

A S H O R T S T O R Y



THE GUILLE

BY B SAMAN

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Genre

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THE GUILF

SHALAN

"Raat ka sannata tha, sadak par sirf pani ke chhente aur barish ki boonden sunai de rahi thi. Mein laundry se nikal kar hostel ki taraf badh raha tha jab achanak zoradar barish shuru ho gayi. Kapde bheegne se bachane ke liye mein ek grocery store ke andar ja kar khada ho gaya, pani ki boonden shishe par girti rahi, ek ajeeb si bechaini hawa mein thi. Jese hi barish dheemi padi, mein hostel ki taraf daud pada. Gate par pahunchte hi meri nazar Rohan par padi—uska chehra utara hua tha, aankhon mein koi gehri pareshani chhupi thi."

"Kya hua, Rohan? Tum pareshaan lag rahe ho," maine bheege kapde jhadhte hue poocha.

"Tumhara phone kahan hai?" Rohan gusse se chilaya.

Maine apni pocket me haath dala, par phone nahi mila. Dil ek dum se dhadak utha. "Lagta hai, hostel me bhool gaya hoon... par kya hua?"

Meri baat sunte hi Rohan bina jawab diye daud gaya. Maine bhi uske peeche bhagna shuru kiya, lekin jaise hi main first floor tak pahunchta, Rohan mera phone le kar niche aa chuka tha. Bina kuch kahe, usne mera haath pakda, mujhe kheenchte hue entrance ke locker tak le gaya. Maine dekha, usne mere laundry ka samaan andar rakha aur phir mujhe hostel ke bahar kheenchne laga.

"Kya ho raha hai, tum mujhe kahaan le ja rahe ho?" maine rukne ki koshish ki, par Rohan bina kisi jawab ke seedha ek cab me baith gaya.

"Hospital ja rahe hain," usne mujhe phone dete hue kaha.

"Hospital? Kya sab theek hai? Kisko kya hua hai?" Maine ghabrakar poocha, lekin Rohan ab bhi chup tha.

Maine phone jacket ki pocket me rakh diya—charge khatam ho chuka tha. Hum hospital pahunch gaye. Andar enter karte hi Rohan enquiry counter ki taraf badh gaya, par ab bhi kuch nahi bola. Ek ajeeb si bechaini mere andar barhne lagi thi.

Teesre floor par jaise hi pahuncha, meri pehli nazar chachu par gayi. Pura sharir ek pal ke liye sun ho gaya. Main tezi se unki taraf badha.

"Chachu? Aap yahan kya kar rahe hain?"

Unhone mujhe dekha, chehre par thakan aur bechaini thi. Phir woh bole, "Tumhara phone kahan tha? Kitni baar call kiya, par tumne nahi uthaya! Phir maine Rohan ko call kiya, tab pata chala tum hostel me nahi ho."

"Par hua kya hai? Koi mujhe batayega?" Mere shabdon mein bechaini thi.

Chachu ne meri taraf dekha, phir ek gehri saans li. "Tumhare parents ko goli lagi hai. Wo ICU mein hain."

Yeh sunte hi jaise duniya ruk gayi. Jism se saari jaan nikal gayi ho jaise. Pair dagmaga gaye, aankhon ke aage andhera chaane laga. Rohan ne mujhe sambhala aur ek chair par baithne ko kaha.

"Doctors kya keh rahe hain?" Maine zameen par nazar jamaye hue poocha.

"Wo keh rahe hain... critical hain. Bachna mushkil hai."

Mujhe laga jaise kisi ne scene par ek bada bojh rakh diya ho. Maine kabhi nahi socha tha ki ek din aisa bhi aayega. Mera jeevan hamesha aasan raha tha, parents ne kabhi bhi mujhe kisi kami ka ehssaas nahi hone diya. Jab maine hostel me shift hone ka faisla liya, wo naraz the, maa bahut royi thi. Par main bhi apni zidd par ad gaya. Pehle azaadi acchi lagi, lekin dheere dheere ghar ki yaad aane lagi thi. Har baar jab ghar jata, maa poore dil se meri pasandida dishes banati thi. Pehle unka pyar mujhe dabaav lagta tha, par ab usi pyar ki kami mehsoos hone lagi thi.

"Shalaan, kahaan kho gaya?" Chachu ki awaaz ne mujhe wapas laaya.

"Yeh sab kaise hua?" Maine apni awaz ko sambhalte hue poocha.

"Tumhare padosi ka kehna hai ki raat ko goli chalne ki awaaz aayi. Jab wo bahar nikle, to dekha kuch log mask pehene ghar se nikal rahe the. Ek gaadi me baith kar bhaag gaye. Kuch log unka peeche bhi kiye, par safal nahi ho sake. Police investigation kar rahi hai."

Itne me doctor aa gaye. Chachu unse baat karne lage. Mere pairon me taqat nahi thi, isliye sofa par girta chala gaya. Doctor aur chachu ki baatein samajhne ki koshish kar raha tha, lekin unke shabdon me mujhe sirf ek bura shagun mehsoos ho raha tha. Aisa lag raha tha jaise koi bahut bada toofaan aane wala hai.

Thodi der baad chachi daudti hui aayi aur mujhe gale laga kar rone lagi. Maine apne aansuon ko rok rakha tha. Main kamzor nahi banna chahta tha.

Phir chachu ki awaaz aayi. "Shalaan, mujhe tumse baat karni hai."

Chachi bhi meri taraf dekhne lagi. Chachu mere bagal me baithe, mera haath kas kar pakda.

Chachi ne bhi doosri taraf se mera haath thaam liya.

Mujhe samajh aa gaya tha ki ab kya hone wala hai. Dil zor se dhadakne laga.

"I know you're a strong boy..."

"No, I'm not! I'm not strong!" Main chachu se lipat kar phoot-phoot kar rone laga. Rohan, chachu, chachi—sab mujhe sambhalne lage.

Chachu ne mere aansu saaf kiye aur bole, "Aaj mera bhai aur bhabhi mujhe chhod kar chale gaye. Aaj ek baar phir maine apne baron ka saya kho diya."

Mujhe laga jaise zameen phat gayi ho aur main usme girta ja raha hoon. Main unse ek baar poochna chahta tha, "Mujhe maaf kar diya na?" Par main jaanta tha, yeh sawal ab hamesha adhoora rahega.

Agle din funeral thi.

Ek hafte tak main apne kamre me pada raha. Na kisi se baat ki, na kisi se mila. Chachi mere liye khana laati, main mana karta, par wo jabardasti khilati.

Ek shaam main balcony me tha, sadak par aate-jaate logon ko dekh raha tha. Tabhi kisi ne mere kandhe par haath rakha. Peechhe dekha, to chachu the.

"Beta, neechhe lawyer aaye hain, chal kar unse mil lo."

Main unke saath living room me gaya. Wahan lawyer, police aur papa ki company ke kuch log baithe the. Main ek kone wale sofa par baith gaya.

Mujhe property aur documents me koi interest nahi tha.

"Shalaan, yeh sab tumhare parents ki mehnat hai. Tumhe isme interest ho ya na ho, par yeh sab tumhara hai. Isse ignore karna unki mehnat ki beizzati hogi."

Main unki baat sun raha tha, par dimaag kahin aur tha. Kya main sach me unka business sambhal sakta hoon?

Main crime journalism ki padhai kar raha hoon. Papa ne kabhi mujhe force nahi kiya, lekin unhe hamesha yaqeen tha ki ek din main unka business sambhalunga. Jab maine pehli baar apne career ke baare me maa se baat ki thi, to unka ek hi jawab tha, "Jo karna hai karo, par last me tumhe hamara business sambhalna hee hoga."

Mujhe yaad hai, jab ghar jaata, to relatives bhi yahi poochte—"Beta, kab business join kar rahe ho?"

Mujhe business word se nafrat ho gayi thi. Aisa lagta tha jaise sab mujhe force kar rahe hain. Par ab... jo log mujhe force kar rahe the, wo ab nahi rahe. Aur jo kuch bhi tha, ab sirf mere upar tha.

"Ji, aunty, law padh raha hoon. Waise bhi aaj kal logon se irritate hone laga hoon. Sab bas mujhe advice dete hain, bolne ka mauka hi nahi milta. Socha, law hi padh loon... kam se kam wahan toh bolne ka haq milega!"

Ek toh jhooth bola, upar se is andaz mein bola ki mummy ki aankhein mujh par tik gayi. Wo kuch boli nahi, par unke nighaon ne mujhe kaafi kuch suna diya. Aur maine bhi apni aankhon ke ishaare se jawaab de diya—"Acha friend circle banayein, yeh gossip aunties se door rahein." Mummy ne aankhein dikayi, main samajh gaya ki zyada bolna theek nahi. Bina kuch aur kahe main wahan se apne kamre ki taraf nikal gaya.

"Shalaan, ab tumhe faisla khud lene honge."

Chachu ki baat se ek pal ke liye sab kuch rukh gaya. Police officers ke beech discussion chal raha tha, lekin meri soch kahi aur thi. Unhone kaha tha—*ab tumhare parents tumhare saath nahi hain... hum hain, lekin faisla tumhe lene honge.*

Mujhe nahi pata tha yeh words ek zimmedari ka wazan lekar girenge ya ek aisi aazadi denge jo mujhe hamesha chahiye thi. Par ek baat toh pakki thi—main ab bhi confuse tha.

Kuch din ghar par nikal gaye. Main police ki discussions se door bhaagta raha. Jab bhi woh aate, chachu bulate, main ya toh bahana bana deta ya agar chala bhi jata, toh ek corner me bina kisi interest ke baitha rehta. Sach toh yeh tha ki mujhe sach sunna hi nahi tha.

Chachu ne meri halat dekh kar hostel wapas bhejne ka faisla kiya, shayad soch rahe the ki padhai me mann lagega. Par unhe nahi pata tha ki mujhe ab sirf ek cheez ki zarurat thi—sach ko samajhne ki.

Hostel pahunchte hi Rohan ne mujhe dekha aur bina kuch soche gale lag gaya. Usne bina pooche mera trolley uthai aur andar le gaya. Main bhi uske peeche chalta raha, lekin jaise hi apne bed par gira, ek ajeeb si sukoon bhari thakan mehsoos hui.

Rohan samajh gaya tha. Wo bina kuch kahe mujhe wahin chhor kar chala gaya.

Kuch der baad wapas aaya, haath me ek paper bag tha. Mujhe dekhte hi bola, "*Khana kha le yaar.*"

Mujhe bilkul mann nahi tha, lekin uski zid ke aage haar maanni padi.

Din yunhi guzarte gaye. Class jaata, wapas aata, aur ghanton tak chhat ko ghoorta rehta.

Kabhi laptop khol kar be-maqсад scroll karta rehta, toh kabhi sirf ek jagah jam jata. Main sab kuch dekh raha tha, lekin samajh kuch nahi paa raha tha.

Rohan bhi pareshan ho gaya. Pehle toh kehta tha, "*Bahar chal, kuch activities kar.*" Par jab main sunta hi nahi tha, toh usne kehna hi chhod diya. Mujhe meri khud ki chhupne ki jagah mil gayi thi, par sach kahin na kahin mujhe dhoond raha tha.

SHADOW AGENCY

Ek din chachu ka phone aaya.

"Shalaan, main ek private detective hire kar chuka hoon. Ek hafte baad se wo log kaam shuru kar denge."

Unhone ye casually kaha, jaise yeh koi normal decision ho. Lekin mere liye yeh sirf ek update nahi thi. Yeh ek shikaar ka aaghaz tha.

Ek hafte baad shaam ke waqt detective Sana aur journalist Ryan mere ghar aaye.

Main balcony se unko dekh raha tha. Chachu lawn me baith kar unse baat kar rahe the. Table par papers bikhre hue the, jaise wo koi office ho. Kabhi chachu bolte, toh wo dono dhyaan se sunte. Kabhi unki baat hoti, toh chachu bhi ek ek shabd samajhne ki koshish karte.

Mujhe pehli baar mehsoos hua... yeh sirf ek case nahi hai. Yeh ek khel hai. Aur mujhe isme hissa lena hi hoga.

Tabhi chachi ne room ka darwaza khola.

"Shalaan, tumhari chai."

Maine jaldi se apne bikhre hue papers aur laptop ko ek taraf kiya.

"Tumhara project hai?" Unhone poocha.

"Ji, haan." Maine bina kisi hesitation ke jhooth bola.

Main nahi chahta tha ki kisi ko pata chale ki main bhi is case par research kar raha hoon. Kyunki agar kisi ne jaan liya, toh yeh log mujhe rokne ki poori koshish karenge. Aur main rukhne waalon me se nahi tha.

"Jate hue darwaza band kar dijiyega."

Chachi muskurayi, mere sir par haath rakha, aur bina kuch kahe chali gayi.

Dinner par chachu late aaye. Maine unka intezaar kiya.

"Un log kya keh rahe the?" Maine casually poocha, jaise mujhe interest hi na ho.

"Wo log kal se kaam shuru karenge. Saare papers le liye hain."

"Dono detective hai?" Maine jaan bujh kar ye sawaal kiya, jaise mujhe kuch pata hi na ho.

"Nahi, ek journalist hai. Yeh dono tumhare parents ko acche se jaante the aur chaahte hain ki reporting bhi ho aur sach bhi saamne aaye."

Main bas sir hila kar sunta raha. Mujhe unke words se koi farq nahi pad raha tha. Jo farq pad raha tha wo yeh ki ab mujhe bhi sach jaan'na hai, lekin mere tareeke se.

Raat ko hostel wapas jaane ka faisla kiya.

Papa ki car uthai, hostel parking me park ki, aur supermarket se kuch chips aur Rohan ke favourite biscuits liye. Mujhe is raat der tak jagna tha.

Room me jaakar laptop khola aur The Shadow Agency ka naam type kiya.

Yeh sirf ek company thi ya kisi bade raaz ka pehla suraag?

Mujhe nahi pata, lekin ek baat zaroor jaanta tha—

Ab main sirf ek spectator nahi tha. Ab main bhi is game ka hissa tha.

