is "Employees of Closed Institution Seek Work Again." After murder, smuggling and arrests, the question of employment has returned.' 'That question was there from the beginning,' Abhay replied. 'All the other events gathered around it.' Naval Kishore was silent for a moment. 'Then the task of news is to show the people left behind.' Abhay arranged separate verified accounts of Kusum's, Fakira's and Imran's unpaid wages on the desk. Their difficulties were clear without unnecessary private details about any of them.

On his way home Abhay stopped at the bus stand. Young men and women stood in queues holding files of certificates. One young woman was checking the address of an examination centre on her phone; a young man was fastening a broken strap on his sandal. The scene in Navgarh recalled Abhay's first meeting with Naina. Then she had been hurrying about in the hope of finding work; now she was planning to find reliable information for other people. Poonam had returned alive, but the wounds of what she had suffered would need time to heal. Abhay closed his notebook. Tonight there was no need to knock on anyone's door and demand answers.

The next morning Abhay read his published report again. Beside the headline was a small correction notice; at the end were useful addresses for workers' rights; there was no photograph of Poonam's family. The news had not solved every problem. Ratan's trial was still to come, Dinesh's admission still to be examined, questions about Chandan's responsibility remained, and the employees had not yet been paid. Nevertheless, on that day's page questions had been raised about injustice without making a spectacle of the victims' lives. Abhay folded the newspaper, put it in his bag and set out to gather the following day's news.

Chapter 55: Chandan's Mistake

When Chandan woke in the morning, he could hear the sound of grinding in the courtyard. Saraswati Devi was crushing coriander in a small brass container. There was a faint touch of winter in the air, yet Chandan's body was covered in sweat. The phone beneath his pillow had sounded three times during the night. The first message had come from the moneylender to whom he owed a debt, the second from an old driver, and the third from an unknown number. The last contained only these words: 'There is still time. Think carefully before you say whatever you have to say.' Chandan did not delete the message. He saved a screenshot and quietly sat up.

In the kitchen Naina was kneading dough for the rotis. Seeing her, Chandan said, 'Didi, I have to speak to Sujata-ji again today.' Washing her hands, Naina asked, 'Have you got an appointment?' 'At ten.' 'And the lawyer?' 'He will meet me near the police station at half past nine.' Saraswati Devi came in from the doorway. 'I shall come too.' Chandan immediately tried to stop her, but his mother interrupted. 'If I do not sit inside the police station, I shall sit outside. You need the courage to tell the truth. I want to say only this: do not look at my face and tell a lie.'

Naina looked at her mother's face. Her steps were still slow since her return from hospital. 'You stay at home,' she said. 'I am going with Chandan. We shall tell you whatever we learn as soon as we return.' Saraswati stood for a while beside the vessel on the fire. 'I want to save my son,' she said, 'but saving someone and hiding him are not the same thing. If your father were alive, he would say exactly that.' Chandan could not look at his mother. His father's name was rarely spoken in the house; whenever it was, everyone's voice grew softer of its own accord.

Chandan took two folded pages from his notebook out of his pocket. All night he had been writing down the dates of his deliveries. The first time he had carried building materials; the papers had then seemed ordinary. On the second occasion he had been told to deliver sealed crates. The consignment note said 'equipment', but inside the vehicle he had heard glass bottles clinking. The third time, when Manoj's men started unloading sacks, Chandan saw that the ground beside the sacks was wet and the smell was strong. He had asked, 'There is a permit for

this consignment, isn't there?' The driver had replied, 'The more questions you ask, the fewer jobs you will get.'

Earlier he had treated these incidents as proof of his uncertainty. Writing them down that night, he understood that he had continued driving the vehicle even after he began to suspect something. The five thousand rupees for the second consignment had been paid to him in cash, not into his bank account. With that money he had paid an instalment on his motorcycle and spent some on his mother's medicines. Using money for a good purpose did not make its source innocent. He had known this before, but had concealed it even from himself. On the last page of the notebook he wrote: 'I was not as frightened on the day I made the mistake as I am on the day I must admit it.'

As soon as he stepped out into the lane, Chandan met Vijay. Vijay worked at a small chemist's shop. He held a carton of medicine, and a bag hung from his bicycle's handlebar. 'Has the new examination notice come?' he asked. Chandan said, 'I haven't had time to look.' Vijay hesitated. 'I saw your photograph beside that report about the investigation. Is everything all right?' Before answering, Chandan looked around him. 'I am trying to put right what isn't right.' Vijay asked no further questions. His restraint felt to Chandan like unexpected support.

There was a crowd outside the police station: people involved in a small land dispute on one side, and on the other a family who had come to complain about a missing motorcycle. All at once, Chandan felt his own case to be both the greatest and the smallest of them all. Advocate Shashikant Jha met him on the veranda. Opening Chandan's notebook, he said, 'Write clearly what you saw with your own eyes. Say that an inference is an inference. Do not sign a statement without reading it. And keep the original copies of any papers you possess in a safe place.' Chandan nodded, but one question troubled him: what if telling the truth led to his arrest?

Sujata Kumari was sitting in her office. On the desk lay separate files concerning Naresh's murder, particulars of goods transport, and a copy of Chandan's first statement. She first made sure that Chandan was well enough and that legal assistance was available to him. Then she asked, 'In your earlier statement you said that you did not know what certain consignments contained. What do you wish to clarify now?' Chandan pushed his written pages towards her. 'The first time, I really did not

know. With the next two consignments I became suspicious. I had not opened the goods, but I was beginning to understand that something was wrong. Even so, I took the money.'

Sujata watched his face. 'When did you first become suspicious? Do you remember the date?' Chandan opened a page of his notebook. 'The Tuesday of that week, but I shall have to compare the messages on my phone to be certain of the date.' 'Good.' 'I had refused when they mentioned the payment, but later I agreed, saying that I needed the money.' Sujata said, 'What matters here, more than what was going through your mind, is what happened, when it happened, and who was there. Tell me the truth. I shall not put words into your mouth.' For the first time Chandan felt a little more at ease.

When they came to the night of the murder, Chandan's voice began to tremble. He said that Manoj had telephoned late that night and asked him to bring the vehicle. He had dropped Manoj near the bend in the canal and waited some distance away at the roadside. That was all he had said before. Now he added that he had seen the sleeve of Manoj's shirt wet that night, and that Manoj had spoken less than usual on the return journey. 'Did you see blood?' Sujata asked. 'No. I do not know whether it was water or something else.' 'Did you see a weapon in Manoj's hand?' 'I did not.' The answers were short, but he made no attempt to fill them out with conjecture.

Sujata put an old photograph in front of him: the road below the concrete bridge over the canal. 'Where was the vehicle standing?' Instead of placing his finger on the photograph, Chandan took a pencil and made a dot. 'Here. But it was dark that night. I saw the peepal tree on the right that day.' Sujata asked Arun, the officer assisting her, to make a note of this. She then explained to Chandan the consent and necessary procedure involved in examining the location records on his phone. Chandan remembered how anxious he had been then to protect that phone; today it contained the record of his own movements.

In the middle of the conversation Chandan asked for water. The glass trembled in his hand. 'I did not commit the murder,' he said softly, 'but I drove the vehicle carrying unlawful goods. I concealed the money I received.' Sujata said, 'The question of murder and the question of unlawful transport will be investigated on different grounds. Your statement will be compared with the available evidence. The legal process will take its course.' Chandan had been searching for forgiveness in her reply, but he found none; all he was given was a clear path.

As they came out of the station, Naina asked, 'Did you tell them everything?' Chandan said yes. 'Even about the consignments you suspected?' 'Yes.' 'And what you saw on the night of the murder?' 'That too.' Naina handed him a small box of rotis and sattu from her bag. Chandan said, 'I'm not hungry.' 'Eat something all the same.' Silently he took a mouthful. Outside, the tea seller was washing his utensils and a school bus had stopped on the road. Complicated questions of justice and crime continued to unfold, but the hunger of midday waited for no one.

Behind them a woman sat near the police-station gate with her adolescent son. The boy's bicycle had accidentally struck someone's vehicle, and they had come to discuss compensation. Listening to them, Chandan thought that not every mistake was a crime, but every mistake had some cost. In his own dealings, he had not been merely an unsuspecting passer-by. Once he became suspicious, he could have said no. The silence he had chosen for a small sum of money now spoke through every conversation at home. 'Whatever you've damaged, you must repair,' the woman told her son. Chandan lowered his eyes. The words troubled him for a long time.

That afternoon Sujata was preparing fresh questions on the basis of Chandan's account. She instructed Arun to compare the vehicle records, the timing of telephone calls and the statements of the alleged recipients of the consignments. 'Do not mistake someone's courage in confessing for proof of innocence,' she said, 'and do not place every offence on the shoulders of a person merely because he has admitted a mistake. Each matter must be investigated on its own evidence.' Arun added new entries to the timetable. That day a formal notification also arrived concerning Manoj's judicial custody. The work of establishing the links between the two matters was still unfinished.

Before returning home, Chandan and Naina went to the bank. The next instalment of the motorcycle loan was due in two days. Chandan asked at the counter for an accurate statement of the outstanding amount. At first the employee told him to look at his phone, but Chandan requested a written copy. The principal, interest and late-payment charges were shown separately. Many times before he had looked away from such figures; today he read every line. 'If I earn five thousand rupees next month from lawful work,' he asked Naina, 'how much shall I give the family and how much of this can I pay off?' Naina said, 'First find the work. Then we shall work out both sums.'

When they reached home, Saraswati Devi rose from her chair. 'What did they say?' Chandan replied, 'I told them what I did. There will be an investigation.' 'Did they detain you?' 'Not today. They have called me again.' Saraswati's eyes filled with tears. Touching Chandan's forehead, she said, 'When you were little, if we caught you lying, first you cried and then you told the truth. Now you will not cry any less because of your mistake. But you must change the way you live.' For the first time, Chandan told his mother that he had set aside the money remaining from the illegal earnings and would not use it without legal advice.

That evening he added a fresh page to his old notebook of expenses. Beside the amount spent on his mother's medicines he recorded where the money had come from. 'I ought to feel proud that I bought medicines for Ma,' he told Naina, 'but the money used to buy them is a thorn in my mind.' Naina answered, 'Admitting that you did wrong does not mean there was anything wrong in treating Ma. Her treatment was necessary. What was wrong was the path you chose. Next time money is needed, we shall think about it together, but we shall not take money that must be hidden.' Chandan did not shut the notebook; he left the page open.

Madhavi Devi came that evening with ingredients for a light khichdi for Saraswati. 'People outside are saying all sorts of things,' she said. 'Some say Chandan was involved in the murder; others say that because the police let him go, everything is all right. I believe neither.' Naina said, 'The matter has reached the courts. The officials will say what there is evidence for.' Madhavi nodded. 'When a poor boy takes the wrong road, people start counting the hunger in his house as well. But speaking of hunger does not excuse the wrongdoing.' Chandan was listening from inside as she spoke.