Mera hostel room ek battlefield lag raha tha—desk par crime reports, newspapers, aur notebooks bikhri thi. Wall par ek bada sa corkboard, jisme Shadow Agency, Detective Sana aur journalist Ryan ki photos aur details pinned thi. Red strings unke connections dikhane ki koshish kar rahi thi, jaise ek bada conspiracy web ho.

Rohan room ke darwaze par khada tha, haath me coffee ka mug liye, mujhe aur mere bikharte dimaag ko dekh raha tha.

"*Tu sach mein pagal ho raha hai, Shalaan,*" usne finally kaha.

"*Ho sakta hai,*" maine bina nazar hataye laptop screen par type karte hue kaha.

Room mein sirf keyboard ki tapping aur coffee ki smell thi. Pichle ek hafte se yahi routine tha—class jaana, wapas aana, aur ghanton tak research me ghus jaana. Rohan lectures cover kar raha tha, par uska patience ab khatam ho raha tha.

Mujhe ek next move karni thi.

Agle din subah, maine apna bag pack kiya—kuch kapde, laptop, camera, ek leather notebook, aur sabse zaroori cheez, ek audio recorder pen. Snacks bhi le liye, kyunki mujhe pata tha ki yeh mission ek din ka nahi hone wala. Phir maine car uthayi aur The Shadow Agency ke building ke neeche parking me gaadi roki.

Mera plan simple tha—wait and observe.

Din dhalne laga, aur tabhi maine dekha—Detective Sana kuch logon ke saath building se bahar nikli. Uske haath me ek iPad tha, aur wo log kuch serious discussion me lage the. Maine apna sunglasses adjust kiya aur car start button par ungli rakh di, par tabhi wo log ruk gaye. Ek black BMW aayi, aur bina waqt gawaye wo usme baith gaye.

Maine unki car ko distance bana ke follow kiya. Wo log ek narrow gali me ghus gaye. Ye toh obvious tha ki wo dekh rahe the koi unka peeche toh nahi kar raha. Maine turant apni speed slow ki aur seedha aage badh gaya, jaise kuch pata hi na ho.

Phir, ek jaana-pehchana ghar dikha. Ek moment ke liye, time freeze ho gaya. Yahi toh wahi ghar tha jahan ek baar papa mujhe aur mummy ko lekar aaye the... aur jahan unka kisi se bahut bada jhagda hua tha.

Us ghar ke saamne ek construction site thi—perfect hiding spot. Maine apni car ek kone me park ki aur headlights off kar di. Kuch minute baad, wahi black BMW wahin aayi. Sana aur Ryan nikle. Ryan ke haath me ek bada sa camera tha—journalist mode on. Dono dheere-dheere ek taraf chale gaye, aur main apni jagah se unhe observe karne laga.

Lekin kuch hi der me wo wapas aaye. BMW me baithte hi headlights ke roshni me unke chehre dikhe—frustration. *Kuch nahi mila.* Unhone turant signal diya, aur car wapas agency ke taraf nikal gayi.

Maine ek lambi sans li. Yeh approach kaam nahi karega. Agar mujhe sach jaanna hai, toh mujhe andar se khelna padega.

Agle din test dene ke baad, maine seedha The Shadow Agency ka rukh kiya. Reception desk pe jaa kar ek form bhara.

"Internship ke liye apply karna hai," maine casually kaha.

Lobby me Detective Sana dikh gayi.

Sana, Sana Bashir apni mid-30s mein thi, ek aisi aurat jo apne andar ek quiet confidence rakhti thi—jaise kisi ne duniya dekhi ho, hazaar raaz khole ho, aur sach ko tukdon se jodna seekh liya ho. Uski gehri brown aankhein kisi bhi insaan ke andar tak dekh sakti thi, jaise har jhooth ko turant pehchan leti ho. Uske jet-black baal ek low ponytail mein bandhe the. Uska dressing sense professional aur practical tha—ek navy-blue blazer jo uske slim-fit white kurti ke upar perfectly fit ho raha tha, aur saath mein black trousers jo clearly fieldwork ke liye suited the.

Uske haath mein ek ipad tha, aur left fingers ek steel coffee mug ke side pe halki tapping kar rahi thi—jaise uska dimaag ek hi time pe hazaar cheezein process kar raha ho.

"Shalaan, right?"

Pehchaan gayi hai. Of course, unke paas mera pura data hoga.

SANA

Lobby mein jaise hi maine kadam rakha, meri nazar us ladke par ja tikki—Shalaan.

22-23 saal ka hoga, magar uske chehre pe ek ajeeb sa thehraav tha, jaise zindagi ne use umar se zyada samajh de di ho. Grey suit ke neeche ek simple white t-shirt, haathon me ek sleek black watch, aur gale me wahi ek silver chain—jo maine uski har tasveer me dekhi thi. Niche white sneakers, casual par confident.

Lekin jo cheez sabse alag thi, wo thi uski nazar.

Ek teekhi, jaanchti hui nigah jo jaise har sach ko uske chhupne ki jagah se kheench kar bahar le aane ke liye bani ho. Dark brown baal, thode bikhre hue—shayad sochne ki aadat me anjaane mein ungliyan baar-baar guzar chuki thi.

Uski body language sakht aur tajurbaakar lagi, jaise ek trained investigator ki ho, magar uss thehre hue chehre ke peeche ek aur cheez chhupi thi—ek bechaini. Be-inteha curiosity aur ek chhupi hui wary energy, jaise wo kisi badi sachai ke sirf ek kadam door khada ho.

Aur sabse khaas baat?

Woh jaanta tha ki main use dekh rahi hoon.

Jaise hi maine ek kadam aage badhaya, usne bhi mere sath qadam mila diya.

Meri jaanchti nazar se milte hi, ek halka sa smirk uske chehre pe ubhra.

“Miss Sana?”

Uski awaaz thehri hui thi, jaise kisi bhi reaction ko absorb karne ke liye tayyar ho.

Maine bas halka sa sar hila diya.

"Tum yahan kya kar rahe ho?" Maine directly poocha, kyunki lobby me uski maujoodgi sirf ek hi baat indicate karti thi—yeh mujhe dhoondhne aaya tha.

Wo bina palke jhapkaye meri aankhon me dekhta raha, jaise kuch samajhne ki koshish kar raha ho.

“Main yahan job ke wajah se aaya hoon. Mujhe university ki taraf se intern ki tarah bheja gaya hai.”

Ek second ke liye, mujhe laga shayad yeh mazaak kar raha hai. Intern? The Shadow Agency me?

Maine thoda aage jhuk kar uski baat clear karni chahi, “Par shayad tumhe maloom ho ki tum is case me kuch help nahi kar sakte.”

Uske chehre par ek pal ke liye uljhan dikhayi di, par phir ek ajeeb si muskurahat ke sath bola, “Ji, mujhe maloom tha. Par main toh aapke team me already select ho chuka hoon.”

Meri aankhen thodi si teekhi ho gayi. Kya?

Wo jaise yehi reaction chah raha tha, ek confident smirk ke sath bola, "Shayad aapko information nahi mili hai." Aur bina ek aur shabd bole, wo agency ke main gate ki taraf chal diya.

Mere andar ek ajeeb si gussa ubharne lagi. Mujhe bina bataye yeh kaise ho sakta hai? Maine seedha director Ruhaan ke office ki taraf kadam badhaya.

Shishe ke darwaze ko zor se kholte hi, director ki taraf gusse bhari nazar daali. "Sir, aapne mere team me kisi ko join kiya hai?"

Ruhaan ne mujhe ek shant nazar se dekha, jaise woh already mere reaction ke liye prepared the.

Unhone ek file close ki aur thehre hue lehze me bole, “Haan, main uska verification kar chuka hoon. Professor Sharma ne mujhe directly recommend kiya hai.”

Mere haath apne aap hi fold ho gaye. Professor Sharma? Matlab yeh officially approve ho chuka hai?

Ruhaan ne mujhe aur clarify kiya, “Unka kehna tha ki yeh ladka apne parents ki maut ke baad se mentally disturbed hai. Agar yeh kisi real case me involve rahega, toh iske mental health ke liye helpful hoga. Aur badle me, yeh hamaari case me madad karega.”

Unke tone me koi shak nahi tha. Yeh decision liya ja chuka tha.

Pehli baar mujhe kisi victim ke kareebi ko apni team me rakhna hoga. Aur yehi baat mujhe sabse zyada uneasy kar rahi thi.

SHALAN

Mujhe pata tha ki victim ke relative ko case me involve karna allow nahi hota.

Isliye maine pehle hi apna game set kar diya tha. Professor Sharma se mil chuka tha, kyunki mujhe maloom tha ki woh aur Director Ruhaan college ke dost the. Unka naam maine kayi baar suna tha. Bas ek meeting, ek solid recommendation, aur main agency ke andar.

Jab hostel wapas aaya, toh seedha laptop khol kar kaam par lag gaya.

Kuch der baad, Rohan room me ghusa. Jaise hi maine use job ke baare me bataya, uska chehra ekdum chamak gaya. Bina kisi warning ke, mujhe ghaseet le gaya ek fancy restaurant me.

Jaise hi hum wahan pahunche, maine usse samjhane ki koshish ki, "Rohan, maine yeh job kisi khushi ke liye nahi li. Yeh sirf ek wajah se kiya hai—mere papa ke case ko solve karne ke liye."

Woh mujhe kuch der tak dekhta raha. Phir ek halke se muskurahat ke sath bola, "Mujhe maloom hai, par main is baat se khush hoon ki tu kamre se bahar toh nikla. Aur wish karta hoon ki main bhi tere sath hota. Main bhi chahta hoon ki aunty aur uncle ke murderer ko saza mile."

Mere paas kehne ke liye shabd nahi bache the.

Kuch pal ki khamoshi ke baad, maine casually bola, "Tu bhi apply kyun nahi kar leta?"

Rohan ne apne cutlery ko adjust kiya, phir meri taraf dekha, "Tu samajhta nahi hai, Shalan. Wo log mujhe le lenge?"

Maine uski aankhon me directly dekha, "Kyun nahi? Abhi wahan internship ke liye openings hai. Tu apply toh kar sakta hai."

Uske chehre pe ek ajeeb si soch thi—jo pehli baar uske words se nahi, uski aankhon se samajh aayi.

Rohan ek effortlessly stylish ladka tha, jo bina kisi effort ke bhi hamesha sharp lagta tha. Uske medium-length, slightly messy black baal uski carefree personality ko reflect karte the—jaise usne kabhi comb chalane ki zaroorat hi mehsoos na ki ho.

Humari style bahut milti jhulti thi. Wo mostly casual aur branded kapde pehenta tha—oversized hoodies, jeans, aur sneakers uski signature style thi. Ek simple black leather band uski wrist pe hamesha rehta, jo shayad ek habit ya ek sentimental attachment thi. Uska stance relaxed hota, jaise duniya ki koi tension uske radar par nahi hai.

Rohan sirf ek dost nahi tha—woh ek aisa insaan tha jo har situation ko ek alag perspective se dekhne ki aadat rakhta tha. Jaha main har cheez ko logic aur evidence ki nazar se dekhta, waha Rohan ke liye emotions aur instincts bhi equally zaroori the. Wo ek aisa ladka tha jo life ko chill mode me jeena chahta tha. Uske papa ek successful businessman the aur mama ek reputed professor, isliye financial pressure uspar kabhi tha hi nahi. Uske liye abhi life ka matlab sirf maasti, adventure, aur freedom tha—job aur responsibilities se dur.

Lekin ek aur cheez thi jo uske andar strong thi—dosti.

Mujhe dekh kar usko lagta tha ki main apni zindagi sirf ek hi mission ke around ghuma raha hoon. Wo jaanta tha ki main andar se toot chuka hoon, par uske bas me nahi tha ki mujhe rok sake. Isliye usne ek decision le liya—agar main apne past ka peeche nahi chhod sakta, toh kam se kam wo mujhe akela nahi chhodega.

"Tu apni kahani likh raha hai, Shalan," usne haste hue kaha, "Aur mujhe sirf ek side character bana diya?"

Mujhe malum tha ki wo majak kar raha hai.

"Chal, ab zyada soch mat, is bare me baad me baat karte hain." usne ek casual tone me kaha aur menu utha liya. "Pehle decide kar ki khayega kya, future journalist?"

Maine ek halki si smile di. Chahe wo mazak kar raha ho ya nahi, mujhe ye achha laga ki koi toh tha jo mere saath khada tha.

Khana kha kar hum hostel laut aaye. Rohan apne bed par girte hi so gaya, aur main, jaise hamesha hota hai, laptop lekar case notes dekhne lag gaya.

JOINING

Agle din subah, 7 baje uthte hi ek automatic routine follow kiya—jaldi se ready hua, bag uthaya, aur camera ko gale me latkaya. Car ghar par chhod di aur bus stop ki taraf nikal gaya.

Bus stop par thodi der khada raha, thandi hawa chehre se takra rahi thi. Phir ek purani si bus aayi, brakes ki cheekh sunai di, aur main bheed ke saath andar ghus gaya. Bus ke andar ek ajeeb si chaos thi—kisi ko office ke liye der ho rahi thi, koi phone par zor-zor se baat kar raha tha, ek chhota baccha maa ki godh me ro raha tha. Main is sab ko ignore karte hue apni book nikal li. Psychology aur crime ki books mujhe hamesha se attract karti thi. Abhi sirf 20 pages hi padhe the ki bus ruk gayi—meri stop aa chuki thi.

Book ko bag me rakha, earphones lagaaye, aur agency ki taraf paidal chal diya.

Jab main agency pahunch, toh dekha ki waqt se 25 minute pehle aa gaya tha. Thoda relief mehsoos hua. Lekin jaise hi meeting room ka darwaza dhakka dekar khola, toh samne ek ajeeb scene tha—saare log already wahaan baithe the, tired aur focused. Maine apni watch check ki—kya main late ho gaya?

Detective Sana ne meri confusion dekh li. Usne thoda muskurakar kaha, "Tum time par aaye ho. Hum log raat se yahan hain. Abhi aur research baaki hai, lekin pehle thoda fresh hone ja rahe hain."

Woh jaise hi meeting room se nikli, maine ek gehri saans li. Pehli hi din, aur yeh level ka intensity? Yeh sirf ek job nahi thi. Yeh ek battlefield tha.

Kamre me ek ajeeb si energy thi—thakaan, tension, aur ek bechaini jo hawa me ghuli hui thi. Sabhi log neend se thake lage, jaise poori raat kisi uljhan me kaati ho. Table ka haal dekh kar hi samajh aa raha tha ki yahaan kaam rukta nahi. Har jagah papers, scattered notes, aur

hastily drawn maps phele the. Table ke saamne ek badi screen thi—uspar mere parents ki tasveer.

Ek second ke liye meri saansein thami.

Maine bina awaaz kiye apna bag aur camera ek kone me rakha aur nazar ghuma kar room ka andaza lagaya. Ek bada sa table jisme charon taraf kursiyan thi, deewaron ke saath shelves jisme files bhar-bhar ke rakhi thi. Upar electronics ke alag-alag gadgets pade the—CCTV hard drives, bugs, aur tracking devices.

Lekin meri nazar sabse pehle kahaan gayi?

Coffee machine.

Ek paper cup uthaya aur apne aap ko rok nahi saka. Pehli sip li hi thi ki table par phela saara data mere saamne tha—mere parents ke sabhi employees, business partners, doston aur dushmanon ki details. Har jagah red circles, arrows, aur hastily written remarks the—jaise kisi ne har angle se case ko todne ki koshish ki ho.

Phir meri nazar ek file par padi.

"Shadow Agency: Confidential."

Mera naya office. Mera kaam.

Mujhe ab tak yeh agency sirf ek internship lag rahi thi, ek aisa moka jisse mujhe mere parents ke case ki taraf thoda aur access mil sake. Par jaise-jaise main yeh files dekh raha tha, ek aur cheez samajh aa rahi thi—Shadow Agency kisi bhi normal investigative firm se alag hai. Yeh ek corporate research firm hai jo private investigations bhi handle karti hai, aur is case ka ek bada hissa yahan analyze ho raha hai.

Dheere se first page palta. Jitna padha, utni curiosity badhti gayi. Har ek word jaise ek naye raaz ka darwaza khol raha tha. Lekin tabhi—

"Bahut tez ho tum, Shalan."

Ek thandi, lekin edge wali awaaz ne mujhe rok diya.

Maine nazar uthai. Detective Sana wapas aa chuki thi. Expression unreadable tha, lekin uski aankhein directly meri har move ko scan kar rahi thi—jaise ek trained predator apne prey ko dekhta hai.

Aur tabhi, ek aur detective, jo mere umar ka hi tha, mere bagal se guzra aur bina kisi hesitation ke mere haath se coffee ka cup le liya. Apni kursi kheench kar laptop on kiya aur bina mujhe dekhe casually bola,

"What? You're an intern here, you should make coffee for everyone."

Mere chehre par ek pal ke liye gussa aaya, lekin maine file wapas table par rakhi aur ek casual tone me bola, "Bas thoda samajhne ki koshish kar raha tha."

Sana ke lips par ek chhoti si smirk aayi, lekin usme ek warning chhupi thi.

"Agar tumhe sach mein samajhna hai, toh sahi tareeke se seekho. Chhup kar nahi."

Uske words seedha dimaag me ghus gaye. Yeh sirf ek warning nahi thi. Yeh ek challenge tha.

Meeting officially start hone wali thi. Maine apne aap ko compose kiya, chair ke backrest se seedha ho gaya. Yeh meri pehli step thi, aur mujhe har move soch samajh kar chalni thi.

Meeting room mein ek low buzz chal raha tha—sab apni reports aur laptops me ghuse hue the. Maine apne aap ko compose kiya, chair ke backrest se seedha ho gaya. Yeh meri pehli step thi, aur mujhe har move soch samajh kar chalni thi.

Tabhi, ek aawaaz room ke silence ko todti hai.

"Toh kya hum theories banane wale hain ya kuch actual evidence bhi hai?"

Ek casual yet sharp tone. Ek aisi awaaz jo bina zor diye bhi command karti hai.

Maine sir uthaya. Darwaze par ek aadmi khada tha—zyada formal nahi, par ek journalist ki effortless confidence uske har gesture me thi. Haath me ek notepad, ek pen ko fingers me casually spin karta hua, jaise koi chess player apni next move soch raha ho.

Ryan Zafar.

Wo bina kisi hesitation ke andar aaya, ek empty chair kheench kar baitha aur table par apna notepad patak diya. Uski aankhein ek pal ke liye mujhpar tikti hain—scanning, assessing, jaise ek trained journalist kisi naye source ko evaluate kar raha ho. Phir, bina kisi introduction ke, usne files ki taraf haath badhaya.

"Chalo dekhte hain, kya naya mila hai."

Uski body language relaxed thi, par har movement calculated. Aisa banda jo har conversation me ek layer extra observe karta ho, jo har sentence ke beech wale gaps ko bhi sunta ho.

Sana ne ek sigh liya aur sarcastically bola, "Nice of you to finally join us."

Ryan ne ek short smirk diya.

Jab Mr. Ryan room me aaya, meeting officially shuru ho gayi. Screen par teen tasveerein flash hui—

- Ek broken watch. Almost identical to mine. Meri maa ne mujhe aur papa

ko ek hi model ka diya tha. Birthday gift.

- Ek key. Bina keychain ke. Strange. Hamare ghar ki har key ek keychain ke sath hoti thi. Ek ajeeb aadat thi. Hum jahan bhi ghumne jaate, ek keychain aur photo magnet yaadgar ke taur pe zaroor le aate.
- Ek cigarette butt. Lekin... hamare ghar me cigarette koi nahi peeta tha.

Ryan ne screen se nazar hata kar reports scan ki. Uska tone clipped tha, serious.

"Thief ki ek bhi clear image nahi mili. Na CCTV, na koi eyewitness. Yeh aadmi ek shadow ki tarah aaya aur bina ek bhi clue chhode chala gaya."

Sana ne bina emotion ke ek hi word bola— "Professional."

Maine casually kaha, lekin har word soch-samajh kar— *"Ek thief itna professional kaise ho sakta hai?"*

Ryan ne screen ki taraf dekha aur sirf ek second hesitate kiya. *"Exactly. Lekin agar yeh planned murder tha, toh kisne kiya? Faisal Ahmad ke business rivals? Ya koi family dispute?"*

Maine bina ek second waste kiye wo key uthai.

Maine deliberate pause ke sath kaha, *"Shayad wo chori karne ke maqsad se nahi aaya tha..."*

Sabne ek saath meri taraf dekha.

Maine calmly key ko rotate kiya aur ek aur line drop ki— *"Aur shayad wo mere parents ko achche se jaanta tha."*

Ek silence chhaya. Sirf projector ka soft hum sunaayi de raha tha.

Sana ne narrowed eyes se dekha. Ryan ne pen twirl karna band kar diya. Vikram (IT expert) ne curiosity se ek eyebrow raise kiya.

"Tumhe aisa kyun lagta hai ki yeh kisi jaane wale ne kiya?" Sana ne meri taraf dekha, nazar ekdum intense. Jaise abhi bhi usko mujh par shaq ho.

Maine bina ek second waste kiye key uthai aur calmly bola—

"Is key ki wajah se."

Mere words par ek pause aaya. Sab sun rahe the.

"Hamare ghar me har key ke sath ek keychain hoti hai. Infact, hamare paas keys se zyada keychains hain. Har trip par ek yaadgar keychain aur photo magnet le aate hain. Par yeh... bina keychain ki key ghar me nahi ho sakti."

Meri baat sun kar Sana ne narrowed eyes se dekha, jaise kuch analyze kar rahi ho.

Maine cigarette butt uthaya aur fingers ke beech roll kiya.

"Aur dusri baat," maine deliberately slow tone me kaha, *"Yeh cigarette."*

Ek silence.

"Papa ko cigarette se sakht nafrat thi. Itni ki mujhe ek baar mere dost se milne tak nahi diya kyunki unhone use cigarette peete dekh liya tha."

Ryan, jo ab tak silent tha, aage jhuka. Uske expressions suddenly serious ho gaye.

"So, I hope you've got your answer." Maine casually back lean kiya jaise koi badi baat nahi boli.

Ek silence chhaya.

Sab ek dusre ki taraf dekhnay lage.

Phir, bina kisi aur discussion ke, sari team ek naam par focus ho gayi—

Suresh Khanna.

Wohi businessman jisse 5 saal pehle ek party me Papa ki larayi ho gayi thi. Is baar screen par uski tasveer flash hui. Saath me uske business records, conflicts aur past rivalries.

"Yeh Suresh Khanna hai," Vikram ne uske face ki taraf ishara kiya. *"Paanch saal pehle, ek high-profile party me Mr. Ahmed aur inka bada jhagda hua tha. Mr. Ahmed ke employees aur business partners ke mutaabiq, us incident ke baad Khanna ko bade financial losses hue."*

Vikram ek second ke liye ruk gaya, phir dheere se meri taraf dekha—jaise use darr ho ki kahin mujhe bura na lag jaye.

Miss Sana ne immediately uska expression pick kar liya. Usne directly meri taraf dekha, *"Shalan, yeh case sirf surface tak nahi rukega. Tumhare parents ke baare me aisi baatein samne aayengi jo tumne kabhi sochi bhi nahi hongii. Har insaan ke dark secrets hote hain."*

Maine bina kisi hesitation ke kaha, *"I'm prepared for this. Agar main yahan hoon, to iska matlab maine pehle se sab kuch soch samajh liya hai."*

Ek second ke liye room me sirf projector ki halki si humming sunai di.

Phir Vikram ne cursor move kiya, ek naya slide screen par flash hua—money transfer details.

"Us din ke baad, Mr. Ahmed ne Khanna ko barbad karne ki puri koshish ki thi." Vikram ne ek file open ki.

Screen par ek pattern emerge hone laga—multiple financial deals jo abruptly cancel ki gayi thi.

"Yeh dekho," Vikram ne ek column highlight kiya. *"Khanna ke saath ki gayi saari badi deals terminate ho gayi thi... aur unhi companies ne Mr. Ahmed ke saath naye contracts sign kiye, kam damon me."*

Sab silent ho gaye.

"To iska matlab simple hai," Ryan ne finally kaha, *"Khanna ne sab kuch khona hai, uska sabse bada dushman agar koi hai, to wo Mr. Ahmed hi hoga. Revenge ek strong motive hai."*

Kuch din tak sirf research hi chalti rahi. Mr. Khanna ke baare me details nikalne me kaafi waqt lag raha tha. Har din naye documents, naye records, aur phir bhi sirf itni hi information milti jaise kisi bade jigsaw puzzle ka ek chhota tukda.

Isi beech, Rohan bhi agency join kar chuka tha—as an intern in the IT department.

Mujhe hamesha lagta tha ki case jaldi solve ho jata hai—movies aur novels se jo seekha tha, usme 2-3 ghante me sab kuch khatam ho jata hai. Main crime journalism ka student tha, par hamare projects sirf already solved cases ko analyze karne tak seemit the. Yeh real tha.

Yahan teen din ho chuke the, din ke 17-18 ghante kaam karne ke baad bhi sirf itna progress hua jitna ek novel ke sirf 10 pages padhne me hota.

Ek din, Miss Sana ne meri halat dekhi to halki muskurahat ke saath boli,
"Kya hua? Case solve karne ki bahut jaldi hai?"

Maine thoda hass kar apne sar ke pichle hisse ke baal khujaaye.

"Mujhe laga tha ki yeh jaldi solve ho jayega, but ab samajh aa raha hai... yeh ek patience game hai."

Sana ne thoda sarcastic andaaz me kaha,

"Itni aasan nahi hoti kisi bhi case ki investigation. Kayi din lag jate hain. Kabhi kabhi criminal ko malum bhi pad jata hai ki hum uske peeche hain. Fir dhamki bhi aati hai... aur phir—"

Maine uski baat beech me kaat di.

"Aapko mili hai kabhi dhamki?"

Ek second ke liye, uska chehra bilkul blank ho gaya. Jaise maine uske past ka koi darwaza khol diya ho.

Usse pehle ki wo kuch keh pati, Mr. Ryan ki aawaz aayi.

"Sana... Sana...!"

Hum dono second-floor balcony par the. Ryan seedhiyon se aate dikhe, lekin jaise hi unki nazar mujh par padi, unki aawaz dheemi ho gayi.

"Miss Sana, aapka lunch."

Sana thodi confuse si lagi, phir bina kuch bole apna lunch uthaya aur chali gayi. Ryan bhi turant apne phone ka notification dekh kar *"Excuse me"* keh ke neeche chale gaye.

Mujhe instantly laga—in dono ke beech kuch to hai.

Meeting room me wapas gaya to wahan Vikram aur Rohan already baithe the. Rohan naye system ko samajhne ki koshish kar raha tha, aur Vikram apne laptop me busy tha.

Maine casually pucha, *"Miss Sana aur Mr. Ryan kab se yahan kaam kar rahe hain?"*

Vikram ne ek second ke liye mujhe dekha, phir bina kisi expression ke bola,

"Dono yahan intern ke taur par aaye the. College mates bhi the. Rumour hai ki unki shaadi ho chuki hai. Lekin agency me kisi ko kisi ke personal matters me interest nahi hai... aur na hi waqt."

Rohan ne bhi sirf ek side glance diya, phir apne kaam me lag gaya.

Maine *"Hmm..."* keh kar apna laptop khola, but ek thought mere dimag me chipak gaya—Rumours kabhi kabhi sach bhi hote hain.

Meeting room me ek gehri sanatta tha. Dim lights ka halka sa glow screen par pad raha tha, jisme naye evidence ek ke baad ek saamne aa rahe the. Sabhi ki nazar screen par chipki thi, aur har kisi ki body language bata rahi thi ki ye case expected se kahin zyada complicated hone wala hai.