That night Vijay came again. The owner of the chemist's needed a reliable driver to bring small consignments from a warehouse, but the pay was low and the work was not permanent. Vijay said, 'I haven't given him your name without asking you. If you want, speak to the owner yourself.' Chandan asked, 'And if he hears about the police case?' 'He will hear about it. If you take a job by lying, you'll be back where you started.' Chandan was hurt, but there was no pity in Vijay's offer, only the possibility of work. He resolved to meet the owner the next day and tell the truth.

The lawyer telephoned that night. Shashikant Jha advised Chandan to put his papers in order once more before answering the police's

further questions. 'Do not delete old messages out of fear,' he said, 'and do not add things you never saw in the hope of escaping blame. If you notice an error in your statement, ask at once for it to be corrected.' Chandan asked, 'Will all this mean I am considered innocent?' 'I can promise no such thing,' the advocate replied, 'but truthful statements and sound records provide a proper basis for an investigation.' After putting the phone down, Chandan endured his fear for the first time without the comfort of a false promise.

Naina was sitting in her room writing down the likely costs of the proposed centre. Chandan appeared in the doorway. 'Didi, will you ask someone to speak for me?' 'No. If you need an introduction for work, I shall give one, but I will not conceal what you have done wrong.' 'People will say even my sister has turned against me.' 'Turning against you and refusing to lie are two different things. I shall not abandon you, but I shall not answer for your actions in your place.' Chandan lowered his eyes. He understood that his sister's love was not meant to save him from the law, but to help him find his way back to an honest life.

The next day Chandan went to meet the chemist's owner. 'Where have you worked before?' the owner asked. Chandan named his first employer, then added, without being pressed, that the police were investigating some of his goods-transport work. The owner did not promise him a job then and there. 'I need someone who can deliver medicine to sick people on time,' he said. 'I shall check the papers, the licence and the investigation, and then tell you.' Chandan came back empty-handed, but this time he had not been tempted to seize an opportunity by lying.

On his way he saw a notice announcing the postponement of an examination pasted outside his old coaching institute. Savita stood with other candidates reading the recruitment notice. Seeing Chandan, she asked, 'Will you sit the examination again?' Chandan replied, 'I haven't given up studying. But I have to face the consequences of what I did.' Savita said, 'Answer for the mistake you made; don't throw away the work you put in.' This was no easy consolation. Savita herself had been troubled for months by the cancellation of examinations. Both knew that they would also have to find the money for another application fee.

When Chandan came home, Saraswati Devi was spreading bedding in the sun on the veranda. He took the bucket and brought water. His mother asked, 'Did you get the job?' 'Not yet.' 'Will you go again?' 'Yes, with the papers.' Saraswati did not smile, but her voice no longer

trembled as it had before. 'Bring the bedding in today. There will be dew this evening.' Without a word Chandan began to fold it up. For the first time in a long while, someone in the household had asked him to perform an ordinary task, not answer a great and painful question.

That evening a fresh notification appeared on Chandan's phone, instructing him to appear on a specified day the following week in connection with the investigation. He showed it to Naina and the lawyer, then wrote the date beside the message in his notebook. The consequences of his offence had not ended. The debt remained, and lawful employment was still only a possibility. But he did not turn off his phone and hide in the dark. When Saraswati called him to eat, he washed the utensils, set them on the table, and sat beside his mother.

Chapter 56: A New Effort to Find Work

In the morning light Naina opened an old notebook and sat down to work. Once she had recorded the dates of her job applications in it; later she had added the wages paid by the Nai Disha Employment Centre, the false receipts and the stages of the search for Poonam. Now the last few pages contained a new reckoning: the rent of a room, two tables, chairs, electricity, printing and repairs to an old computer. At the top of the page she had written, ‘Employment Assistance—No False Promises of Appointment.’ Writing the heading was easy. She knew that before asking other people to place their trust in a centre bearing that name, she would have to answer a thousand questions.

Serving breakfast, Saraswati Devi said, ‘First your own earnings stopped, and now you are taking on the burden of finding work for other people?’ Naina replied, ‘I shall look for work for myself too. In the first month the centre will bring expenses, not income. That is why I shall not stop giving tuition.’ Her mother asked, ‘Where will you get the rent?’ Naina turned the notebook towards her. ‘I have spoken to Savita. Kusum will come too. At first we shall rent a room for two days each week. We shall show separately what it costs to provide services free of charge.’ Saraswati examined the figures carefully. ‘You have to keep accounts if you want a fire burning in the kitchen,’ she said. ‘That much is true.’

At midday Naina went to the old public library. Local organisations sometimes held meetings on its front veranda. The library committee's secretary, Harinarayan Jha, had formerly worked with panchayat records. He asked Naina two questions before anything else: ‘Are you a company that provides jobs, or a centre that provides information?’ and ‘Who will examine the documents of the unemployed people who come here?’ Naina answered clearly, ‘We shall not appoint anyone. We shall check public notices about vacancies in government and private employment, help people complete applications, and give them the addresses of the appropriate offices for wage claims and complaints. We shall not keep the original copies of anyone's certificates.’ A little confidence appeared on the secretary's face.

Not everyone on the library committee agreed. One member asked, ‘If a job you tell people about turns out to be fraudulent, who will take

responsibility?' Naina replied, 'We shall state plainly where the information came from. We shall not label anything "verified" unless it has been checked. People will make their own decisions, but they will know how to examine the information.' Another member asked whether those running the centre were connected to any political party. Naina explained her role and those of her colleagues. The committee gave conditional permission to use a small room two days a week. Naina would have to find the first month's expenses herself.

Savita was waiting outside. She carried the official notice cancelling an examination because of a question-paper leak, together with copies of the candidates' written questions. 'People are falling into the agents' traps again,' she said. 'Some say the new examination is certain; others say a secret selection list has already been drawn up.' Naina said, 'We shall put up only notices from authorised websites or offices. Anything unconfirmed will be marked as unconfirmed.' Savita laughed. 'In that case, half the noticeboard will be empty.' 'Better empty than filled with lies.' On that point they agreed.

Kusum arrived with some employment-related papers she still had from the closed office. She made it clear at the outset that she would not use anyone's private records without permission. 'I shall continue trying to recover my unpaid wages,' she said. 'But after work I can use my experience to warn other applicants. I can tell them what to look for when they read a letter of appointment.' Naina asked her to help at the assistance desk. 'First put it in writing that nobody at this centre will guarantee anyone a job,' Kusum said. Her voice bore the weariness of an old deception.

Before their first day, Naina, Kusum and Savita drew up a page of rules. Naina revised it as she listened to the others. They would not keep photocopies of personal documents without a need. A clear list of charges would hang at the door, and no one would be charged for basic information offered free of cost. If there were expenses for filling in an application, a receipt would be issued. They would not accept money in exchange for displaying a company's advertisement. The identity of anyone making a complaint would not be made public without permission. All three read and signed a copy of the rules. Kusum said, 'Writing the rules will not be enough. We shall have to apply them to ourselves as well.'

Madhavi Devi arrived early with a broom. 'There is no need for you to sweep here,' Naina told her. Madhavi laughed. 'It may be your centre,

but the dust won't ask my caste. If I do the work, record what you will pay me. What sort of accounting is it to help the poor by taking their labour for nothing?' Naina felt ashamed. She added the cleaning fee for the first week to her budget. From Madhavi's words came the centre's first genuinely practical rule: no one's labour would be taken without payment in the name of service.

An old wall clock hung in the room. A fan turned with a rattling sound, and dust from the road drifted through the window. On the board Savita wrote, 'Employment Information and Application Assistance.' Beneath it Kusum added in smaller letters, 'No Promise of Appointment.' Naina pinned up the list of rules. Nobody came during the first hour. In the second, a young man stopped at the door and asked, 'How much must I pay to register here?' Naina said, 'First tell us what help you need. Some information is free.' The young man did not believe her.

He was Imran, who had worked temporarily at Nai Disha. Two months' wages were still owed to him, and he was now looking for work in a shop selling motor parts. 'I am ashamed to tell anyone the name of my former employer,' he said. Kusum replied, 'Why should someone whose wages have been withheld feel ashamed? You have proof of the work you did, haven't you?' Imran showed his identity card and old messages concerning his wages. Kusum gave him information about the appropriate office for lodging his claim for arrears; Naina checked the telephone number in the advertisement from the new shop. 'Will I get the job?' Imran asked. 'I don't know,' Naina said, 'but I will not lie to you.'

Their second visitor was the son of an elderly farmer. He was looking for training in sewing for his sister. An advertisement received on his phone demanded a large deposit at the outset. Savita said, 'Check the organisation's name, its registration and the address of those who provide the training. A pretty poster is not evidence of trustworthiness.' The young man said, 'When I asked somewhere else, they told me to deposit the money at once. Why are you all taking so much time?' Kusum replied, 'Because the money belongs to your household; it is not our income.'

That evening Naina recorded the accounts. Four visitors had come. No one had obtained a job, but notices for two suspicious advertisements had been set aside. Printing had cost twenty rupees, tea twelve, and the cleaning fee had been agreed. Cash income: zero. 'A great business we

have begun,' Savita joked. Naina replied, 'On the day there is income, that too will be accounted for openly.' Closing the window, Kusum said, 'Don't be afraid of this emptiness. Giving someone an honest answer on the first day is work as well.'

Naina did not visit Poonam's house that day. She telephoned first to ask whether a visit would be welcome. Poonam's voice was steadier than before, but she said, 'I'm tired today. Come tomorrow.' Naina answered only, 'All right.' Since Poonam's rescue, many people had advised her to return quickly to a normal life. Naina was gradually learning that a person's health and the use of her own time were matters for her own decision. She had thought of asking Poonam to help at the centre, but it was necessary to learn what Poonam wanted before making any proposal.

The following day Naina arrived at Poonam's door. Sunlight lay across the courtyard. Poonam sat in a chair sewing the edge of a piece of cloth. Her mother brought tea from inside. Naina explained the centre's work and rules plainly. 'There is absolutely no obligation for you to come,' she said. 'If you feel like it, sometime you could help us understand difficult language in appointment letters.' Poonam stopped sewing. 'Even the mention of those papers frightens me now.' Naina said at once, 'Then not that work. No one will press you.'

After a while Poonam asked, 'What sort of work could I do without having to leave home?' Naina said, 'We need help reading public information and writing it in language people can easily understand. But only if you want to.' Poonam considered this. 'At first I shall come for one hour on one day each week and see. I don't want my name publicised.' 'We won't even put your name down without your permission,' Naina said. Poonam did not smile, but she agreed to come and look at the centre the following Tuesday. It was her own decision.