Aaj ki meeting Vikram lead kar raha tha. Usne apne laptop ka ek key press kiya, aur screen par ek financial transaction ka screenshot aaya.

"Ek transaction mili hai," uski awaaz ek dum steady thi. "Sender unknown, lekin yeh raha receipt—ShadowFox Ltd."

Room me ek pal ke liye khamoshi chha gayi. Mr. Ryan ne apni chair me thoda peeche jhuk kar socha. Uski aankhein narrowed thi, jaise woh apni memory ko scan kar raha ho. Phir dheere se bola,

"Yeh naam suna suna lag raha hai..."

Vikram ne ek aur click kiya, aur agla slide saamne aaya.

“Maine ispe aur deep research kiya, toh malum hua ki ‘ShadowFox Ltd.’ ek investment company hai, jo ek personal trust fund se operate hoti hai.”

Miss Sana ne halki si curiosity se pucha, "Aur yeh trust?"

Vikram ne ek aur click kiya. Iss baar screen par ek aur naam flash hua—

‘S.K. Trust.’

Ek second ke liye meeting room me ek ghanaghor khamoshi chha gayi.

Rohan, jo ab tak sirf sun raha tha, confusion me meri taraf dekha aur dheeme se bola, "S.K?"

Maine Vikram ki taraf dekha, aur usse pehle ki main kuch bolta, Miss Sana aur Mr. Ryan ek saath bole—

"Suresh Khanna."

Vikram ne sirf ek chhoti si muskurahat ke saath right thumb se ishara kiya—bingo.

Miss Sana ne ek pal ke liye socha, fir thoda sceptical expression ke saath boli,

"Yeh coincidence bhi ho sakta hai."

Vikram ne bina ek second waste kiye ek aur slide change ki. Iss baar screen par Mr. Khanna ka photo aaya, aur uske neeche uske business details.

"Jab aap log Mr. Khanna ke paas gaye the, toh unhone kaha tha ki murder ki raat kisi private event me the. Par ab tak koi CCTV footage nahi mili, na koi solid evidence, na witnesses."

Vikram ek pal ke liye ruka, fir agla slide change kiya.

"Second point—murder ke aas paas unka phone switch off raha. Jab pucha gaya, toh kaha ki family event me the, jahan rule tha ki sab phones off rakhein."

Convenient.

Agla slide flash hota hai—BMW X5 (Black Sapphire Metallic).

"Third point—yeh unki registered cars me se ek hai. Aur yahi model Mr. Ahmed ke main gate ke CCTV footage me bhi mila. Shaam 4 baje se lekar subah 6 baje tak wahi par tha. Sirf back view capture hua hai. Jab yeh car nikli, toh speed itni zyada thi ki number plate visible nahi thi."

Ek aur slide. Is baar cigarette ki jali hui image.

"Fourth point—Mr. Khanna ke ek employee ka kehna hai ki unhone 4 saal pehle cigarette peena chhod diya tha."

Ek aur coincidence? Ya koi deliberately clues drop kar raha hai?

Vikram apni kursi par baith gaya, aur ek gehri saans li. Room ka mahaul aur bhi tense ho gaya tha.

"Main apne pen ko ungliyon ke beech ghumate hue bola..." "Too many coincidences..."

Mr. Ryan ne meri taraf dekha, phir dheere se sab ki taraf, aur ek baar phir calmly bola,

"Ya misleading."

Miss Sana ek pal ke liye chup rahi, fir dheemi si muskurahat di—jo ek clear indication tha ki wo bhi Mr. Ryan ki baat se agree karti hai.

Mr. Ryan ne apni baat aur aage badhate hue kaha, "Ya toh waqai Mr. Khanna responsible hai... ya koi aur hai jo Mr. Khanna aur Mr. Ahmed ke beech ki dushmani ka fayda utha raha hai."

Vikram thoda jhuka, eyebrows thodi furrow ki, aur questioning tone me bola, "Toh kya yeh saare evidence galat hain?"

Miss Sana ne files ko scan karte hue thoda socha, fir calmly boli,

"Nahi. Par humein yeh bhi yaad rakhna hoga ki sirf in clues ki wajah se hum kisi ko criminal assume nahi kar sakte. Jab tak solid proof na ho, humein har angle se dekhna hoga."

"Uss key ka kya hua jo humein Mr. Ahmed ke ghar se mili thi?" Sana ki awaaz ek dum steady thi, jaise wo kisi missing puzzle piece ko dhoond rahi ho.

Rhea Malhotra (assistant investigator) ne key uthai, usko ungliyon ke beech ghumaya aur ek gehri soch me dub gayi. "Maine iske baare me Mr. Faizan Ahmed se baat ki thi," usne file palat kar kaha. "Unka kehna hai ki yeh key unke ghar ki nahi ho sakti. Har key ke saath ek keychain hoti hai, aur agar yeh office ka hota to iska duplicate unke paas bhi hota. But yeh unke liye bhi ek mystery hai."

Sana ne ek second socha aur phir pucha, "Aur tumhari research?"

Rhea ne ek aur document open kiya. "Yeh kisi regular door ya locker ki key nahi lagti. Structure aur design se lagta hai ki yeh kisi medium-size padlock ki key hai."

Ek pal ke liye room me sirf screens ki halki-halki light thi. Mr. Ryan ne apni fingers knock karte hue kaha, "To do possibilities hain—ya to yeh kisi secret warehouse ki key hai jiske baare me kisi ko nahi pata, ya fir yeh murderer ke pocket se gir gayi hai."

Maine apni pen ko table par ghumaya aur dheere se kaha, "If it's the second one... toh iska matlab murderer wahan tha. Aur is key ka rasta humein us tak le ja sakta hai."

PART- VI

Agle kuch din torture ki tarah guzre. Na bas sirf hectic, na bas tiring—ekdum jaan le lene wale.

Main aur Mr. Ryan do hafte tak ek hi car me Mr. Khanna ke peeche lage rahe. Har roz wahi routine—follow, note, observe, repeat.

Jab mujhe neend aati, Mr. Ryan jaagte. Jab unka shift hota, main coffee aur guilt ke sahare zinda rehta.

Aur yeh guilt kis baat ka tha?

Ki yeh mission hamari ummeedon se zyada boring nikal raha tha.

Mr. Khanna ki life suspicious kam, aur robotic zyada thi.

- Subah 9:30 baje ghar se nikalte, 10:00 baje office pahunchte.
- Lunch office cafeteria me karte, phir wapas apne cabin me band ho jate.
- Shaam 8:00 baje office se nikalte, 8:15 tak gym pahunchte, ek ghante ki workout, aur 9:30 baje ghar laut aate.
- Sunday ko thoda alag karte—din bhar ghar me rahte aur raat ko Japanese restaurant me family dinner.

Na koi secret meetings. Na koi shady log. Na koi darwaze ke peeche mafia whispers.

Agar yeh banda killer hai, toh ya toh uski acting Oscar-worthy hai... ya phir hum galat aadmi ke peeche apna waqt barbaad kar rahe hain.

Par ek aur cheez jo mujhe disturb kar rahi thi—Aryan Khanna.

Mr. Khanna ka beta. Mera childhood best friend. Jo ab nahi hai.

Ek waqt tha jab humari families kaafi close thi. Hum dono ek saath khelte, padhai me madad karte, aur ek doosre ki har secret baat jaante the. Bachpan ka woh dost jise tum bhoolna bhi chaho toh nahi bhool sakte.

Par ek jhagde ke baad sab badal gaya.

Papa ko Aryan pasand nahi tha. Unhe hamesha uske parivaar se problem thi, par unke paas mujhe dosti todne ka koi solid reason nahi tha. Jab tak...

Ek din papa ne Aryan ko apne dad ka chhupaya hua cigarette churate hue dekh liya.

Bas. Unko jo chahiye tha, mil gaya—ek perfect excuse.

"Aryan tumhe bigaad raha hai."

"Uski aadatein achi nahi hain."

"Yeh dosti tumhare liye achi nahi hai."

Aur yeh baatein roz repeat hoti rahi, jab tak maine Aryan se doori nahi bana li.

Uske baad Aryan ki family financially struggle karne lagi aur uska school change ho gaya.

Usne kabhi call nahi kiya.

Maine bhi nahi.

Aur aaj, main uske baap ko murder suspect ke roop me stalk kar raha tha.

Kismet kitni ajeeb hoti hai.

Aaj Mr. Khanna par nazar rakhne ka aakhri din tha. Ab tak koi evidence nahi mila. Koi suspicious activity nahi. Sirf ek dead end.

Mr. Ryan driver's seat par coffee sip kar rahe the, aur main backseat me laptop par aaj ka follow-up report likh raha tha.

Lekin honestly?

Mere dimaag me ek aur sawal ghoom raha tha.

Aur aaj usse poochne ka perfect time tha.

"Are you and Miss Sana married?"

Mr. Ryan ka reaction?

Ek second ke liye freeze ho gaye.

Phir dheere se peeche mud kar mujhe dekha, jaise maine koi illegal kaam kar diya ho.

Aur bina kuch bole wapas aage dekhne lage.

"Yeh sab tumhe kisne bataya?"

Unhone coffee ka sip liya aur papers aur photographs scan karne lage, jaise meri baat ek buni-bunayi kahani ho.

"Mujhe kisi ne nahi bataya. Bas kuch baatein sunai de jati hain."

Silence.

Sirf car ke engine ki awaz.

Mr. Ryan apni files scan karte rahe, jaise yeh discussion kabhi hua hi nahi.

Mujhe laga curiosity ab khatam ho jayegi...

...par wo aur badh gayi.

SANA

Warehouse ka andhera itna gehra tha jaise yahan waqt ruk gaya ho.

Main aur Rhea ek key ke peeche pure din bhatak chuke the.

Har jagah tutte hue shelves, zameen par padi dhool, aur ek ajeeb si sannata.

Rhea ne frustration me ek iron box ko lat mari.

"Agar ek aur jagah bina kisi clue ke milegi na, toh main yahan bomb laga dunga!"

Mujhe bhi irritation ho rahi thi, par hum afford nahi kar sakte the ki gusse me koi galti ho jaye.

"Hume kuch miss ho raha hai," maine kaha, andar ka uneasy feeling ignore karte hue.

Rhea ne exhale kiya, "Haan, ek solid clue."

Lekin yahan kuch bhi nahi mila. Hamlog wahan se mayus ho kar apne car me baith gaye.

Car me baithte hi maine phone nikala.

Ryan ka message—

"Shalaan ko hamare relationship ka shaq ho gaya hai."

Ek second ke liye meri saansein rukh gayi. Mann me ek hi sawaal—kaise?

Maine turant reply kiya—

"Are you sure? Tumne kuch confirm toh nahi kiya?"

Uska jawab instantly aaya—

"Nahi, main chup ho gaya."

Meri ungliyan phone ke screen par freeze ho gayi.

Han, main aur Ryan shaadi-shuda hain.

Ek case ke dauraan hamarai mukaqat hui hui thi. Aur sirf itna hi nahi, hamari ek beti hai—Inaya Ryan.

Par yeh sab kuch duniya se chhupa kar rakha hai. Kyuki family hamari sabse badi kamzori hoti hai.

Ek baar kisi ko pata chal gaya ki tumhare paas koi hai jise tum protect karna chahte ho... Toh fir baat khatam.

Mera ek bhai bhi hai—Omar Bashir. BA LLB kar raha hai, hostel me rehta hai.

Kyunki main chahti hoon ki wo safe rahe. Inaya chhoti hai, isliye use nahi bhej sakti.

Yeh sach ek din sabke saamne aayega, par tab jab main tayyar houngi.

Rhea ko uske apartment drop karne ke baad mein ghar aayi.

Seedha Inaya ke kamre ki taraf gayi.

Dheere se darwaza khola.

Wo apne study table par so rahi thi. Mein use utha kar bed par sula di aur uske uper blanket daal di aur room ka temperature bhi set kar di. Aur bina aawaz kiye room se bahar nikal gayi.

Kapde washing machine me daale. Subah ke liye kuch sandwiches bana kar fridge me rakhe. Kuch foil me lapet kar apne bag me rakh liye.

Phir ek baar Inaya ke kamre ka darwaza khola. Uska shaant, masoom chehra dekha...

Aur bina awaaz kiye band kar diya. Caretaker ko sab instructions diye. Aur bina peeche dekhe, ghar se nikal gayi.

Raste me Rhea ko pick kiya. Office pahunchte hi meeting room ki taraf bhaagi. Sab log already wahan baithe the.

Mera bag cabin me rakha aur bina waqt gawaaye andar gayi.

Ryan meeting lead kar raha tha. "Main aur Shalaan 2 hafte se 24*7 Mr. Khanna ko follow kar rahe hain. Lekin ab tak koi solid info nahi mili.

Routine ekdum normal hai—

Subah office, shaam gym, fir ghar. Na koi secret meeting. Na kisi shady bande se mulaqat.

Ryan ek pause leta hai, fir ek gehra saans. "Sirf do possibilities hain—

Ya toh wo ekdum begunah hai...

Ya phir...

Maine uski baat kaat di— "Ya phir wo humse ek kadam aage hai."

Pura room ek second ke liye silence me chala gaya.

Jab mein file band kar rahi thi, maine notice kiya—Shalaan mujhe dekh raha tha. Uski nazar ekdum steady thi, jaise ek shatranj ka khiladi apne agle move ka wait kar raha ho.

Meri heartbeat ek pal ke liye ruk si gayi. Kya usne sach jaan liya? Ya phir yeh sirf mera waham hai?

Uske lips par ek halki si muskurahat thi—woh waise hi dekh raha tha jaise koi jawab milne ke baad sirf confirmation ka intezaar karta hai.

SHALAN

Mujhe abhi tak poori tarah confirm nahi tha ki Miss Sana aur Mr. Ryan ka rishta sirf professional hai ya uske peeche koi aur kahani chhupi hai. Lekin jab maine Miss Sana ke chehre ko dekha, ek pal ke liye jaise unka saara confidence hil gaya ho.

Unke chehre ka rang ud chuka tha. Aankhon ka colour change ho gaya tha, jaise kisi ne unse ek aisa sawaal puchh liya ho jiska jawab unke paas nahi tha. Woh ek second ke liye freeze ho gayi thi, par phir bhi apne emotions ko hide karne ki koshish kar rahi thi. Lekin maine notice kar liya.

Kya Mr. Ryan aur Miss Sana ke beech kuch hai? Ya phir yeh sirf mera shak hai? Agar kuch hai bhi, toh yeh dono itne secretive kyun hain?

Main zyada sochna nahi chahta tha. Maine apni curiosity ko control kiya aur wapas meeting room ki taraf dhyaan diya.

Mr. Ryan apni report khatam kar chuke the. Ab Miss Sana bolne lagi.

"Main aur Rhea har jagah ja kar is key ke baare mein information collect kar rahe the. Kahin bhi koi lead nahi mili... ek jagah chhod kar—CCTV footage."

Room ek dum se attentive ho gaya. Sabhi ek naye lead ki umeed me the.

Sana ne apni report pesh ki. "Jab humlog Mr. Ahmed ke ghar ke saamne se gujre, toh thodi door ek CCTV camera dikhai diya. Humne footage nikalne ki koshish ki, aur dekha—subah 6 baje se lekar 8 baje tak ek bhi black BMW X5 wahan se nahi gujri. Yeh ajeeb baat thi. Agar gaadi wahan nahi thi, toh Ahmed ka murderer uske ghar tak kaise pahucha?"

Ek cheez aur thi jo strange lag rahi thi. Jab hum wapas Mr. Ahmed ke ghar ki taraf gaye, toh ek aur gali dikhai di, jo Ahmed ke ghar se pehle aati thi. Us gali ke end par ek supermarket tha, jisme CCTV laga hua tha. Humne footage wahan se collect ki aur Vikram ko bhej diya."

Vikram ne apne laptop par kuch type kiya. Ek pal ke liye pura room silent ho gaya. Usne screen par ek blurry image zoom ki—Black Sapphire Metallic BMW X5.

"Yeh wahi gaadi hai," Vikram ne confirm kiya, "Jiski footage Miss Sana ne bheji thi. Yeh car Mr. Ahmed ke ghar ke samne murder ke din dekhi gayi thi. Jab humne iska number trace kiya, toh pata chala ki iska owner yahan se 810 km door rehta hai.

"Sabse shock wali baat yeh hai," Vikram ne continue kiya, "19th December ko yeh gaadi uske ghar ke samne se chori ho gayi thi. Complaint bhi register hui thi. Par jo sabse disturbing baat thi—21st December—Mr. Ahmed ke murder ki shaam—yeh car wahan thi. Aur 22nd December ko wahan se gayab ho gayi. Fir 26th December ko yeh wapas original owner ke ghar ke samne dikhai di."

Room ek pal ke liye silent ho gaya. Sabke dimaag ek hi baat soch rahe the—yeh car ek important clue ho sakti thi.

"Gaadi se humein koi fingerprints nahi mile," Vikram ne continue kiya, "Par ek water bottle mili hai, jo forensic lab bhej di gayi hai. Kal subah tak report aa jayegi."

Maine Sana ke chehre par ek strange expression dekha—ek grim determination.

Sana ne intense awaaz me kaha, "Mr. Khanna ke related ek strong evidence mila hai. Humne us raat ke sabhi family gathering members se baat ki, unke photos aur videos analyze kiye. Ek footage mili hai jisme Mr. Khanna sirf kuch second ke liye dikh rahe hain."

Ek uneasy silence cha gaya.

"Matlab, wo hamare main suspect se temporarily nikal jaate hain. Par iska ye matlab nahi ki wo involved nahi the. Kya pata unhone kisi hitman ko hire kiya ho?"

Ryan ne sochne ke baad kaha, "Ab kal forensic report ka wait karte hain. Agar humein koi usable fingerprint milta hai, toh hum usse apne database ke criminals ke saath match karenge. Ho sakta hai wo kisi purane criminal ka ho."

Maine poora waqt chup rehna behtar samjha. Aaj ke liye itna kaafi tha.

Ab bas kal ka intezaar tha...

Kal decide karega ki yeh case kis mor leta hai.

Agle Subah Meeting room mein silence tha, bas coffee mugs ki halki-halki khanakti awaaz aur laptops ki screens ki halki roshni. Sab apne-apne devices lekar chairs par baith chuke the. Report aa chuki thi.

Vikram ne ek click kiya, aur jaise hi screen par ek ek chehra ubharna shuru hua, maahol ek dum se badal gaya. Mr. Ryan aur Miss Sana—jo ab tak composed lag rahe the—achanak uncomfortable lagne lage. Sana ne apni coffee ka sip lena chhoda, aur Ryan ne apne laptop ka screen aage kheench liya jaise kuch chhupana chah raha ho.

Vikram, jo screen ki taraf focused tha, calm tone me bola, "Humlog iska criminal verification kiye... koi past record nahi mila. Yeh koi registered criminal nahi hai, par kabhi ispar shaq kiya gaya tha."

Sana ka expression ek second ke liye freeze ho gaya. Phir, ek gehri awaaz me boli, "2010 ki Mr. and Mrs. Aadeel ki file check karo... usme iska naam mil jayega. Yeh us case ka main suspect tha."

Room ka temperature jaise ek dum gir gaya. Ryan ne ek baar Sana ki taraf dekha, par uske chehre par koi emotion nahi tha—ya shayad wo chhupa rahi thi.

Hume samajh aa chuka tha, yeh sirf ek aur case nahi tha. Yeh kuch personal tha. Kuch aisa jo ya to unki yaad ka hissa tha... ya phir unke past ka ek bhool gaya nightmare.

Hum bina ek second waste kiye records search karne ke liye meeting room se nikal gaye. Hume us file tak pahunchna tha, jaldi.

Sana

"Main is insaan ko kaise bhool sakti hoon?"

Wahi chehra... wahi aankhein... wahi tez naak... aur wahi sard muskurahat jo sirf kuch palon ke liye thi, par jo hamesha ke liye dimaag me chhap chuki thi.

Jis insaan ne sirf ek case nahi... meri aur Ryan ki zindagi ka pura mod badal diya tha.

Us shakhs ka naam bhool gayi thi... par uska chehra hamesha yaad raha.

Jaise hi screen par uski tasveer aayi, meri saansein atak gayi. Meri fingers coffee mug ke handle par thi, par achanak laga jaise wo mug thanda ho gaya ho. Jisme garam coffee thi, ab wo bhi barf jaise mehsoos hone lagi.

Aur phir jaise sab kuch wapas laut aaya... 15 saal pehle ka woh raat... woh warehouse... woh ek pal jo kabhi khatam nahi hua.

Ryan ki taraf dekha—uske chehre par bhi wahi saaye the.

Uske aankhon me sirf ek cheez thi—darr, guilt... aur gussa.

15 Saal Pehle – Mr. and Mrs. Aadeel ka Murder Case hamare paas aaya tha us waqt hum naye the. Internship se nikal kar professional bane hi the. Ek ajeeb sa excitement tha, pehla case solve karne ka.

Ek businessman ka murder. Raat ke andhere me, bina kisi warning ke. Koi evidence nahi, koi eyewitness nahi. Sab kuch perfectly planned. Murder ka tareeka batata tha ki yeh koi aam loot-maroo ka case nahi tha. Yeh kisi professional ka kaam tha.

Hum case ke jitne kareeb ja rahe the, utna hi kuch ajeeb lagne laga tha.

Fir woh ek call aaya.

Mujhe ab tak yaad hai, car me thi, pendrive haath me tha jisme is case ka sabse bada proof tha. Ryan mujhe kuch bata raha tha, par maine suna bhi nahi.

Bas ek kaan phone pe tha, ek steering pe.

Aur phir ek thandi, bedard awaaz phone ke dusre taraf se aayi

"Tumhara bhai Omar mere paas hai..."

Gaadi ek jhatke se brake par ruki.

Meri ungliyan steering wheel par tight ho gayi.

"Aur tum abhi jahan ho, wahan se sirf 20 kadam door ek jagah hai. Ya toh apne bhai ko bhool jao... ya is evidence ko. Sirf 10 minute hai tumhare paas."

Mujhe yaad hai wo 10 second ka silence jo mere aur Ryan ke beech me tha.

Ryan ne mujhe dekha, maine usse dekha.

Hum dono samajh gaye the ki humare paas sirf ek option tha.

Omar sirf mera bhai nahi tha. Wo ek waahid rishta tha jo maine mummy-papa ke baad sambhal kar rakha tha. Main use nahi kho sakti thi.

Ryan chahta tha ki main pehle kuch soch lun fir kuch karun. Par wo bhi samajhta tha ki main nahi rukne wali.

Aur shayad, wo bhi nahi chahta tha ki hum Omar ko wahan chhod dein.

Hamlog car se bahar nikal kar paidal chalne lage samne ek Warehouse tha jiske charon taraf Sannata tha

Mujhe ab bhi yaad hai wo jagah...

Jaise hi andar ghusi, pura andhera.

Sirf ek jagah se halka sa peeli roshni aa rahi thi.

Aur usi ke neeche ek kursi thi—Omar uss kursi par tha.

Haath aur pair rassi se bandhe hue... aankhon par ek patta... jo aansuon se bheeg chuka tha.

Uska pura sharir tharthara raha tha.

Uski saans bhi itni tej thi ki har ek heartbeat mujhe door se sunai de rahi thi.

Maine dheere se uska naam liya.

Aur usne apna sar meri awaaz ke direction me uthaya.

"Tum jis pendrive ki talash me ho, wo le aayi hoon!"

Meri awaaz warehouse ke sannate me gunj gayi. Har jagah se wo awaaz takraai... aur wapas aayi.

Achanak... ek bhari, bedard awaaz andhere me se nikli—

"Us pendrive ko table par rakh do."

Andhera itna gehra tha ki mujhe sirf ek cheez dikhai di... Ek chamak... ek metallic reflection...

Gun.

Aur uska nishana... Omar par tha.

Ryan ne bina waqt gawaye pendrive table par rakh di. Humne jaldi se Omar ke haath aur pair ki rassi kholi. Uska sharir itna tharthara raha tha ki wo khade tak nahi ho paa raha tha.

Hamlog pendrive dekar Jab gate ki taraf bhage, maine dekha—
Woh shakhs light ke neeche aaya. Aur uska chehra ab saaf dikh raha tha.

Main ruki.

Ryan bhi ruka.

Mujhe yaad hai, usne mujhe nahi dekha.

Uski aankhein sirf ek jagah fix thi.... Us shakhs par. Jiske haath me gun thi.
Aur nishane par ham teeno the.

Humlog bina kuch kahe car ki taraf daude. Backseat me Omar ko baithaya jo ab bhi shock me tha.

Par jaise hi car start hui, ek intuition aaya. Main aur Ryan bina ek shabd bole wapas andar daude.

Par jaise hi andar gaye... Sara warehouse roshni se bhara hua tha. Charo taraf bade-bade cartoons the, jin par patakhon ke stickers lage hue the.

Beech me ek table tha—usi par ek paper rakha tha. Maine use uthaya—

"Table ke neeche dekho... par dhyaan se."

Ryan aur maine ek doosre ki taraf dekha. Dheere se neeche jhuke. Aur phir suna...

Tic... tic... tic...

Ek bomb chipka hua tha.

03:00

02:59

02:58

Humein aur kuch dekhne ki zaroorat nahi thi. Hum wapas car ki taraf bhaage. Ryan ne full speed me accelerator daba diya. Backseat me Omar ab bhi shock me tha. Hum barely kuch meters hi door nikle the ki...

BOOM!!!

Peeche se ek deafening explosion hua. Ek aag ka gola aasman tak uth gaya. Hawa me dhuan badlon ka roop le chuka tha. Aur us warehouse ka ek bhi nishan zameen par nahi bacha tha.

Hum wahin par thehre rahe. Explosion ka dhuan ab bhi aasman me uth raha tha. Meri saansein tez ho rahi thi. Dil ki dhadkane ab bhi normal nahi hui thi.

Aur phir... phone vibrate hua. Screen par wahi number tha... Wahi number, jisne thodi der pehle Omar ke kidnapping ki khabar di thi. Mere haath ek second ke liye ruke. Mujhe andaza tha, yeh koi aam message nahi hoga. Maine dheere se phone unlock kiya.

Aur jo dekha... meri ragon me ek thandi lahar daud gayi. Ek video.

Maine bina soche play kiya.

Screen par dikh raha tha—

Main aur Ryan warehouse ke andar ja rahe hain... Phir ek sudden cut...

Aur phir hum dono wahaan se bhaagte hue nikal rahe hain... Car me baithe... full speed se bhagaye... Aur phir...

BOOM.

Explosion.

Meri aankhein screen par fix ho gayi. Yeh kya tha? Yeh video kahan se aaya? Aur tab mujhe samajh aaya.

Yeh ek warning thi. Ek perfectly planned setup. Agar yeh footage bahar jata, toh sirf ek conclusion nikalta—

“Yeh explosion Sana aur Ryan ne hi plan kiya tha.”

Aur phir ek aur message aaya.

"Yeh kiya tha, Miss Sana."

Mera dil ek second ke liye ruk gaya.

"But I promise... yeh video main kisi ko nahi dikhaungi... jab tak aap na chahein."

Bas itna hi.

Mujhe samajhne me ek second bhi nahi laga.

Agar humne sach bola... Agar humne kisi ko bataya... Toh yeh video hamare khilaf use hoga.

Hum kuch nahi kar sakte the.

Aur sabse badi baat— humein senior officers se bhi support nahi milti.

Jab case ki investigation aage badhi, senior officers ne is case ko suicide declare kar diya.

“Mr. & Mrs. Aadeel ki company bohot loss me thi.”

“Financial problems se pareshaan the. Isliye unhone suicide kar liya.”

Aur bas... case band ho gaya.