That evening Naina did not enter Poonam's name in the notebook as an employee. She wrote only, 'Tuesday—visit according to visitor's wishes.' Kusum asked, 'Will Poonam come?' 'Perhaps. Leave the decision to her.' Kusum nodded. 'I'll remember.' Meanwhile Savita had received a new notice about a competitive examination. The date was not yet final. Kusum wrote 'PROVISIONAL' in large letters on the board. Such a small word could stop many false hopes from taking root.

Chandan was the first visitor on the third day. He arrived with his old driving licence and a blank sheet for a recommendation. Naina showed no surprise; she opened the register and asked, 'What help do

you need?' Chandan said, 'The chemist's owner wants my licence and details of my previous work. I don't want to conceal the fact that I am under police investigation. But what should I write in the application?' Naina explained the general employment rules, then advised him to consult his lawyer about how to state the legal circumstances. 'I shall help you complete your application, not select you for the job,' she said. For the first time Chandan sat on the other side of his sister's counter like any ordinary applicant.

Savita asked Chandan whether he still had his old examination-preparation books. 'I do,' he said. Savita proposed a small, free group-study session one evening each week. It would cover the official syllabus, previous question papers and application deadlines, as well as warnings against agents who claimed to provide examination questions in advance. Naina said, 'Let us keep a separate time for it, away from the centre's regular services. Don't trap the students in a crowd of people seeking work.' Everyone agreed to the proposal.

Madhavi Devi brought in a woman named Budhni. Budhni cooked in two households, but one had withheld her wages for months. 'I cannot read,' she asked, 'so can I still get help here?' Naina offered her a chair. 'The work you do is employment too. First let us hear about the wages you are owed.' Budhni counted the days she had worked; Madhavi helped her remember the dates. Kusum prepared a written account and supplied the address of an appropriate labour-assistance contact. 'This is the first time I have had my own story written down,' Budhni said.

The next day Budhni returned with a small bundle of jaggery. 'I haven't paid off my debts,' she said, 'but the employer gave me half the wages he owed me. I showed him the written account, and then we were able to discuss it.' Naina tried to return the bundle. 'This isn't a service fee,' Budhni said. 'It's jaggery from our home. Share it among yourselves.' Madhavi laughed. The five of them ate the jaggery together. It was a small success—her family's debts had not disappeared and no permanent work had been found—but Budhni had been able to ask for the wages she had earned without fear.

The centre's first week was difficult. A power cut at Anil's cyber shop prevented some applications from being completed on time. Naina warned those whose deadlines were imminent to use another available centre. One company offered to pay a monthly sum if its advertisement was displayed. Naina asked for time to check the documents; the company replied immediately that there was no need for so many

questions. Its advertisement was given no place on the board. An opportunity for income had been lost, but the centre's first rule had survived.

A woman came to show them an old appointment letter. It bore the company's seal, but where her salary should have been stated were the words 'To Be Decided After Training.' 'At home they say that if I leave the job, people will call me lazy,' she said. Naina asked about the working hours, safe travel and the terms of her pay in writing. Reading each point, the woman was astonished. 'I looked only at the place where I had to sign,' she said. Savita explained how she could obtain information about employment terms from the relevant office. The centre did not decide for her; it merely made the meaning of the paper clear.

One evening Abhay came to see the centre. Before speaking to Naina, he read the list of charges on the board. 'If I write a report, more people will come,' he said. 'First see whether we can manage so many,' Naina replied. 'And Poonam's name must not appear in that report.' Abhay agreed. 'I'll give information about the work, not praise it like an advertisement,' he said. Naina asked, 'What if I make a mistake?' Abhay answered, 'Then I'll question you just as I would any other organisation.' Both laughed. Their laughter contained the trust that had survived earlier disagreements.

Poonam came on Tuesday, accompanied by her mother. She hesitated as she stepped inside. The tables, computer, files and receipts brought back memories of the old office. Naina came forward. 'Sit here. If you do not feel comfortable, you can go home at once.' Poonam chose a chair by the window. Instead of asking her questions, Kusum offered her tea. After a while Poonam read three notices on the board. The name of a private company was unclear on one of them. 'Where is this place?' she asked. Savita said, 'We haven't finished checking it yet.' With a red pencil Poonam herself wrote 'UNVERIFIED' beneath it.

An hour later Poonam stood up. 'That's enough for today,' she said. Naina accompanied her to the door. 'Would you like to come next week?' Poonam thought for a moment. 'I may come. But whatever work I do must be treated as work, not as an act of charity.' Naina replied immediately, 'Then we shall agree on payment for it, however small the task.' Poonam smiled for the first time. 'Good. I'll check my time and let you know.' Her mother watched her daughter turn towards home.

Such a brief journey outside the house might be nothing to someone else; for Poonam it had been difficult.

When Naina returned home at the end of the week, she counted the money remaining in her pocket. After paying the rent, little was left. Saraswati Devi asked, 'You work so hard, but what have you saved for yourself?' Naina answered, 'For now, experience and accounts. In time I shall need a steady income. I shall not stop teaching the schoolchildren.' Her mother served her hot rice. 'Run a centre that doesn't take people's money and then fall silent,' she said. Naina said nothing. The memory of the old institution and the responsibility of the new one seemed to sit beside the same serving dish.

In the second week Harinarayan Jha, the library secretary, came to inspect the centre. He examined the receipt book, the rules for visitors' consent and the accounts of expenditure. 'You've helped very few people,' he said. Naina replied, 'We have recorded what happened. We make no claim about what did not.' Harinarayan signed a page extending their permission to use the library room for another month. 'When your work depends on other people's trust, you must also have patience,' he said. After he had gone, Kusum laughed. 'Perhaps that signature is our first proof of earnings.'

Closing the window that evening, Naina looked out at the road. They had given no visitor a false guarantee of employment. Savita was carrying a poster through a crowd of students leaving a coaching class; Madhavi had entered her day's wages on a receipt and gone home; Poonam had sent the time she herself wished to come the following week. The new centre possessed no power to transform anyone's fate. But here there was a place to ask questions instead of being deceived, and the courage to say clearly when an answer was not available. Beneath the noticeboard Naina pinned a note: 'CLOSED TOMORROW'—because the following day she herself had a job interview.

Chapter 57: Opposition to the Marriage

The morning in Navgarh was clear in the month of Aghan. Saraswati Devi was winnowing rice in the courtyard when her maternal cousin Shailendra Jha arrived at the door. He had brought his wife Kamala and a wedding invitation for a young niece. The conversation began with ordinary family news: how things stood in one household or another, who was ill and who had gone away for work. But before they had finished their tea, Shailendra asked, ‘Have you thought about Naina's marriage? She is getting older.’ Saraswati replied, ‘Naina will decide for herself. I shall hear what she has to say first.’ Shailendra's cup stopped halfway to his lips. ‘A daughter's marriage is hardly a matter for one person alone.’ Two days before that morning Naina had returned from a scheduled job interview. The private institute offered low wages and such long hours that running the employment-assistance centre would become difficult. She had received no written assurance of an appointment either. While awaiting a reply, she had decided to continue both her work at the centre and the income she earned by teaching children. More than a year had passed since the day Naina first stood in a queue to apply for work. Two rainy seasons had come in the meantime; examinations had been cancelled and new notices had appeared. Through it all, the family's anxieties and struggle for employment had slowly changed their shape.

Naina was in the inner room matching receipts from the employment centre. She could hear her name being mentioned, but did not come out. Shailendra asked his next question: ‘That journalist, Abhay Paswan—he comes here, doesn't he?’ Saraswati said, ‘He does. He has helped us a great deal in times of trouble.’ Kamala spoke rather sharply. ‘People are saying all sorts of things. Shouldn't anyone look at caste and community, family background, earnings?’ Saraswati put down the winnowing tray. ‘If there is something I can ask my daughter, I shall not seek its answer from gossip.’

Naina came outside. ‘Mama, whatever you want to ask, ask me,’ she said. Shailendra looked her up and down. ‘You people have become very educated. But society has its rules. Abhay belongs to a different caste. His employment is not permanent, and who knows what salary he gets? On top of that there is Chandan's case. This is no time to raise the question

of marriage.' Naina did not answer at once. She took the empty teacups inside, returned, and said, 'I shall answer every point, one by one. First, please don't interrupt me.'

Shailendra tried to laugh. 'Why would I wish you harm?' 'I am not saying you wish me harm,' Naina replied. 'But how can a decision about my life be made without me?' Kamala said softly, 'Your mother's honour is at stake too.' Naina sat beside her mother. 'It is good that you are concerned about her honour. Then first ask Ma what she wants.' Saraswati Devi had remained silent for a long time. 'I want my daughter to make a home founded on trust, not on deception and fear,' she said.

There was genuine concern behind the uncle's displeasure. His own son's marriage negotiations had collapsed for financial reasons, and he still remembered the humiliation the family had suffered that day. 'If Abhay leaves his work at the newspaper, how will you run a home?' he asked. 'Naina herself was unemployed only yesterday, and now she runs a small assistance centre. None of this offers a secure life.' Naina did not brush the question aside. 'You are right,' she said. 'The question of income is difficult. I shall speak to Abhay plainly about it. But it is not right to hide the question of caste discrimination behind the question of earnings.'

'You don't understand,' Shailendra said sternly. 'What will the relatives say? Who will come to the wedding?' Naina answered, 'Those who wish us well will come. We shall not drag here those who don't.' 'And the traditions of your family?' 'Our family traditions also include caring for our parents, respecting guests and speaking the truth. Why should I abandon any of those?' Kamala said, 'It all sounds fine on paper. Life is different.' Naina looked at her. 'That is precisely why I am asking about life: who will stand beside the other in illness, how household expenses will be shared, how we will speak when one of us makes a mistake.'

The visit did not end in bitterness, but neither did it end happily. Shailendra said he would make no promise for the time being and would speak to the relatives. Naina told him that no marriage arrangement concerning her should be made without her consent. The guests left. After the door had closed, Saraswati Devi picked up the winnowing tray, but her hands stopped. 'If your father were alive, what a difficult conversation this would have been,' she said. Naina went to her. 'What are you afraid of, Ma?' For the first time Saraswati spoke openly. 'I

don't want you to suffer. I am not afraid of anyone's caste; I am afraid of the cruelty of people.'

That evening Abhay did not go straight from the newsroom to Naina's centre. Naina telephoned him herself and said there was something important they needed to discuss. They met at the old tea shop near the bus stand. There were few customers, and they sat on a bench outside. Naina told him everything her uncle had said. Abhay listened for a long time. 'I don't want your mother to be insulted because of me,' he said. Naina asked, 'Is the cause of that insult you, or the way other people behave?' Abhay answered, 'Whatever the cause, its burden enters people's lives. We must think about that burden without deceiving ourselves.'