Koi post-investigation nahi. Koi forensic analysis nahi. Koi proof nahi ki yeh ek murder tha.

Aur sabse ajeeb baat?

Aadeel family ka koi bhi rishtedaar case reopen karane nahi aaya. Kisi ne bhi justice ke liye ladne ki koshish tak nahi ki.

Mr.Aadeel malik aur Nafisa Malik ka ek chhota beta tha... sirf 8 saal ka.

Uska naam tha Aariz Malik.

Par kuch dinon baad, uska bhi koi pata nahi chala.

Usse kisi ne adopt kar liya...

Aur wo abroad chala gaya.

Uske baad—

Uske existence tak ka koi record nahi mila.

Present

Vikram file le kar aa chuka tha.

Ek purani file. 15 saal purani. Maine dheere se file palti. Har page ek bhool-bhulaiya tha. Par phir—ek naam saamne aaya.

“Bilal Kasuri”

Wohi naam.

Wohi shakhs.

Wohi pattern.

2010 ke case me bhi yeh car ke wajah se suspect bana tha.

Aur ab fir wahi.

Yeh coincidence nahi ho sakta.

Ryan ne file dekhi. Uska chehra ekdam stiff ho gaya. Humne ek doosre ko dekha—bina shabd, bina sawaal. Samajh gaye the. Yeh case aur 2010 ka case kisi na kisi tarah jud gaye the.

Tabhi—

“Miss Sana, kya aap is case ke baare me janti hain?”

Shalaan.

Uski awaaz ek dum thehri hui thi, par aankhein... Aankhon me Curiosity. Ek talaash.

Jaise usse sach jaanna hi hoga.

Maine nazar file par rakh li.

Mujhe pata tha—agar maine uski aankhon me dekha, toh woh sach jaan lega.

“Haan. Yeh case 2010 me hamare paas aaya tha. Evidence nahi mila, toh suicide case declare kar diya gaya.”

Aakhri shabd bolna mushkil tha.

Ek second ka sannata.

Aur phir—

“Agar evidence nahi mila, toh aap suicide case bana diye?”

Uski awaaz ekdam thehri. Par andar se kuch tut raha tha.

Dard. Ek broken trust.

"Aap keh sakte the ki aapse solve nahi ho paaya."

Yeh case uske liye personal ho gaya tha.

Uske chehre par ek ajeeb si halchal thi. Jaise use darr tha—kahin uske bhi parents ka case aise hi band na ho jaye.

Maine ek kamzor sa jawab diya— “Woh case alag tha, Shalaan... Unka koi relative nahi tha jo reopen karne aaya.”

Jhoot. Aur mujhe pata tha ki woh bhi samajh gaya tha.

Uski aankhein keh rahi thi— "Yeh koi wajah nahi hai."

Woh kuch bolne hi wala tha... Par tabhi— “Ab humein is aadmi ka detail nikalna hoga.” Ryan ki awaaz ne silence tod diya.

Par Shalaan... Ab bhi mujhe dekh raha tha. Hazaar sawaal liye. Aur mujhmein... Uske kisi bhi sawaal ka jawab dene ki himmat nahi thi.

Shalaan

Miss Sana ke chehre par ek ajeeb si bechaini thi. Jaise andar ek tufaan daba rakha ho. Jaise har pal kuch kehna chahti ho, par apne aap ko rok rahi ho.

Unki aankhein... Ek aise insaan ki aankhein jo sach chupane ka hunar rakhta ho.

Par kab tak?

Aaj humein jaldi ghar bhej diya gaya.

"Kal se investigation shuru hogi, aaj thoda relax kar lo," Ryan ne kaha tha.

Par mujhe relax nahi hona tha. Mere andar hazaar sawaal uth rahe the. Aur inke jawab mujhe sirf Sana aur Ryan hi de sakte the.

Main office se nikal aaya. Apni car tak gaya... par chalaya nahi. Bas baitha raha. Intezaar karta raha. Kuch der baad Sana aur Ryan nikle. Ek doosre se kuch bhi kahe bina seedha apni car ki taraf bade.

Dono ki body language stiff thi. Jaise andar kuch to chal raha ho.

Kya yeh sirf ek aur case tha? Ya yeh dono isse zyada jaante the?

Main inka peeche karne laga. Meri car unke piche piche chal rahi thi. Sadak par traffic kam tha. Raat ho chuki thi, streetlights ki halki roshni gaadiyon ke windshield par padh rahi thi. Meri aankhein unki car par tiki rahi. Wo bina kisi hesitation ke seedha ek residential area ki taraf mud gaye. Ek bada gate aaya.

Car ruki. Phir gate khula. Car andar gayi. Aur phir... gate band.

Main kuch second tak wahi ruka raha.

Agar yeh inka ghar hai... Toh mujhe kuch aur maloom karna hoga. Main us gate ke saamne apni car rok kar baitha raha.

Raat ke 10 baj chuke the. Andar lawn se ek bachi ki zor se hansne ki awaaz sunai di. Uski chhoti-chhoti khilkhili hasi hawa me goonj rahi thi. Saath me Sana aur Ryan bhi hans rahe the.

Wo log khush lag rahe the. Jaise kuch khel rahe ho. Mujhe ek pal ke liye hairani hui. To inki beti bhi hai. Jabse maine unhe dekha tha, sirf tension aur secrets ke saaye hi nazar aaye the. Par yahaan... ek normal zindagi.

Main bina kisi wajah ke wahi ruka raha. Unki awaazon me kho gaya.

Aur mujhe apna bachpan yaad aa gaya.

Meri ungliyan steering wheel par dheere se daba rahi thi, par dimag kahin aur chala gaya tha...

Shaam ka woh ek khaas pal yaad aaya—jab papa ka intezaar routine tha, maa kitchen me khane ki khushbu faila rahi hoti, aur main darwaza khulne ki awaz sunte hi bhaag kar papa se lipat jata. Dinner table par hum teeno, chhoti-chhoti baatein, hansna, maa ka daantna, aur papa ki sirf ek halki muskurahat jo hamesha mujhe bacha leti thi. Fir woh ek chhota sa raat ka ritual—ice cream khane ka bahane bahar jana.

Sab ek pal me aankhon ke saamne aa gaya... Aur phir utni hi jaldi uss yaadon ka chehra dhundhla ho gaya. Aaj sab kuch badal chuka tha.

12 baj gaye the. Andar ab shanti chhayi thi. Main hostel wapas aa gaya.

Rohan apne bed par so chuka tha. Main bina kapde badle hee apne bistar par gir gaya... aur so gaya.

Subah jab main aur Rohan office ke liye nikle, hum bus ke seat par apni apni duniya me kho hue the.

Usne apne kan me earphones daal rakhe the, aur main apni book me ghusa hua tha.

Jab hamara stop aaya, to bina ek shabd kahe utar gaye.

Meeting room me sabse pehle coffee banayi.

Fir apni chairs par baith gaye, baaki logon ka intezaar karte rahe.

Rohan apne laptop par kuch type kar raha tha—shayad presentation tayyar kar raha tha.
Aur main... main apna bag check kar raha tha.

Cameras – check

Laptop – check

Pendrive – check

Pen recorder – check

Aaj mujhe aur Mr. Ryan ko Bilal Kasuri ka pata lagane ke liye nikalna tha.

Meeting shuru ho gayi.

Sab log apni jagah par aa chuke the.

Screen par ek naam likha tha—

Bilal Kasuri.

Aur uske saath ek photo.

Rohan khada hua aur bolna shuru kiya.

"Iske baare me thodi si information mili hai," usne screen ki taraf dekha.

"Iska koi permanent ghar nahi hai. Na koi family. Bas ek chhote se bartan ki dukan hai... jo sirf show ke liye hai. Kyunki wo dukan zyada tar band rehti hai."

Room me ek ajeeb si khamoshi thi.

"Iski ek wife thi," Rohan aage bola, "par uski maut 5 saal pehle ho chuki hai."

Maine Sana ki taraf dekha.

Uske chehre par koi bhi expression nahi tha.

"To yeh rehta kahan hai?" Ryan ne sawal kiya.

"Dukaan me hi sota hai. Par jab chhupna hota hai, to kisi hotel ya warehouse me chale jata hai," Rohan ne kaha.

"Abhi dukan band hai ya khuli?" Sana ki awaaz me ek sharp edge tha.

"Dukan ek mahine se band hai," Vikram bola, *"par aas paas ke logon ne use kayi baar use udhar guzarte hue dekha hai. Woh shayad dukan me hi chhupa ho."*

Ryan ne sochne wale andaaz me sir hila diya.

"Ek kaam karte hain," Sana boli, "Pehle main aur Rhea wahan jake dekhte hain. Agar wo wahan nahi milta, to phir Mr. Ryan aur Shalaan usse dhoondhne nikalenge."

Plan final ho gaya.

Sana aur Rhea apna bag utha kar nikal gaye.

Ek Ghanta Baad ek Phone Call aaya

Loudspeaker on.

"Hello?" Miss. Sana ki awaaz.

"Haan, hello. Kya hua? Wo wahan hai?" Ryan ne sawal kiya.

"Nahi," Sana ki awaaz thodi thaki hui lag rahi thi. *"Yahan koi nahi hai. Par raat ko yahan koi tha. Bed ki halat se lagta hai ki Bilal yahin soya tha. Aur bed par dhool bhi nahi hai."*

Ryan ek pal ke liye chhup raha.

"Wahan aas paas koi CCTV hai?"

"Haan," Rhea boli, *"ek dukan me tha. Usme uska chehra saaf dikh raha hai. Par wo yahan se jaane ke baad wapas nahi aaya."*

Ryan ne gehri saans li.

"Are you guys okay?"

Mujhe is sawal par na jane kyun bahut gussa aaya.

Agar inhone use pehle pakad liya hota, to ab yeh sab questions puchhne ki zaroorat nahi hoti.

"Yes, we are fine. Aap log nikal sakte hain." Sana ne phone cut kar diya.

NEW TWIST

Main aur Mr. Ryan apna bag utha kar parking lot ki taraf badhe. Ek gaadi par baithe. Aur bina ek shabd kahe nikal pade.

Humne us dukan ke aas paas ke saare hotels aur warehouses check kiye.
Par Bilal Kasuri ka koi pata nahi tha. Wo jaise hawa me gayab ho gaya ho.

Do din ki bekaar bhatakne ke baad, hum thake-haare office laut aaye. Meeting room me ek ajeeb sa sannata tha—jaise hawaa bhi ruki ho, jaise sab kuch ek anjaane bojh ke neeche daba ho. Sana ek kone me khadi thi, haath me ek file, par unki ungliyan uske cover ko bechaini se masal rahi thi. Unka chehra hamesha ki tarah sakt tha, par aankhon me kuch aur bhi tha—dar, gussa, aur ek aisi bebasi jo kabhi unka hissa nahi lagti thi. Jaise woh kuch chhupane ki koshish kar rahi ho, jaise unka pura wajood cheekh-cheekh kar kuch kehna chahta ho, par shabd unka saath nahi de rahe the.

Ryan unki taraf badhe. "Kya hua?"

Sana ne bas ek pal ke liye unki taraf dekha, aur agle hi lamhe woh apne jazbaat rok nahi paayi. Ek dum se woh Ryan se lipat gayi, unki saans tez ho gayi, aur woh zor-zor se rone lagi.

"Omar Bashir is kidnapped, sir," Vikram ki awaaz room ki khamoshi me gunji.

Ek dum se sab kuch static me chala gaya. Jaise koi dhoop se chhaya me aa jaye. Jaise kisi ne hawa me ek aisa zeher ghola ho jisme har kisi ki saans atak rahi ho.

Ryan, Sana ko sambhalte hue Vikram ki taraf ghoomte, "What? Yeh kab hua? Tum logon ne mujhe pehle kyun nahi bataya?"

"Sir..." Vikram ne ek screenshot screen par daal diya, "Yeh message bas paanch minute pehle aaya hai."

Screen par likhe lafz jaise ek ek karke jism me reengh rahe the—tez, zehreeli ghaas ki tarah jo andar se sulgane lage.

"Hello, Mr. Ryan and Miss Sana. Kafi dinon baad hamari mulaqat ho rahi hai. Suna hai dubara aap log mujhe dhoondh rahe hain? To mujhe bhi thoda prepare hona padega, hai na? Yaad hai na rule—kisi ko kuch nahi batana. Yeh sirf hamare beech ka ek chhota sa secret hai.

Waise, aap is case ko chhod kyun nahi dete? Warna aapka pyaara bhai... kya naam hai...? Oh han, Mr. Omar Bashir.

Waise woh yahan ghoomne aaye hain, to kya kehte ho—tum bhi milne aa rahe ho? Aapke paas sirf do ghante hain. Uske baad main thoda busy ho jaunga. I hope aapse jaldi mulaqat ho."

Ryan ke haath gusse se mutthi me bandh gaye. "Omar ko call karo, abhi!"

"Sir, hum try kar chuke hain!" Vikram ki awaaz bhi bechain ho gayi thi, "Uska phone uske room me hi mila. College aur friends se bhi confirm kiya gaya. Unka kehna hai ki Omar kisi call ke baad jaldi se tayar hokar room se nikal gaya tha."

Usi waqt Vikram ke laptop par ek notification aayi. Woh bina waqt gawaye screen palta kar bola, "Sir, CCTV footage aa gayi hai." Video chali. Screen par Omar college ke bahar akele khada dikh raha tha. Koi zabardasti nahi thi. Koi haath pakadne ki koshish nahi thi. Woh khud ek black car me baith gaya, aur gaadi tez raftaar me nikal gayi.

Ryan ghhuse se bola. "Number track karo," unka lehza ekdum sakht ho gaya.

"Already kiya, sir," Vikram ne files kholte hue bola, "Gaadi chori ki hai."

Ek aur dead end. Aur waqt haathon se ret ki tarah fisal raha tha. Tabhi washroom se room me Sana wapas aayi. Aankhon me aansu nahi the. Sirf ek jazba. Sirf ek aag.

"I don't wanna lose him," unhone gehri saans lete hue kaha, "But I don't wanna lose this case either."

Unka lehza wapas wohi purana tha—sakt, tayar, aur ladne ke liye bechain.

"Kyun na hum usse samne se milkar baat karein?" Sana ka lehza ekdum sakt tha. "Ryan aur main andar jaenge. Shalaan aur Vikram bahar gaadi me rahenge. Rohan aur Rhea dusri gaari se thodi door se control system sambhalenge."

Room me ek gheri khamoshi chha gayi. Sabhi ek dusre ki taraf dekhne lage, jaise is plan me koi unsuna khatra chhupa ho. Ryan ne haath jod kar sochne wale andaaz me apne hoth dabaye. "Par yeh Omar ke liye aur bhi dangerous ho sakta hai," unki awaaz me chhupa tension ab saaf sunai de raha tha. "Pata nahi is baar unki kya planning ho."

"But it doesn't mean ki jab chahein, wo humein kamzor kar dein!" Miss. Sana ki aankhon me ek ajeeb si aag thi, "Har baar hum sirf react karte hain, par iss baar hum apna ek move karenge!"

Kuch palon tak koi kuch nahi bola. Phir humne plan aur strategies par thodi der aur discussion ki. Har chhoti detail par dhyan diya gaya. Koi bhi galti ki gunjaish nahi thi. Uske baad, Sana ne Bilal ko ek message bheja:

"Hum kahaan mil sakte hain?"

Kuch hi der me reply aaya—

"Meri dukan par aa jao."

Ryan ne turant sawal uthaya, "Dukaan ke andar koi secret area ya escape route ho sakta hai?"

Sana ne ek pal socha, jaise har detail yaad kar rahi ho. "Nahi. Jitna humne dekha hai, aisa koi hidden exit nahi hai."

Miss Sana aur Ryan ne apne daanton me ek miniature tracker fit kar liya—agar kuch bhi gadbad hoti, toh humein unki exact location ka pata chal sakta tha. Sab apni-apni positions lene ke liye tayar ho gaye. Gaadiyon ke engines start hue. Mission shuru ho chuka tha.

Sana

Dukaan me taala nahi tha baas yunhi handle laga tha. Jab hum andar gaye to gate band ho gaya, wahan kuch log counter par khare hue the unhone bina koi shabd kahe hamare saare belongings le liye—phones, weapons, aur kuch bhi jo unhe shanakht ya recording ka shak de sakta tha. Par ek chhoti si jeet yeh thi ki hamare tracker ke baare mein unhe koi andaza nahi tha.

Fir ek aadmi aage aaya, haath me kali patti liye. “Yeh aankhon pe bandho,” usne ek thandi awaaz me kaha. Ek pal ke liye maine Ryan ki taraf dekha. Koi aur chaara nahi tha. Humne patti pehni, aur tabhi do majboot haathon ne humein pakad liya.

Andhera aur Sirf kadmon ki awaaz. Zameen neeche se badal rahi thi—kabhi concrete, kabhi mitti. Hum koi chhupa hua rasta cross kar rahe the.

Das minute guzar gaye. Ab hamlog kisi sarak par aa gaye the. Fir kuch dur chalne ke baad ek lakdi ki gate khulne ki aawaz aayi aur ek dum se kadam ruke. Aankhon se patti hatai gayi. Jaise hi roshni aankhon me lagi, ek pal ke liye sab kuch dhundhla dikhai diya. Lekin jo dekha, usne mujhe jhunjhor diya.

Yeh ghar... Mere parents ka ghar tha. Yeh ghar band padha tha kayi saalon se. Par aaj yahan koi tha. Living room ke sofa par ek naya chehra baitha tha—yeh Bilal nahi tha.

Ek ajnabi. 30s ka, bodybuilder frame, grey shirt, denim jeans, sneakers, aur hathon me black colour bracelet.

Ryan ne seedha aankhon me dekh kar kaha, “Kaun ho tum?”

Aadmi ne muskurakar apni revolver uthai aur use aram se rumal se saaf karte hue bola, “Mere naam ka tumse koi lena dena nahi hai.”

Meri nashe tan gayi. Ek aur khel. Ek aur mask. Ryan ne ek kadam aage badhkar kaha, “Ab kya chahiye tumhe?”

Aadmi ne revolver table par rak diya. Ek dum relaxed. Jaise uske haath me waqt ka remote ho.

“Seedhi baat pe aate hain,” usne dheere se kaha. “Yeh case bandh kar do. Waise bhi pehle bhi tumne aisa kiya tha, toh is baar mushkil nahi hogi.”

Mere andar ek aag si phail gayi. Yeh hamari kamzori jaanta tha.

“Sach aur insaaf ki bakwas bandh karo,” usne revolver ki taraf ishara kiya. “Aur practical decision lo.”

Mere pair dagmaga gaye. Bas yeh ek cycle thi—har dafa humein todne ki koshish, humein neecha dikhane ki chaal. Meri nazar revolver par tik gayi. Bas ek second... ek second aur agar haath lag jaye, toh sab khatam.

Mujhe uske shabdon ki ek bhi awaaz sunai nahi de rahi thi. Sirf revolver. Aur tabhi—Ryan ek jhatke me revolver ki taraf dauda.

Woh aadmi ek pal ke liye react bhi nahi kar paaya. Revolver ab Ryan ke haath me tha. Gehri khamoshi chha gayi. Aur fir—

Seedhi se aane wali kadmon ki aahat. Do aadmi neeche aa rahe the. Unke beech... Omar.

Pair thoda dagmagaye hue, saans bhari-bhari chal rahi thi. Haathon me ab tak shayad halke kampan ki chaap thi, jaise kisi ne zabardasti usse kheench kar yahan laaya ho. Par sabse darawani baat thi uski aankhein.

Woh aankhein jo pehle shaitani muskurahat aur mazak se bhari rehti thi, ab ek andekha khauf liye khadi thi. Jaise maut ko chhukar aaya ho. Jaise sirf kuch hi pal bache ho, jo kabhi kisi ne socha bhi na ho.

Ryan ke haath se revolver dheere-dheere neeche aa gaya. Ek dum bejaan. Mujhe laga ki shayad humne haar maan li.

Aur usi waqt ek aawaz aayi.

Ek dum se tez dhamaka. Jab tak samajh aata, sab kuch slow-motion me badal chuka tha.

Omar ke sine ke beech ek gehra suraakh ban gaya. Khoon ka ek garam fawwara nikla aur hawa me bikhhar gaya. Jaise kisi ne raat ke andhere me suraj ka tukda cheer diya ho. Ek pal ke liye, sab kuch ruk gaya. Omar ki aankhein chhoti ho gayi thi. Dard nahi tha usme. Bas ek ajeeb si shaanti.

Phir uske honth dheere se hilne lage. Ek ajeeb si muskurahat ke saath.

“Aapki kamzori khatam ho gayi, aapi.”

Mujhe laga ki meri saansein band ho gayi. Fir ek dum se reality wapas aayi.

"AMBULANCE BULAO!! KOI TO AMBULANCE BULAO!!"

Main cheekh rahi thi, par meri awaaz diwaar se takra kar vapas aati lag rahi thi. Jaise koi sun hi nahi raha ho.

Ryan, jo ab tak ek dum shaant tha, usne bina soche Omar ka laash uthaya.

Peeche koi cheekh raha tha—

"TUM LOG PAAGAL HO GAYE HO?! MAINE KAHA THA DEAL HONE TAK KUCH NAHI KARNA!"

Aur phir kisi ne jawab diya, "Boss, yeh khud goli chala liya. Humein malum nahi kab hamara gun chhupa ke rakh liya tha."

Sab bhag rahe the. Par hum wahin ruke the. Omar ke saath.

Ryan ne bina soch Omar ka laash utha li, aur main uske saath bhaagi. Jaise hi hum bahar pahunche, ek gaadi tez speed me aati dikhi. Shalaan aur Vikram. Omar ko gaadi me rakha, aur full speed me hospital ki taraf bhaage.

Par der ho chuki thi. Raste me hi Omar ki saansein ruk gayi. Mere andar sab kuch sookh gaya tha. Rone ki bhi taqat nahi rahi.

1 Hafte Baad Main ghar me band rahi. Ryan poore case ka analysis kar chuka tha. Woh aadmi koi naya tha. Humne uspe case kiya—par koi sabot nahi tha.

CCTV footage me sirf ek cheez dikh rahi thi—Omar har jagah khud apni marzi se ja raha tha. Aur woh aadmi? Uska record bilkul clean. Koi past crime nahi. Koi connection nahi. Case officially band kar diya gaya.

Par hum jaante the—yeh sirf shuruat thi.

Shalaan iss waqt har jagah tha—jaise koi parchhayi jo sirf ek hi shikaar ka peeche kar rahi ho. Woh office me kam dikh raha tha, kabhi akele jaata, kabhi Ryan bhi uske saath hota. Woh har mod par us insaan ka peeche kar raha tha.

Ek hi naam baar-baar saamne aa raha tha—Bilal Kasuri.

Par yeh sirf ek naam nahi tha. Yeh ek raaz tha, ek andehri chaaya jo sirf tab dikhai deti jab uska man ho.

Rhea ko maine Inaya ke saath rehne ke liye kaha. Is baar mujhe koi bhi risk nahi lena tha. Main har ghante use call karti, yeh confirm karne ke liye ki sab safe hai. Mera ghar aur personal life ek sach tha jo maine hamesha sabse chhupa kar rakha tha.

Par ab waqt badal chuka tha. Sabko sach batana pada. Lekin ek baat ab bhi sirf Rhea ko pata thi—mera address. Aur mere relationship ke baare mein bhi sirf usne pehle se hi jaan rakha tha.

Rhea sirf meri junior nahi thi—woh meri padosi thi, meri dost thi. Ek waqt tha jab woh sirf ek sapna dekhti thi detective banne ka. Aur ab woh bhi is andhere ka hissa ban chuki thi.

Hum us dukaan me wapas gaye. Wahi jagah jahan humein behosh kiya gaya tha. Jab hum us jagah pahunche, dimaag pe zor diya. Kya kuch aisa tha jo uss raat anjaane me samajh nahi aaye?

Phir yaad aaya—shor. Koi awaaz. Jaise koi darwaza dheere se khula ho. Jaise koi chhupa rasta ho jo humse anjaane me reh gaya tha.

Ryan ne mujhe dekha, "Iska matlab yeh hai ki yahan koi secret passage hai."

Hum sab ne milkar dukan ki ek-ek shelf check karni shuru ki. Ek ek shelf ko dhakelna shuru kiya. Koi hila bhi nahi. Jaise diwar me jude ho. Phir ek jagah haath maara... Aur ek shelf alag si awaaz karne lagi.

"Wait... yeh andar se solid nahi lag raha." Ryan ne apne haath se tap kiya. Ek khokhli awaaz.

Aur bas. Shelf ke ek kone se ek showpiece hataya... aur dheere se ek mechanism activate ho gaya.

Grrrrrrkkkkkk...

Shelf dheere-dheere apni jagah se hatne lagi. Jaise kisi purane pinjre ka darwaza khul raha ho. Andar lohe ka ek aur gate tha. Aur uske andar puri tarah andhera.

Meri spine se ek thandi lahar daud gayi.

Yeh darwaza kis taraf jaata hai?

Ryan ne apne pocket se torch nikali. Uski roshni dheere se gate ke andar phail gayi.

“Sambhal kar.” Ryan ne dheemi aawaz me kaha.

Jaise hi hum andar gaye, ek ajeeb si khushbu thi. Niche ek bichhaayi hui bedsheet thi. Side me paani ki purani bottles aur foil me lipta kuch khaana pada tha. Maine torch us par focus ki... ek ek cheez dheere dheere samne aane lagi. Koi yahan sota hai.

Aage badhte hi ek ajeeb si hansii gunj uthi. Sookhi. Sard. Darawni.

Ek aisi hansii jo jaise kisi maze lete shikari ki ho. Aur phir—

Dhadam!

Peeche ka darwaza ek jhatke se band ho gaya. Itni zor se ki deewaren tak kaanp gayi. Bahar Vikram aur Rohan pehra de rahe the, par jaise hi gate band hua, unki cheekhein andar tak gunj gayi.

"Miss. Sana! Mr. Ryan! aap log sun sakte hain? Gate kholiye!"

Mujhe laga koi pinjra band ho gaya ho. Yeh jagah... Jaise kisi sher ki gufa ho. Aur hum... Sirf ek shikar.

Mera haath apni gun ki taraf gaya. Anguliyan tighten ho gayi thi. Dil ki dhadkane itni tez ho gayi thi ki har ek beat dimaag me goonj rahi thi. Aur phir... Mera phone baja.

Shalaan.

Uska naam screen par chamak raha tha. Maine turant phone uthaya, Ryan bhi apna kaan laga kar sunne laga.

"Hello?" – Shalaan ki awaaz breathless thi.

"Han, bolo. Tumhe kuch mila?" Maine dheemi par shaki awaaz me kaha.

Shalaan ki agli line ne mera dimaag jhatke se jaga diya.

"Ma'am... Inaya ghar se gayab hai!"

Meri saansein rukh gayi.

"Rhea behosh mili hai... uske haathon se khoon nikal raha tha... maine use hospital bhej diya hai!"

Aur usi waqt... Andar se ek bache ki cheekh sunayi di.

Inaya!

Mera haath phone ko itna zor se pakad chuka tha ki knuckles safed pad gaye the. Phone ke dusri taraf se Shalaan ki awaaz phir aayi—"Aap us tak pahunch chuki hain? Ma'am... is baar use mat chhodna. Use goli maar dena!"

Main gun par haath rakh chuki thi. Darr aur gussa dono ek saath ubhar rahe the.

"Main andar ja rahi hoon."

Phone ka speaker ab bhi on tha, uske andar se Shalaan ki cheekhti awaaz sunayi di—"Ma'am, use khatam kar dena!"