Abhay explained his monthly earnings. His basic salary at the newsroom was fixed, but allowances and income from additional assignments were uncertain. After rent, food, help for elderly family members and repayments on an old debt, little remained in savings. 'I won't promise you a large house,' he said. 'Sometimes there will be pressure to suppress a report; sometimes the fear of losing my job. But I will not lie about money.' Naina showed him her own accounts for tuition and the centre's expenses. 'I cannot work miracles either,' she said. For the first time, they were setting out their separate figures openly in a conversation about love.

'What does your family think?' Naina asked. Abhay said, 'Ma has told me to hear you out. Father is worried that your family should not suffer still more from the pressure. My younger sister asks whether Naina will have to give up her work after marriage. I told her: why should it be for me to raise the question of her giving up her work?' Naina smiled. 'Then understand this from the beginning: I shall earn my own living by my labour.' Abhay said, 'And my journalism must not become the whole religion of the household. I shall have to make time to listen to you.'

They were silent for a while. A vehicle passed along the road with musicians playing wedding music. 'The wedding season has begun,' the shopkeeper said with a laugh. Naina and Abhay looked at one another. 'What if the opposition grows stronger?' Abhay asked quietly. Naina said, 'I shall change my decision on the basis of your conduct, not other people's threats. If you ever silence me, stop me working or deceive me, I shall reconsider. But not because of caste.' Abhay answered, 'The same rule applies to me. We shall build a life as equals, protecting one another and questioning one another too.'

On her way home Naina passed through the lane behind the bus stand. A newly married couple were loading their belongings for a rented room onto a rickshaw. The bride held a brass plate; the groom carried a mattress. They were arguing about something and then both burst out laughing. Naina thought that marriage was not merely a ceremony. It meant sharing the day's tasks, fatigue and disagreements, and choosing again and again to go forward together. To a point her uncle's question was sound: a household had to be run. But its answer could not be found in a distinction of caste.

The next day Shailendra telephoned Saraswati Devi. He said some of the family wished to speak to Naina. Saraswati asked Naina for her consent. 'I'll speak to them,' Naina said, 'but no decision about me should be made at a secret meeting.' Accordingly, a small family gathering was arranged for Sunday. Naina told Abhay as well. 'Don't come yet,' she said. 'First let my own family hear me.' Abhay agreed. Naina felt that, in making this decision, she had found a place for her own voice.

Four relatives gathered on the veranda on Sunday. Shakuntala, an aunt, first asked Saraswati, 'Do you truly agree?' Saraswati said, 'My daughter is an adult. I am concerned, but I shall not stop her decision by force.' Shailendra repeated his objections: 'Different caste, little income.' Naina did not turn her answers into a quarrel. 'I have listened to you all,' she said. 'I understand that you fear I may suffer. But I shall live my life by my own decision. I wish to marry Abhay. We shall decide when, after considering the legal case, my mother's health and our work arrangements. We shall not hurry without thinking.'

Shakuntala said, 'If you break a boundary established over centuries, there will be consequences.' Naina replied, 'Every decision has consequences. I cannot accept that caste determines who is worthy and who is not. I have seen hardship with Abhay, and we have disagreed too. He stood against pressure to write false news. His identity is not merely his surname.' Shailendra remained unconvinced. 'You are deciding in a rush of emotion.' Naina said, 'There are feelings, but there are accounts too. I know his income; he knows my responsibilities.'

At that moment Chandan came out carrying water. One of the relatives said on seeing him, 'There is already a case going on in this house. Settle that first.' Setting down the tray, Chandan said, 'Don't put the burden of my wrongdoing on Didi's marriage. I have said what I needed to say in the investigation. The legal process will continue. It is

not right to stop her life on my account.' His voice was not steady, but he did not flee the gathering. 'You should keep quiet for now,' Shailendra said. Naina replied, 'He is speaking about his own responsibility. Listen to him.'

Saraswati looked at both her children. One was acknowledging a mistake; the other was stating her decision about her life. She remembered the first days of her marriage to her husband. The family's finances had been poor then, but the two of them had managed the expenses together. 'I will say only this to you all,' she told the relatives. 'Speak openly about whatever you fear. But do not hand Naina over to someone as though she were an object. She is educated, she works hard and she has views of her own. What is shameful about that?'

Some of the relatives softened; others did not. Shakuntala said, 'I would like to meet Abhay.' Naina replied, 'That is fair. Abhay's family can meet you all too, provided everyone treats one another with respect.' Shailendra spoke not angrily now, but wearily. 'I still do not agree.' Naina said, 'I have heard your disagreement. But I shall not conceal my decision because of it.' At the close of the gathering, nobody felt victorious. Nevertheless, everyone had heard what Naina had to say. That was the first difference.

After the relatives had gone, Saraswati was exhausted. Naina helped her sit on the bed. 'I had never heard anything like that before,' her mother said, 'a daughter speaking so clearly about her own marriage.' Naina asked, a little hesitantly, 'Are you angry?' Saraswati replied, 'No. But I worry about the cruel things people will say to you.' Naina took her hand. 'I won't have to hear them alone. If you wish, we shall talk to everyone gradually. But I shall be truthful about my decision.'

Abhay called that night. Naina told him about the entire meeting: her uncle's opposition, her aunt's questions, Chandan's words and her mother's reply. Abhay said, 'I'm ready to talk to your uncle, but I don't want to use the prospect of being insulted as an excuse to start another quarrel.' Naina said, 'First, speak openly in your own house.' Abhay agreed. 'Ma already knows. I'll speak to Father in detail. I want people from both families to meet with respect, if they can. Even if that isn't possible, my own decision will remain clear.'

The next day Abhay went to his family home. His mother was cooking dal on the stove; his father was reading an old newspaper. Abhay told them of the opposition in Naina's family. His father first asked, 'Is Naina certain of what she herself wants?' 'Yes.' 'Then why

should she be pressured in the name of society?' Abhay's mother said, 'I care about the girl's peace of mind, not her caste. But you earn little and have responsibilities at home. Make the decision together.' Abhay replied that he and Naina had already spoken about their expenses. His mother said, 'Tell me when you arrange a day for us to meet.'

When Shakuntala next telephoned, her voice was less stern than before. 'Do the women in Abhay's family work?' she asked. 'Surely his family won't make Naina leave her work?' Naina replied, 'I have spoken plainly to him about that. You can ask his family yourself when you meet them.' Her aunt was silent for a moment. 'I left my job at a school after I married,' she said. 'Everyone said looking after the home was important work. Later, when we needed money, finding another job was difficult.' For the first time Naina heard her aunt's own unfulfilled longing beneath her opposition.

The following day Abhay's sister Rani telephoned Naina. Rani spoke openly in her own home about education and work. 'Bhaiya says you will continue working at your centre,' she said. 'I was pleased. But our father's health hasn't been good lately. It would be wise to decide in advance who will take responsibility for caring for him in the future.' Naina answered, 'My mother's health is weak too. We should not force either one of us to abandon our own family to care for the other's. We shall work out an arrangement together.' Rani's question was about life, not caste, and Naina took it seriously.

Shailendra was still not at ease. He tried to obtain information about Abhay from an old acquaintance without telling the family. The acquaintance said that some people had written unpleasant things on social media about the young man who worked as a journalist. Shailendra was close to believing it when he remembered the false allegations spread against Naina too. He asked for documents. 'Where is the evidence for these accusations?' The acquaintance gave him no answer. Shailendra did not tell Naina about the incident, but for the first time he understood how dangerous it could be to make decisions for a family on the basis of rumour.

As Naina was thinking about marriage, Chandan said, 'Didi, if you postpone it because of my case, I shall feel even worse.' Naina replied, 'The time of your case and the time of my life are separate things. I shall decide when it is right, but not by concealing your wrongdoing.' Chandan asked, 'Will Abhay hate me?' Naina said, 'Criticising what you have done and hating you are two different things. He has listened to

what you have to say. What you do from now on will show what kind of person you wish to become.' Chandan did not answer immediately.

That evening Naina was returning after finishing work at the new centre. 'You look sad today,' Savita said. Naina replied, 'Marriage has come up at home. People are arguing about caste and income.' Savita laughed. 'We have worn ourselves out sitting examinations in the name of jobs. People seem to think marriage is another examination.' Naina smiled. 'The difference is that I shall choose the questions for this one myself,' she said. They walked down from the veranda together. Outside, people were preparing coloured lights for a wedding, while inside the centre a notice of the next day's vacancies hung on the board.

That night, on the last page of her notebook, Naina wrote several questions about married life: where they would live, how they would divide expenses, her mother's medical care, responsibility for Abhay's parents, the time required for her centre, the risks of journalism and mutual respect during religious and customary observances. She wrote nothing that was intended as a test of love. These were practical questions concerning the ordinary routine of married life. She decided to discuss them with Abhay one by one when they next met. She knew that without clear arrangements alongside affection, many small questions could later grow into great quarrels.

In the morning a message from Kamala arrived at Saraswati's door: 'Yesterday's words hurt me, but I shall meet Naina again calmly.' Naina read it and gave it to her mother. 'Let her come,' she said. 'I can listen to disagreement. I shall only not surrender the right to decide for myself.' Saraswati Devi watered the tulsi shrine in the courtyard. No date for the marriage had yet been fixed, and the relatives still differed in their opinions. But Naina had neither hidden her decision nor insulted anyone. She picked up her bag and set out for the employment centre, where people would again be queuing in search of work that day. She had no doubts about her decision.

Chapter 58: The Court Hearing

A winter morning mist lay across the road leading to the district court in Navgarh. Smoke rose from the tea stalls, and outside the gate people stood with papers tucked into their bags. Rekha Mandal had draped her brother's old woollen shawl over her shoulders. It had belonged to Naresh. He had bought it the previous year but had worn it very little. Rekha had thought of putting it away. On her way to court that morning, she had felt that having something familiar beside her might help her say what she needed to say. Naresh's wife Seema and an elderly neighbour, Bisundev Sah, accompanied her. Seema carried a small box of food that she had not found an opportunity to open all morning. Many weeks had passed between Ratan's arrest and this court hearing. In the meantime the charge sheet had been prepared, lawyers had made their arrangements and witnesses had been served notices; the family had sometimes had to wait from one date to the next.

A hearing concerning Ratan Singh and Manoj Sah was scheduled that day. The police had filed a charge sheet based on their investigation into the murder. Records relating to some of the allegations of employment fraud and trafficking of workers had also reached the competent courts, but not all those matters were going to be decided on a single day. Sujata Kumari had patiently explained this to the family several times beforehand. Rekha had listened, and yet in a corner of her heart she wished someone would stand up today and say who had killed Naresh and why. She had shared that longing with no one.

Before entering the court premises, Rekha had to write her name on a sheet of paper. A security guard asked which case she was connected with. ‘I am Naresh Mandal's sister,’ Rekha said. The guard found her name on the list and very respectfully showed her the right way inside. Even that ordinary procedure felt heavy to her. In the village she had been known less by her own name than as her brother's sister. Today that relationship had to be written on paper. Inside, an elderly woman was asking which room handled a question about her husband's pension. Rekha could see that each staircase in the building held someone's private waiting.

Abhay met them near the gate. He had an old bag over his shoulder and his newsroom identity card in his hand. Greeting Rekha, he asked,

'When did you arrive?' Rekha said, 'A little while ago. There are so many people here that I cannot tell which room we are supposed to go to.' Abhay directed her to the information board for court assistance. 'I have come to write a news report. I shall not ask about your private affairs without permission.' Rekha said, 'My brother's murder has become news. But news does not understand a family's household expenses.' Abhay answered, 'I shall not forget that.'

Seema was looking for somewhere to sit on the court veranda. Her son had gone to school; an elderly woman from the neighbourhood would look after him until evening. When Naresh was alive, he had always paid the boy's school fees before the third of the month. This time Seema had placed the fee receipt in her bag as though it too formed part of the murder papers. 'My dear, the road to the justice you seek is long,' Bisundev said. 'But you must look after your body as well.' Seema opened the food box. Inside were two rotis and potato curry. She broke off half a roti and offered it to Rekha. 'I'm not hungry,' Rekha said. Seema insisted. 'We cannot manage simply by saying we feel no hunger.'

Seema had also brought a list of the debts the family had incurred in the first two months after Naresh's death. She kept looking at it as though someone at court might ask her to account for their deprivation. Rekha said, 'Put those papers away for now. We shall produce them when they are needed.' Seema asked, 'But who will speak of what is not written on paper? The child's sleepless nights, my fear of going to the market, the day the rent falls due?' Rekha considered this for a while. 'Each matter will have its own place,' she said. 'Today we shall listen to what is necessary. The rest of our lives we shall have to manage at home.'

Before the hearing, Sujata was speaking to her colleague Arun. The police had preserved records of Naresh's last telephone contacts, the warehouse entry register, the movements of the old vehicle and the medical report. These formed the evidentiary basis for reconstructing the sequence of events in the murder, but Sujata knew that each claim made by the prosecution would be tested in court and challenged by the defence. 'Match the list of original documents again,' she told Arun. 'Every certified copy we provide must correspond to its original.' Arun nodded. 'We also have the receipt for the notebook Rekha handed over.' 'Good. Let the documents speak more than we do.'

Meanwhile Ratan was brought in under guard. Rekha saw him at such close quarters for the first time. At public gatherings in town he had sat on a dais wearing garlands. Now there were two policemen

beside him, and a lawyer handed him his papers. He walked with his head lowered, but once he looked around. Rekha could not tell whether his eyes had fallen on her. Seema suddenly seized Rekha's arm. 'Come, let us sit over here,' Rekha whispered. They tried to keep their eyes on the courtroom door rather than on Ratan's face.

Outside the courtroom a young man was arguing loudly with his friend about Ratan's arrest. One said that wealthy people obtained bail and escaped in the end; the other said that once someone had been arrested, his guilt was proved. Passing by, Sujata stopped. 'Both questions will be determined through the court process,' she said calmly. The young men fell silent. Hearing her, Rekha thought that to her every sheet bearing an allegation was not merely a number but the absence of her brother. Yet if justice were left to whim, why would Naresh have been so insistent all his life that accounts should be reconciled?

Manoj was brought in by another route. Chandan had not come to court; he had been instructed to attend on a specified date in connection with his separate investigation. Naina had wanted him not to go merely to watch a spectacle in the court crowd. She herself had come not with Poonam but to ask after Naresh's family. After giving Saraswati Devi her medicines, she had arranged for Savita to stay at her house for a while. When she saw Rekha near the court gate, she stood beside her. 'Didi, you did not need to come here,' Rekha said. Naina answered, 'I haven't come to deliver a verdict. Tell me if you need anything.'

When the hearing began, there were too few seats in the courtroom. Some people remained waiting on the veranda outside. A court employee called the cases in order. When the case concerning Naresh's murder was announced, the lawyers stood. The court confirmed the presence of the prosecution and defence. There was discussion of the status of supplying copies of the filed charge sheet and associated records. The prosecution raised concerns about the safety of certain witnesses. The defence requested full copies of the documents and adequate opportunity to present its case. The court heard both sides.

Rekha could not understand every word she heard. At one moment there was a date, at another a document number, at another a discussion about supplying copies. She kept twisting the edge of her shawl. Ratan's lawyer said that arrest did not amount to proof of guilt; the allegations had to be examined. The prosecutor replied that the charge sheet contained material gathered from several independent sources and that

witness protection was important. Rekha understood that the court would hear both assertions. Her pain alone would not be sufficient here.

In a corner of the veranda Rekha met Kusum, one of Naresh's former colleagues. She carried an application about unpaid wages from the closed office. She stopped when she saw Rekha. 'Whenever Naresh-babu checked an account, he would not leave even a single rupee unexplained,' she said. 'I used to wonder why he was so careful. Now I understand.' Rekha asked, 'Have you received your wages?' Kusum shook her head. 'A case is going on against the owner, but employees still have to feed themselves.' Rekha said, 'Please don't consider anyone's claim to their rights unimportant on my brother's account. Keep a copy of your papers safe.'

During a break Rekha went outside. 'Would you like me to help you understand anything?' Abhay asked. Rekha said, 'They spoke of so many documents. When will there be justice?' Abhay replied, 'Today was not a day for judgment. The next hearing concerns the records and the process relating to charges. The testimony will come at a different stage.' Rekha gave a lifeless little laugh. 'My brother was killed in so short a time, and it takes so long to tell the truth about it.' Abhay searched for an answer but offered no hasty consolation.

Naina took Rekha towards a small stationery seller on the court premises. The shop sold blank paper, folders and ink for legal stamps. 'There is a copy of the notebook your brother kept, isn't there?' Naina asked. 'Yes. Sujata-ji gave a receipt. The police have the original and I have another copy.' 'Keep your copy safe at home. And don't sign any papers under pressure without understanding them.' Rekha said, 'I am in no state to fight anyone today. But I shall first understand what my signature means.' As she spoke, her voice grew a little steadier.

On the veranda Seema brought up the question of her son's school fees. 'The court will decide whom to hold responsible for his death. But the month's rent has to be paid today,' she said. Bisundev suggested submitting a written request to the school's headmaster for an extension. Naina said that through the employment-assistance centre she could check accurate information about assistance schemes available to widows. She would tell them only what they were genuinely entitled to, without offering false assurances. Seema nodded. 'Write down the names, but I shall read the application myself.'

After the midday meal Naina went to the court information desk. An employee there was sorting bundles of papers. She asked how the

family would receive written notice of the next hearing. The employee explained the public procedure available and told her not to trust rumours instead of official notices. Rekha's household did not always have a working smartphone; Seema's old phone repeatedly switched itself off. Naina reflected that even the means of receiving news immediately were not equally available to everyone. She wrote down the information she had obtained and gave it to Rekha, while urging her to verify the final date against the authorised notice.

That afternoon a police employee telephoned Sujata about preparing an authorised copy of confidential documents connected with Poonam's statement. Sujata made it clear that the victim must not be exposed to the risk of needless identification. Some financial transactions linked the murder case with the investigation into trafficking of workers, but these were matters proceeding separately. A local reporter was preparing to combine everything into one sensational headline. Sujata told him, ‘Write about what is being investigated; do not turn speculation into a judgment.’

Before the hearing resumed, Rekha stood for a moment beneath a neem tree outside. She remembered how Naresh used to draw a red circle around any incorrect bill he found at home. Today she felt that each court paper needed the same kind of care as those red circles. She straightened the shawl and went back inside.

Towards evening the court fixed the next hearing date. It directed that copies of certain documents be supplied and procedural matters completed. Ratan's lawyer spoke briefly to his client. Manoj said something to his lawyer and fell silent. Outside the court someone remarked, ‘There was no decision today.’ Another replied, ‘Cases like this take years.’ Rekha tried to stay away from their conversation. After the day's ordeal, she understood that she was not obliged to listen to everything everybody said.

Before leaving, Rekha met Arun-babu, an old acquaintance of Naresh's. He had once examined some of the institution's accounts, though he now worked elsewhere. ‘Naresh-ji once told me that when examining papers you must not look at the rank of the person standing before you,’ he said. Rekha asked, ‘Did you say that in the investigation?’ ‘I said it in my first statement, and later I submitted in writing whatever else I could remember.’ Rekha replied, ‘You did the right thing. If you don't remember something, don't say you do. I wouldn't want lies told even for his sake.’

Abhay was recording the day's sequence of events in his notebook when his editor, Naval Kishore, called. 'What happened in court today? It was the first major hearing after the arrest.' Abhay gave the place and date. Naval Kishore asked, 'Did Ratan admit guilt?' Abhay answered, 'There was no such admission. They discussed the prosecution papers, the rights of the defence and the next hearing date.' The editor sighed. 'That won't sell much news.' Abhay said, 'But it will be accurate.' After a moment's silence Naval Kishore said, 'All right. Send the report.'

On the way home Naina spoke to Chandan on the telephone. He asked whether Sujata had said anything about him. Naina replied, 'Your investigation was not before the court today. Keep your own date in your notebook and speak to the lawyer in good time.' Chandan said, 'I was wondering what Naresh-babu's sister would say if she saw me.' Naina answered, 'The answer to that belongs to her. Say clearly what you know. Before asking forgiveness, understand the full weight of your own wrongdoing.' Chandan was silent for a long while, then said he had already given their mother her medicine.

On their return, Naina and Abhay stopped at a refreshment stall outside the court. 'It was a hard day for Naresh's family,' Abhay said. 'Today I understood that even the hope of justice costs money,' Naina replied. 'Bus fares, a day's lost wages, care for a child, food.' Abhay said, 'I shall write something about that. But not an account of Rekha's private grief without her permission.' Naina looked at him. 'You don't forget that so quickly now.' Abhay laughed. 'Poonam taught me that someone's wounds are not merchandise for the news.'

When Rekha reached home, she took off Naresh's shawl and put it away carefully. Seema placed the slip stating the next court date beside the fee receipt. When the little boy returned from school, he asked, 'Ma, the person who killed Father is in prison, isn't he?' Sitting beside him, Seema said, 'Some people have been arrested. The court will examine the evidence.' The boy asked another question. 'Will Father come back?' To that Seema could give no answer. Rekha drew the boy close and said, 'Your father will not come back. But we shall not forget the good things he did.'

That night Rekha opened her copy of Naresh's notebook. The writing was clear: some figures, names, payment dates and many question marks. On its last page Naresh had written that the expense receipts still needed to be reconciled. Beside that ordinary sentence Rekha wrote the date of the next hearing in pencil. She did not wish to

give her own conclusions to the inquiry her brother had left unfinished. But she would not step away from the responsibility of preserving the documents and speaking the truth.

That night Naresh's son was working through arithmetic problems in his school notebook. He had made an error in one column of addition. Rekha did not scold him. She put the figures before him again and asked where he had gone wrong. The boy found his mistake himself. ‘Father used to teach me like that too,’ he said. Hearing him from the kitchen, Seema stood still for a moment. The court would examine Naresh's death through papers and evidence, but in the house his presence remained in such small acts. Rekha closed the boy's notebook and said, ‘We'll study again tomorrow. You've done well today.’

Meanwhile Vibha was reading a new letter from the bank in her rented room. The bank had again asked for an explanation about certain amounts in the joint account. She called her lawyer. ‘Do I need to be present on the court date?’ The lawyer said that formal notice would be given if her presence were required; meanwhile she should preserve her original evidence and independent accounts. Vibha said, ‘I shall not lie to defend my husband, but neither shall I accept blame for what I do not know.’ She had begun to earn a little money from her small enterprise. That day she understood for the first time that financial independence also meant the courage to answer questions in one's own right.

Poonam had not gone to court. She had a scheduled medical follow-up that day. Seema, the support worker, asked, ‘Would you like to hear the news from the court?’ Poonam replied, ‘I shall learn officially what concerns my own case. I don't need to listen to everyone's discussions now.’ In her notebook she wrote the date of her next visit to the employment centre. She awaited the court proceedings, but did not wish to put every other part of her life on hold each day while waiting.

After writing his report, Abhay checked a sentence beneath his byline again. He had first written that the truth of the murder had been established in court; he struck it out. The evidence was being tested there; no judgment had yet been given. That small correction took the excitement out of the headline, but kept the facts intact. Reading the report, Naval Kishore asked, ‘Why all this caution?’ Abhay said, ‘I saw Rekha's home today. One wrong sentence from me would place one

more false hope on top of her grief.' Without another question, the editor sent the report for printing.

The following morning the gates of Navgarh court opened once again. Naresh's case was not due to be called that day; other families came with their papers and their sorrows. Rekha was at home checking the accounts for her nephew's schooling, Abhay was writing about the court's actual proceedings, and Naina was at the centre reading a fee receipt aloud to a new applicant. The hearing date had moved forward, but the questions surrounding Naresh's murder had not ended. Rekha placed the slip safely inside her notebook—not so that she could sit waiting for the next day, but so that she could be present when that day came.

Chapter 59: In the Job Queue Once More

A queue had formed at the Navgarh bus stand before the first bus of the morning. Some people held admit cards in transparent folders, others carried identity cards in their back pockets, and some were reading the last pages of their books. The tea stove had been lit by the roadside, and there was just enough sunlight for people to distinguish their own shadows. Savita Kumari stood in the queue with a blue file pressed to her chest. There was another examination. The previous one had been cancelled amid allegations of a question-paper leak and an investigation. With the announcement of a new date, the candidates had returned to their old routine. The syllabus was much the same, the fares had risen, and the time available for preparation had shrunk.

Ahead of Savita stood a young woman whose hair, damp with dew, clung to her forehead. She repeatedly opened her phone to check the examination centre's address. ‘Have you been there before?’ she asked Savita. ‘No, but I have looked at the map. We'll have to walk a little after getting off the bus.’ The young woman said her name was Munni and that she lived in a distant village. Her father leased a small plot of farmland, and her mother, besides caring for their home, worked husking paddy in other households. ‘I won't get a job today; I'll only sit an examination,’ Munni said. ‘But since morning everyone at home has been telling me to come back with a job.’ Savita gave a small laugh. ‘There is a distance between those two things.’

A boy named Ganesh sold tea at a table in the bus stand. He boiled the tea before seven and then went to a school coaching class for two hours. His father had fallen ill the previous year, and Ganesh's earnings had become a little support for the household. ‘Aren't you studying today?’ Savita asked him. ‘From ten o'clock. Father can't manage the stall just now.’ Ganesh burned his hand while handing over a clay cup of tea, but he smiled. Savita realised that the burden of employment did not fall only on the young people taking examinations; many adolescents who served them were burdened by it too.

Chandan was also in the queue, but not to sit the examination. He had come to town to speak to the chemist's owner about temporary transport work. He had attended the police station on his appointed day the previous week; the next date was recorded in his notebook. Seeing

his old coaching classmates, he stopped. 'Haven't you applied?' Savita asked. Chandan said, 'This time it was hard even to find the fee. Still, I'll look for the next notice. Right now I need lawful work.' Savita replied, 'If you give up studying, all your earlier effort will be wasted. But I understand the cost of feeding yourself too.'

A young man stepped out of the queue and began showing everyone a message on his phone. It said that the examination centre had been changed and that a fee must be sent to a private number to learn the correct location. Some candidates panicked. Savita checked the official website. There was no change. She asked where the young man had received the message. 'It came in a group,' he said. 'Something posted in a group is not an official order,' Savita replied. She told everyone to consult the address on the original admit card. Some felt reassured; others remained doubtful.

When the bus set off, it was hard to find even standing room. Munni made space by the window for Savita's file. Chandan got off at the next turn. Watching him, Savita remembered the day he had sat silently beside the coaching centre gate after hearing that an examination had been cancelled. Unemployment had not forced him to commit an offence; the decision had been his. But the pain of having few choices lay behind that decision. Savita thought that questions of law and questions of employment could not be substituted for one another.

After getting off the bus, Munni asked for directions at a paan shop. The shopkeeper said that the examination centre was in a school beyond a bridge. An unfamiliar young man offered to take them by a shortcut, provided they paid the fare first. 'We'll take the public road; there's still time,' Savita said. Munni felt a little angry that she had to be careful yet again. Savita replied, 'Not everyone is dishonest. But in a new town it's sensible to know where you're going. Don't increase your fears needlessly before an examination.' They crossed the bridge together.

There was another queue outside the examination building. One entrance was for checking documents, another place for depositing belongings. Munni's photograph looked slightly different from the one on her identity card, and an employee questioned her at the entrance. She was frightened. Rather than speak for her, Savita signalled for her to answer herself. Munni correctly gave her date of birth, her father's name and the information on her certificate. The employee checked another document and allowed her inside. Munni turned to thank Savita. 'You spoke for yourself,' Savita replied.

When the question paper was distributed, everything was familiar: general knowledge, mathematics, language and reasoning. The first question seemed straightforward to Savita; the third was difficult. She looked at the clock. For a little while the anger over the cancelled examination, her family's worries and the agents' messages fell away. There were questions in front of her and a responsibility to write her own answers. She wrote what she knew and was careful when making an educated guess about what she did not. When the allotted time ended, the invigilator collected the answer scripts. As they came out, there was hope in some eyes and disappointment on other faces. The result was still far away.

Outside, the candidates began comparing their answers. One young man said he was certain he had answered five questions incorrectly and sat down with his head bowed. Munni told him, 'What is done cannot be changed now. Eat something first.' She herself had eaten nothing since morning. Savita took all three to a small roadside shop. They ordered three glasses of water and three inexpensive parathas. When it was time to divide the cost, the young man said he had no small change. Munni offered to pay his share out of her remaining fare money; Savita told her to keep enough for the journey home. At the table there was more talk of household accounts than of examination answers.

After the examination Savita reached the employment-assistance centre run by Naina. Kusum was making a copy of an application for unpaid wages. Poonam was reading the wording of a public recruitment advertisement. She had felt no discomfort about coming to the centre that day, but Naina still advised her not to work for too long. 'There was another false notice circulating in the queue today,' Savita said. 'People were being asked to pay a fee.' Naina wrote down the details of the message without declaring the unknown number to belong to a criminal. 'First we'll check the official information. If there is evidence of fraud, we'll explain how to make a complaint,' she said.

At that moment Madhavi Devi came with two other women. One had washed dishes in a hotel the previous month but had not received her full wages. The other's husband was again failing to bring his earnings home because of drink. Madhavi said, 'When prohibition first came, for the first time we had savings for household expenses. We said we would buy books for the children. Before a year had passed, liquor was being sold secretly in the lane again. Now it costs more and there is more fear.' The other woman said, 'Everyone talks about stopping what

is being sold. But who worries about our households where earnings are vanishing?' Naina listened. Her centre provided employment information; it could not solve every social problem. Still, she helped the women prepare an account of their unpaid wages.

'Are the families taking on loans again to pay for liquor?' Savita asked. Madhavi answered, 'Some are. Some men have given up drinking and their households are still doing well. But those who sell illicit liquor are earning more. Poor women suffer again.' She told a story from her sister's village, where a young man had become entangled in transport work and now faced a police case. Savita remembered Chandan's face. But she did not mention his name to the woman. An incident in one household did not establish guilt in another.

A new leaflet had been pasted outside the centre: 'Guaranteed Government Appointment, Limited Places, Advance Deposit Required.' The institution's address was unclear; there was a contact number, but the name of the department sounded like that of a government office. 'Nai Disha used to make promises like this in the beginning,' Kusum said as soon as she saw it. Naina did not tear it to pieces. She photographed it and asked who had put it up. A neighbouring shopkeeper said a young man had pasted it there in the morning. 'We won't attach anyone's name to it by guesswork,' Naina said. 'We'll verify the advertisement's claims.'

A small problem arose at the centre that day. An applicant wanted Kusum to issue him immediately with a certificate declaring him 'qualified'. 'I have to submit it to a government office,' he said. Kusum explained that the centre had no authority to certify qualifications; it only helped people understand advertisements. The applicant grew angry. 'Then what's the point of coming here?' 'We do not charge for work we cannot do,' Naina said calmly. 'If you need a certificate, we can direct you to the authorised institution.' The young man left angrily. Kusum's face fell. 'Not every visitor will be satisfied,' Naina told her, 'but we shall not help someone by giving him a false document.'

At midday an elderly father came with his son. The son was a graduate; two examinations had been cancelled and the result of another was in dispute. 'Tell us, is there any reliable job?' the father asked. 'I sold the family's jewellery to educate him. Now I feel ashamed every time I look at his face.' The son said nothing. Naina invited them to sit. 'Your effort in studying is not measured by a single examination,' she told the young man. 'But I will not falsely promise you a job today.

Here are notices of current vacancies. If you like, we'll check which match your qualifications.' For the first time the young man raised his head. 'Even private jobs?' 'Yes, provided the conditions are clear.'

Kusum showed them an advertisement from a factory. The hours were long and the wages ordinary; there was no accommodation. The young man said he could not travel from the village every day. 'I'll pay the fare,' his father said at once. The young man's face fell. 'First calculate the whole cost,' Naina said. 'What will remain after fares? What will food cost? What effect will the journey have on his health?' The father was a little embarrassed. 'I was telling him to take whatever he could get.' Naina answered, 'You need work, but you have the right to read its terms.' They took a copy of the advertisement away without signing anything immediately.

One young man refused to put his name in the centre's register. He feared that because he had complained about an earlier fraud, someone might trouble him again. Naina told him that he did not have to provide unnecessary private information to receive assistance. She wrote down the address of the public department for him. 'Won't you know my name?' he asked. Naina replied, 'We'll take only the information we need. We won't force you to trust us.' The young man left with the slip of paper. Fear was plain in his eyes.

That evening Savita received calls from some of the candidates at the examination centre. Rumours had begun spreading again in private groups that the question paper had been sold. Some said that day's questions had been available in advance; others said the photograph circulating was only an old question paper. Savita told them not to repeat accusations without original evidence. She herself looked up the official complaints procedure. 'We can demand an inquiry,' she said, 'but we have no right to call innocent candidates thieves.' Watching her, Naina reflected on how much Savita's resolve had changed since the days when they had stood in those first queues.

Meanwhile Chandan reached the centre after meeting the owner of the chemist's. The man had agreed to give him three days' trial work at first. The pay was low, but he had agreed to provide written hours and a list of the goods to be transported. Chandan showed Naina the paper. 'I shall ask for a list of everything put in the vehicle,' he said. Naina asked, 'And if the owner says he doesn't need a driver who asks so many questions?' Chandan was silent for a moment, then said, 'I'll look for

other work.' Savita asked if he would continue his studies. 'An hour at night,' Chandan said. Savita smiled. 'I'll send you a list of books.'

In the evening Savita held a small open meeting. Some candidates asked whether they should organise a protest over the rumours of a paper leak. 'We'll demand an inquiry in writing and attach whatever evidence we have,' Savita said. 'But it would be unjust to call every successful candidate guilty.' Someone pointed out that years went by as examinations were repeatedly cancelled. Savita replied, 'That is why it is necessary to demand a transparent timetable and certainty about decisions.' At the end a young man asked how applicants with little money could obtain help with their travel expenses. Everyone agreed to consider what could be done according to their means.

A woman who had once known Kiran came to the centre. She said she had received a telephone call in the name of a new organisation: if she paid a deposit, employment was guaranteed. 'The people who became involved in the earlier crimes might start again under another name,' she feared. Naina replied, 'It is possible, but we cannot accuse someone on suspicion alone. Keep the number, the company's particulars and the demand for payment.' The woman asked, 'Will you go to the police again?' Naina said, 'Where a written complaint is appropriate, we should make one. But the shutting down of one institution does not by itself put an end to the business of false promises.'

As the number of applicants grew, the library secretary Harinarayan Jha asked whether the centre needed the room for an additional two hours. Naina calculated the costs. 'I do not want to expand too far just now,' she said. 'We shall give as much information as we can verify. Our aim isn't to gather a crowd to make ourselves famous.' 'Your patience will be tested,' Harinarayan replied. 'People will want immediate results.' Naina smiled. 'I used to stand in the same queues wanting results at once. I understand their impatience.'

Before going home that night, Savita put a notice on the board: 'Before paying money in the name of any job, examination or training, check the authorised source. An advertisement alone does not guarantee appointment.' Some students had written questions on the notice. Savita supplied short answers, and where she did not know, wrote, 'CHECK PENDING.' Munni telephoned. 'The examination went well,' she said, 'but I'm afraid of the result.' Savita replied, 'Of course there will be fear. But today you didn't send money to a false number. That is something too.'

Chandan arrived home late. Saraswati Devi asked whether his wages had been fixed. 'There is a three-day trial,' he said. 'Will there be written papers?' 'Yes.' His mother fell silent. Naina recorded the day's accounts for her centre: ten visitors, three advertisements checked, two written applications, not a single appointment confirmed. There was no declaration of triumph on that page of her notebook. Yet people were asking questions here that she and the others had not known how to ask anyone a year earlier.

That night Chandan opened the first page of an old examination-preparation book. On a page where he had marked answers in red, an old date was also written: a date from just after an examination had been cancelled. In the margin he wrote, 'Study after work. Never give money on the strength of someone's false assurance.' His mother came to his doorway. 'Turn out the light and sleep. You have to go to work early,' she said. Chandan closed the book. He knew how difficult it would be to manage study and paid work together. But instead of making two grand promises, he was now setting aside one hour for the next day.

The following morning young men and women again stood in queues at the same bus stand. There was a new examination, a short training course, a hospital attendant's position for one person and a factory worker's position for another. Some had stitched their old sandals; others had tied together the torn edges of their files. The tea seller asked a young man, 'You've taken so many examinations. When will you get a job?' 'On the day the question paper, the examination and the result come in the proper order,' the young man replied. An elderly farmer standing nearby said only, 'We need a way to keep the household going until that day.' The queue continued to move forward.

Chapter 60: Life Goes On

The first light of Phagun had spread across Navgarh. In the courtyard, still damp with the night's dew, Saraswati Devi watered the tulsi plant. Birds had been calling from the courtyard tree since dawn. The plaster had fallen away in two places on the walls of the old house, but new leaves had appeared in the flowerpot beside the door. Naina rose early, checked the stove in the kitchen and opened the accounts book of the employment-assistance centre. She had two tasks that day: to finish the centre's monthly accounts and to discuss the final wedding arrangements with Abhay's family. Both seemed equally real to her. On one side were the rent for the room; on the other, the rent, meals and division of time in the life ahead. Almost a year and a half had passed between the day Naina first went out looking for work in the rains and this morning in Phagun. Another monsoon had come in the meantime, and queues of applicants had formed again at the town's bus stand.

Uncle Shailendra had visited again the previous week. This time he had brought no accusations. He quietly asked about Saraswati's health, then said he wished to meet Abhay's family. ‘Please do,’ Naina said. ‘But anything you can ask Abhay or me directly, don't go asking secretly behind our backs.’ Shailendra gave an uncomfortable laugh. ‘I had my concerns,’ he said. ‘I heard your concerns,’ Naina answered, ‘but the name of a caste will not write the decisions of my life.’ Her uncle did not give his final consent that day. He merely said that he would come to the meeting. Naina regarded this as a change of circumstances, not a victory.

Preparations were under way in Abhay's house too. His mother spoke of a modest wedding feast, while his father asked for an accounting of the expense. Rani, Abhay's sister, told Naina over the phone, ‘Bhaiya wants everything to be simple. But Mother says it would not be right merely to inform the neighbours and leave it at that.’ Smiling, Naina replied, ‘The happiness of two households isn't difficult to provide for, if we leave out the show.’ Rani asked, ‘You'll carry on with your work, won't you?’ ‘Yes,’ Naina said. ‘The centre will remain my work after the marriage, and Abhay's journalism will remain his. At home we'll have to divide the work between us.’

Before the meeting, Saraswati Devi called Naina aside. ‘Daughter, I don't want to stop you. But what if Abhay's family insults you because of

Chandan's case?' 'They know about Chandan,' Naina said. 'I've hidden nothing from them. Chandan will answer for his own actions, and I for my life.' Saraswati asked again, 'Do you feel your mother is a burden to you?' Naina held her mother's hand. 'Not a burden. But we need an arrangement in which your wishes are heard too.' Saraswati fell silent. In the midst of a mother's fears, her daughter was making her a participant in the decision.

A few days later the two families met on the veranda behind the library. It was on this very veranda that Naina had once asked permission to establish the employment centre. On that earlier occasion there had been more embarrassment, fear and apprehension; today there was a different kind of hesitation. Abhay's father asked Saraswati Devi, 'How much do your regular medicines cost?' Saraswati was taken aback. She had expected questions about caste or family lineage. Abhay's father said, 'I ask because why should a daughter have to stop worrying about her mother after marriage? We can work out the arrangements together.' Shailendra looked at his face once and then lowered his eyes.

The arrangements for where they would live took up most of the meeting. Abhay worked near the town newsroom, and Naina's centre was in the library. They were looking for two rooms to rent. Naina made it clear that Saraswati Devi wished to remain in her own house, but would need regular attention when necessary. Chandan would live there; that did not mean the whole responsibility should be placed upon him. Abhay agreed. 'I may not be able to return early in the evening from reporting,' he said, 'but I can take on the morning housework and the weekly shopping.' Rani burst out laughing. 'Bhaiya, learn to look after your clothes first!' An ordinary laugh passed from face to face.

In a corner of the veranda Rani and Chandan were talking. 'Bhaiya never gets home on time,' Rani said. 'Is newspaper work always like that?' Chandan laughed. 'Didi works late at the centre too. So the quarrels are certain.' 'Then let them both learn to cook,' Rani replied. Chandan grew a little serious. 'I'm trying to put my mistakes right now. When I kept away from the work at home, every burden fell on Didi.' Rani said, 'She has a household of her own to make, not every old burden to carry alone.' They went indoors together and began putting away the dishes.

Shailendra raised the question of caste once more, but his voice was quieter than before. 'Some relatives will not attend the ceremony. You must understand that much,' he said. 'I understand it now,' Naina

answered. 'If someone does not come, we won't insult them; if they come, we'll welcome them. But we won't postpone the marriage.' Abhay's mother said, 'I cannot close other people's mouths. I can keep the door to my own home open.' Shailendra remained silent for a while. He did not feel the need to repeat his argument that day.

The wedding arrangements were settled: they would complete the legal formalities and establish their union in a simple ceremony in the presence of their families. The date was chosen so that Abhay could obtain the necessary leave from the newsroom and Savita and Kusum could help visitors at Naina's centre. Naina posted a notice at the centre gate saying that the office would be closed that day, though essential public information could be obtained by telephone. 'You're worrying about work even on your wedding day!' Kusum said. 'It isn't right for people who come during working hours to have to turn back without being told,' Naina replied. 'But that doesn't mean I intend to sit here with the office open on my wedding day.'

As Naina made a list of wedding expenses, she looked at the little she had saved in the bank. At first she had thought of taking out a loan for the ceremony. Abhay opposed the idea. 'It would be foolish to incur a debt we don't need merely to spend money for other people to see,' he said. Naina agreed. They decided to employ local women to prepare the food, paying them properly for their work. When Madhavi Devi was asked, she said, 'I'll work, but write down the wages clearly. I don't want charity disguised as free work.' Naina made out a receipt. Madhavi laughed. 'You won't even give anyone water without a receipt now!' 'Not a receipt for water,' Naina replied, 'but certainly a proper account of labour.'

Naina went herself to invite Poonam. Poonam was sitting by her doorway with her notebook. Her health had improved somewhat, though loud noises still sometimes frightened her. 'I'd like you to come,' Naina said, 'but if the crowd makes you uncomfortable, please don't come at all.' Poonam read the words on the invitation card. 'I'll come, for a little while,' she said. 'And if I want to leave early, don't take offence.' Before taking her hand, Naina asked, 'May I hold your hand?' Poonam smiled. 'You may. You don't have to ask about everything, but I like it when you do.'

Vibha sent word that she would not be able to attend. An examination for her training course fell on the same day. She wrote that she respected Naina's independent decision, and that establishing a

home did not mean bringing one's earlier life to an end. Naina wished her well. Naina maintained no personal relationship with Kiran; Kiran's legal case was taking its own course. Dinesh, too, was occupied at his place of work. Not every person in their lives had to gather at the same celebration. Their connections had been shaped by what had happened, and some were best maintained at a distance. Anushka continued living with her mother and attending school. She sent Naina a small card of good wishes for her wedding. Along with it, Vibha wrote that her daughter was now beginning to think for herself about what she wanted to study in the future.

Of everyone, Chandan took on the greatest number of small tasks in preparing for the wedding. He saw to the chairs, washed the earthen pots that would hold drinking water for the guests, and brought vegetables from the market. He wanted his mistakes not to stand in the way of happiness at home. But when a notice came requiring his next appearance before the police, he wrote it in his notebook and informed his lawyer. 'Look after things on the wedding day,' Naina told him, 'but don't conceal anything to do with the legal case.' 'Hiding things won't improve the situation now,' Chandan replied. It was a simple sentence, but Naina knew how much he had lost in reaching that conclusion.

Meanwhile there was an obstacle to obtaining Abhay's leave from the newsroom. Because of an unexpected news story, the editor, Naval Kishore, wanted Abhay to work on the wedding day as well. Abhay told him plainly that he had already handed over his responsibilities and could not be present on the agreed date. Naval Kishore was annoyed at first, then assigned the work to another reporter. 'Don't give up journalism after you get married,' he said with a laugh. 'Journalism is my work,' Abhay answered, 'and my responsibilities at home are mine too.' In this small disagreement, he understood how much the ordering of time would matter in his coming life.

On the wedding morning, faint streaks of cloud crossed the town sky. Saraswati Devi opened a trunk for Naina. Inside lay the sari she had worn at her own wedding, its colour somewhat faded now. 'Will you wear this?' her mother asked. Naina took it out and looked at it. 'This is your memory. I'll keep it safe. Today I'll wear the plain sari I've had made ready.' Saraswati's eyes filled. 'I used to think about how many people would come to your wedding, how many instruments would play.' 'Mother, there are fewer people,' Naina said, 'but I'm not afraid.' Her mother laid a hand upon her head.

Some relatives came to the ceremony and others did not. Shailendra came in the end. At the doorway Abhay's father welcomed him respectfully and led him inside. They did not debate the ways of the old society; the time went in arranging places for the guests to sit and seeing that they were fed. Kamala came to Naina and said, 'What I said before was harsh.' 'Your words hurt me,' Naina replied, 'but I won't repeat that day's argument today.' Kamala placed a small box of bangles in Naina's hand. 'Take this as a blessing, not an instruction.' Naina gave a little smile.

Abhay wore an ordinary kurta at the wedding. Beads of sweat had gathered on his forehead. 'Are you so nervous?' Naina asked. 'I ask so many questions when I'm checking a news story,' he said softly, 'but today I'm rather short of words about my own life.' 'If words are few, we'll make up for them in our actions,' Naina replied. The ceremony and the necessary paperwork were completed. Members of both families offered their good wishes in their own ways. There were no speeches that day. Some children were asking for a second piece of sweetmeat, Rani was filling glasses with water, and Chandan was arranging chairs. In the midst of these ordinary things, Naina and Abhay were married.

Poonam came for a little while. She sat slightly apart from the crowd, then gave Naina a small notebook. 'I've written down the questions people ought to ask when checking employment information,' she said. 'I prepared it while working at the centre. That's my wedding gift to you.' Naina opened it. There were questions about wages, housing, identity papers, leave, contact details and emergency assistance. 'This will be very useful,' Naina said. 'I've written down all the questions I should have asked earlier,' Poonam replied. 'If they help someone else, so much the better.' After a short while she went home with her mother. Nobody pressed her to stay.

The newly married couple spent their first evening in the rented rooms. There was an old clock on the wall, running five minutes slow. Abhay took two steel tumblers out of his bag and Naina set down a pitcher of water. Their meal had been sent from home; from the next day they would have to cook for themselves. 'Shall I fix the clock?' Abhay asked. 'Yes. Otherwise we'll be late for work in the morning,' Naina said. Abhay laughed. Their wedding day was over, but the first list of everyday tasks had already begun.

On the morning after the wedding, the couple went through the expenses of their rented rooms for the first time. They made a separate

list of the utensils, table and bedding brought from home. Abhay put away the rent receipt. 'Who will buy the month's provisions?' Naina asked. 'Whoever gets to the market first. But we'll both keep a record of expenses,' he replied. Naina laughed. 'A household doesn't run on receipts, but without accounts it can go adrift.' While cooking, Abhay put too much salt in the vegetables. Naina tasted them. 'Did you measure the salt?' 'No,' Abhay said. 'Then measure it next time,' she replied. They mixed in some thin dal and finished their meal together.

In the second week, Naina's centre resumed its regular hours. The number of visitors was sometimes large, sometimes very small. Savita compared recruitment information with authorised examination notices; Kusum helped former workers prepare applications for wages still owed to them. Poonam spent two days a week reading information, as her health permitted. Her name had been put on the board with her consent: 'Information Assistant'. Naina entered an agreed payment beside it. 'We won't take her labour and call it free service,' she told Kusum. With her first small payment, Poonam bought medicine for her mother.

Chandan began temporary work transporting goods for a chemist. He carried items according to a written list supplied by the owner. Sometimes there was little work; sometimes it took the whole day. He had to make another statement during the police investigation. His lawyer explained plainly that telling the truth did not automatically free him from the accusations against him. 'I understand,' Chandan replied. His mother still worried about him at times, but now he did not have to invent a false excuse every time he went out through the door.

Naina met Rekha Mandal from time to time. The case concerning Naresh's murder was still before the court. The date of the next hearing would be fixed, documents would be examined, and witnesses would receive the necessary notices. Rekha did not remember her brother solely through the crime. She thought of giving his old books to a small school library. Naresh's son was receiving books for his studies; Seema's employment problem had not yet been fully resolved. When Naina visited, she did not offer empty assurances, but continued to give her accurate information about the assistance available.

Nor had every problem in Madhavi Devi's household been solved. Reports of illicit liquor sales came from time to time; sometimes the police took action, sometimes new people entered the same trade. Her husband was trying to give up drinking, but the household still

depended heavily upon Madhavi's earnings. One day she came to the centre and said, 'When prohibition first came, we thought everything would change. Afterwards we understood that, alongside the law, a home needs work, honest accounts and courage.' Naina listened. Madhavi left with a fresh application demanding a proper accounting of her daily wages.

The investigation was still continuing into the incomplete night register at Bhanu Pratap's outpost, payments connected with the contractor Virendra Rai, and contacts involving the politician Jagdish Chaudhary. Sujata had sent the relevant records to different officers for verification. Nobody had been declared a criminal merely on the strength of an acquaintance or a rumour. People in Madhavi's village heard news of official action, but the illegal liquor trade had not yet been stopped completely.

A new journalist had joined Abhay's newsroom. Looking through old photographs of Naresh's murder, he asked, 'When will you write the final report on this case?' 'We'll report the judgement when the court gives it,' Abhay replied. 'For now, we must report the actual state of the investigation and the hearing.' 'Readers want a sensational headline,' the new journalist said. 'Readers have a greater right to accurate information,' Abhay answered. When he returned home after a day's work, Naina was sitting in their rented room writing up the centre's accounts. They told each other about their day's work, sometimes disagreed, then got up to prepare the evening meal.

At the centre's monthly review, Savita reported that some visitors had received verified information about vacancies and two had reached the interview stage, but nobody's appointment was certain. Hearings on Kusum's applications for unpaid wages were progressing, and Poonam's hours had been set according to her wishes. Naina wrote no more than that on the page. An outsider who meant well had suggested that they advertise, 'We have secured five appointments.' Naina refused outright. A sentence appeared on the centre's information sheet: 'Accurate information, transparent fees, no false promise of appointment.' To Naina, it seemed a principle earned through the experiences of her earlier life.

One day Naina was returning past the bus stand. At the very place where she had first stood in a queue carrying her job application, another young woman was looking helplessly about her while trying to keep her papers together. She held an appointment advertisement and a

slip for depositing a fee. 'Where is this institution?' she asked Naina. 'They told me on the phone that if I don't pay today, I'll lose the opportunity.' Naina read the slip carefully. It used the same kind of urgency and promises that she had heard at the time of Poonam's ordeal. But the institution was a new one; it would not be right to declare it fraudulent on the strength of a sheet of paper alone.

'What's your name?' Naina asked. 'Rupa,' the young woman replied. 'How much did they ask for?' 'Twelve thousand. I've brought five thousand from home. I'll borrow the rest.' 'Did they show you the written terms of appointment?' Naina asked. Rupa shook her head. 'No. They said they'd show me after I paid.' Naina took a slip bearing the centre's address from her bag. 'I can't promise to find you work. But I can check the source of this advertisement. If you'd like, come there first.' Rupa thought for a little while, then said, 'Everyone at home is waiting.' 'We'll tell them what we've actually found,' Naina replied. 'It's important to understand the terms before paying any money.'

From the window of a bus standing at the stop, Munni waved her hand. She was returning home after sitting an examination; the results had not yet been announced. When Savita saw her, she asked whether she would come to the study meeting at the library the following week. 'There's work in the family fields, but I'll make time,' Munni said. Naina told Rupa, 'Some people in this town help others; some deceive them. To tell the two apart, you have to ask questions.' Rupa folded the advertisement and put it into her bag. She was no longer merely afraid; she was preparing to ask.

Rupa walked towards the library with Naina. New coaching advertisements lined the road, workers stood at the gate of an old factory, and a police vehicle passed in the distance. One face of the town showed itself in glittering shops, new buildings and hoardings promising employment; the other was the face of queues, debts, uncertain wages and people waiting in hope of jobs. Naina no longer saw these two faces as separate worlds. She brought Rupa to the office door. 'Sit down. First, read the papers. You have the right to ask questions.' Rupa pulled out a chair and sat. Outside, the queue along the road was growing once more. Inside, Naina opened a fresh page of her notebook. On that page stood the first question; there was no answer yet. But there was the courage to ask, and with that courage life went on.

Every city has two faces.
Only one of them is hiring.

Naina Mishra has spent eight months out of work. She has applied at fourteen places, heard back from none, and carries her file of certificates through the monsoon rain pressed against her chest. When the Nai Disha Employment Centre offers a way out, it looks like the first real chance in a long time.

Then a deposit is paid, a last message is sent, a phone goes silent. Names change, papers turn out to be false, and beside a canal outside Navgarh a man is found dead. A search for work becomes a search for the missing, and the town that queues each morning at its bus stand begins to show its other face.

In sixty chapters and five parts, from the queue of applicants to the court hearing, this novel follows a young woman, a reporter and a policewoman through debt, slander, fear and betrayal, and asks what the truth costs and who is made to pay for it.

Translated from the original Maithili by the author himself

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