Par maine phone pocket me daal diya. Ryan aage badh chuka tha, gun tight pakde hue. Maine bhi apni gun load ki aur uske saath mil gayi. Thodi der aur chalne ke baad, rasta dheere-dheere kholne laga, jaise kisi tunnel se nikal kar ek gupt jagah me pahunch rahe ho.

Rasta ek hall ke size ka ban chuka tha. Hawa bhari hui thi ek ajeeb si badbu se—mitti, gande pani aur purane lohe ki boo. Ek puraana, zard roshni wala bulb chhat se lataak raha tha. Uski roshni beemar lag rahi thi. Light kabhi tez ho rahi thi, kabhi dheemi—jaise uss jagah ki jaan bhi ab ja rahi ho. Har cheez wahan sookhi, buri aur saza dene ke layak lag rahi thi.

Deewarein Kahin mitti ki, kahin cement ki.

Kayi jagah se cement utar chuka tha, jahan sirf eent dikh rahe the. Zameen Mitti ka. Sookhi.

Aur samne— Ek bada, mota lohe ka gate.

Wahi gate jisse hamein hamare ghar ki taraf le kar jaya gaya tha. mere parents ka ghar ek sunsan jagah par tha isliye hamein kisi tarah ki gari ki aawaz nahi aayi thi.

Aur gate ke samne—ek kursi. Kursi purani thi, lakdi ki. Lekin sirf kursi nahi thi.

Ussi kursi par...Ussi tarah bandhi hui...Jaise Omar 15 saal pehle tha.

Inaya baithi hui thi.

Uski aankhon se aansu tapak rahe the, tharthara rahi thi. Mera poora shareer gusse se jalne laga. Haath aur tight ho gaya gun par.

Aur samne... Ek aadmi khara tha. Sookha, thanda chehra. Muskurate hue bola—

"Aa gaye? Bahut waqt se aapki beti aapka intezaar kar rahi thi."

Aur phir, woh dheere se haansa.

Bilal Kasuri. Woh shaks jise dhoondhne ke liye maine apna sab kuch jhonk diya tha.

"Oh, tum log toh bilkul asli detectives lag rahe ho. Haath mein gun, saamne mujrim, aur ek kidnapped bacha. Kahan hai camera? Kahin shooting toh nahi ho rahi?"

Bilal qahqaha lagane laga. Inaya humari taraf dekhi, phir achanak rone lagi.

"Mamma! Yeh uncle mujhe le aaye hain! Inke paas gun bhi hai! Yeh mujhe maar denge! Papa, mujhe yahan se le chaliye!"

Woh siskiyan mein bol rahi thi, dar uski aankhon se tapak raha tha. Main ek kadam aage badhne hi wali thi ki Bilal ne gun nikal li. Aur uska nishana—Inaya.

Main turant peeche hati.

"Kya chahte ho tum?"

Mujhe jawab pata tha. Use woh saboot chahiye jo humne itne dino mein ikattha kiye the.

"Tumhe bhi malum hai mujhe kya chahiye. Aur yeh bhi, agar nahi mila, toh kya hoga."

Woh bolte hi gun Inaya ke maathay par rakh diya. Gun loaded thi. Inaya zor-zor se rone lagi. Uski siskiyan gunjne lagi thi. Bilal ke chehre par ek ajeeb si muskurahat thi. Mera haath apni gun par aur kas gaya.

Aur phir— Ek zor-daar goli ki awaaz.

Bilal Kasuri zameen par gir chuka tha. Khoon ka garam dhara uske pet se beh raha tha, mitti se milta jaa raha tha. Par uske chehre par ab bhi ek ajeeb si muskurahat thi—jaise jeet uski ho, jaise maut bhi uska khel ka hissa ho.

Ryan ek kadam aage badha. Uski ungli ab bhi gun ke trigger par thi. Aankhon mein gusse ka ek toofaan umad raha tha.

“Mujhe pehle hi samajh jaana chahiye tha...” Bilal ki awaaz halki ho chuki thi, lekin har shabd ke saath ek chhupa hua mazak tha, jaise yeh sab uske liye ek tamasha ho. "Main bhi tum logon ki tarah sirf ek mohra hoon.”

Woh hansne laga. Par yeh hansi koi jeet ki nahi thi. Yeh ek aise aadmi ki hans thi jo samajh chuka tha ki uska istemal ho chuka hai. Ki uske saare war bekaar gaye hain. Ki woh kisi aur ki doriyon se bandha tha.

Par uski hans jaldi ruk gayi. Dard ne uska gala daba diya. Uska haath apne khoon se bheeg chuka tha, par woh ab bhi shauk se muskuraya.

Ryan ek kadam aur aage badha. Uski gun ab uske sir ke bilkul paas thi. Aankhon mein sirf ek sawaal.

"Kiska mohra?" Ryan ki awaaz ek dam meethi, lekin uske andar ek tez chhupa hua zehar tha. "Kaun hai is game ke peeche?"

Bilal ne uski taraf dekha. Aankhon mein ek ajeeb si roshni thi—jaise woh aakhri pal tak khelna chahta ho. Jaise uske paas ek raaz ho, jo bas uske saath hi dafan hoga.

Usne dheere se hans di, phir ek lamha socha. Aankhein dheere se band ki, jaise apni maut ke aakhri kadam tak chal raha ho.

"15 saal pehle... past mein jao."

Ryan ne gun tight ki. "Saaf bolo, Bilal."

Bilal ki saanse ladkhada rahi thi. "Tumhe jawab mil jayega, Ryan. Par afsos..." Usne khoon ugal diya, ek lamha ruka, phir muskura diya. "Agar jawab mil bhi gaya, toh tum kuch nahi kar paoge."

Ek bechain khamoshi chha gayi.

Bilal ne phir dheere se apna haath uthaya. Ungliyan hilane ki koshish ki, par haath sirf ek halki si thar-tharahat ke saath neeche gir gaya.

Lekin uski aankhein ab bhi Ryan ki taraf thi.

"Dhoondho usse... jo silver chain pehenta hai."

Aur phir, uske honthon se ek aakhri hasi nikli. Jaise maut bhi uske saath ek chhupa chhupi ka khel khel rahi ho.

Aur fir — Ek tez awaaz aayi.

Peeche se lohe ka darwaza zor se khula. Shalaan bhaagta hua andar aaya, uske peeche Vikram aur Rohan bhi. Unka nazar sabse pehle mujh par gayi. Phir Inaya. Phir khoon mein lathpath Bilal. Aur sabse aakhri—Ryan ke haath mein gun.

Aur unhe sab samajh aagaya. Ek dum se sab kuch rook gaya. Aur iss sannate ke beech, chaale chalne waale Bilal Kasuri ki saansein bhi ruk chuki thi.

"Miss Sana, ab iska kya karein?" Vikram, Bilal ki heartbeat check karte hue bola.

Rohan bina kuch kahe Inaya ko car ki taraf le gaya. Hum sab ek doosre ko dekh rahe the. Samajh nahi aa raha tha ki ab kya karein.

Shalaan ki awaaz sunai di. "Use chhupa do. Aur koi option nahi hai. Agar pakde gaye, toh sab kuch khatam."

Mera dil keh raha tha ki woh sahi bol raha hai. Magar dimaag...

Ryan ab bhi gun pakde khada tha. "Tum chahte ho ki hum ek crime chhupa dein?"

Shalaan ek kadam aage aaya. "Yeh sirf ek aadmi ka khel nahi hai. Koi aur hai iske peeche. Agar abhi hum phans gaye, toh yeh case humein bhi andar kar dega."

Sach. Humein criminal pakadne ka haq tha. Par maarne ka nahi.

Vikram bhi aage badha. "Sir, yahi karte hain."

Vikram ek discipline-man. Lekin usne bhi apni principles side par rakh diye. Aur humein bachane ke liye ready ho gaya. Ham sab is ke liye maan gaye shayad yahi hamari sab se bari ghalti thi, aur aage chal kar jiska guilt pehle se jyada aur gehra hone wala tha.

Humne laash uthai. Bilal ka badan ab bhi garam tha. Khoon ab bhi pet se behta ja raha tha, kapde gehre laal ho chuke the. Uski laash ko uthate hi ek tez metallic smell hawa mein phel gayi. Ek ajeeb sa ehsaas ho raha tha—jaise hum sirf ek dead body nahi, apni zindagi ke sabse bade raaz ko apne haathon se daba rahe the.

Peeche ek car aayi. Uski headlights ek pal ke liye jungle ke raaste ko roshan kar gayi. Number plate change ki gayi thi—koi usse track nahi kar sakta tha. Vikram driver seat pe tha, uska chehra shant, lekin uske haathon ki grip steering par aur bhi tight ho gayi thi.

Hum sab bina bole body ko car ke trunk mein daalne lage. Bilal ka haath dheere se latak gaya. Uski ungليون ka ek sirah mitti ko chho raha tha. Maine ek pal ke liye ruk kar uska haath uthaya aur trunk ke andar kar diya.

Ryan ek shabd bhi nahi bol raha tha. Uska chehra patthar ki tarah thanda tha, lekin uski aankhon mein ab bhi Inaya ka chehra basa tha. Shalaan ek nazar Ryan par daal kar bola, "Jaldi kariye. Zyada der yahan rukna theek nahi hai."

Maine ek baar peeche dekha—Bilal ka lahu zameen par gehra dhabba bana chuka tha. Yeh khoon sirf ek aadmi ka nahi, balki ek poore khel ka hissa tha. Vikram ne engine start kiya, aur humne wo rasta liya jisme ek bhi CCTV nahi tha. Gadi andhere mein fisalti gayi, sirf headlights ki roshni road par halki si chamak chhod rahi thi.

Detective hone ka ek faayda yeh bhi tha ki crime chhupane mein bhi hum expert the.

Jungle ke andar ek jagah thi—ek purana chhoda hua godown jisme sirf sadi hui lakdi ki boo aur mitti ki thandi sugandh thi. Humne gadi wahan rok di.

Darwaza kholte hi ek thandi hawa ka jhonka aaya. Andar pura sannata tha. Humne laash uthai aur andhere mein beech tak le gaye. Mitti naram thi, par khudai karna aasaan nahi tha. Shalaan aur Ryan ne jameen khodna shuru kiya, jabki Vikram car le kar main road par tha taki koi humara peeche toh nahi kar raha.

Jaise-jaise mitti andar girti gayi, waise-waise sabke haathon pe mitti lagti gayi. Ek pal ke liye sab ruka, sabki saanse tez ho chuki thi. Ryan ne last baar Bilal ki taraf dekha, phir uska chehra mitti se dhak diya.

Ek pal ka sannata raha.

Hamlog tools ko wapas se bag me rakh rahe the

Tabhi— Ek halki si chamak Shalaan ke T-shirt se bahar aa rahi thi.

Mere dimaag ne turant signal bheja. Metal... chamak... chain...

Meri nazar wahin jam gayi. Ek silver chain. Waqt jaise ek dum ruk gaya. Jaise kisi ne pause button daba diya ho. Jaise iss pal ke baad sab kuch badalne wala ho.

Chain dheere-dheere hawa me hil rahi thi, aur uske beech ek engraved pendant lataak raha tha.

Do bade alphabets—AM. Mera dimaag ek dum jhatka kha gaya.

AM... Aariz Malik.

Aariz Malik... wahi ladka... Jiske parents ka murder aaj se 15 saal pehle hua tha. Wahi case... jisme sab kuch clear hone ke bawajood, humein use suicide case declare karna pada tha. Jismein saboot humare saamne honay ke bawajood, humne use kisi aur ko diya tha.

Aur ab... Yeh necklace Shalaan ke paas kaise?

Nahi... Ek aur yaad aaya. Aariz Malik adopt kiya gaya tha.

Aur usse adopt kisne kiya? Mr. Ahmad ne.

Meri gardan ek jhatke se uth gayi.

Shalaan? Nahi... Ya Aariz Malik?

Mere haath dheere se rassi ke bundle ko pakde rahe, par ungliyan dheere-dheere dheeli padne lagi. Rassi haathon se gir gayi. Ek chhoti si awaaz—jo is sannate ko todne ke liye kaafi thi.

Par nahi... Uski nazar mujhse mil gayi.

Ek pal ke liye sab kuch mute ho gaya.

Sirf hum dono... ek doosre ki aankhon me dekh rahe the. Ek ajeeb si muskurahat... Jaise usse pata ho ki mujhe pata chal gaya hai. Uski muskurahat itni ajeeb thi ki ek second ke liye Bilal ka chehra yaad aa gaya. Bilkul wohi muskurahat jo thodi der pehle Bilal ke chehre pe thi.

Jaise jaane se pehle woh keh gaya ho—tum sirf ek mohre ho.

Meri saansein tez hone lagi.

Shalaan ne dheere se apni nazar neeche ki, apne gale tak haath le gaya, aur chain ko andar t-shirt ke andar chhupa liya.

Meri ungliyan gun ki taraf gayi. Par gun? Gun toh usne pehle hi hamare paas se nikalwa kar car me rakh di thi. Mujhe ab sab samajh aa raha tha.

Yeh sirf ek revenge plot nahi tha. Yeh ek chess game tha. Aur hum sab sirf ek chaal ka hissa the. Mujhe mehsoos hua jaise meri peeth ke peeche ek andhera sa ghul raha hai. Aur usi andhere ke beech Shalaan muskuraya. Ek thanda, bejaan aur dara dene wala muskurahat.

Wo aage badha, neeche jhuka, rassi ka bundle uthaya... Aur mere haathon me rakh diya.

“Gira diya?” Uski awaaz ek ajeeb si halkaapan liye thi.

Mere haath thande ho gaye. Mujhse ek shabd bhi nahi nikla. Yeh woh ladka nahi tha jo hostel me Rohan ke saath mazaak karta tha. Yeh koi aur tha.

Ya shayad yeh hamesha yahi tha... sirf hum samajh nahi paaye.

Ryan wahi stunned khada tha. Meri saansein tez ho chuki thi, par maine apni zubaan ko sambhal kar dheere se bola—

“Tum... tum kaun ho?”

Shalaan ek kadam peeche hata. Uski muskurahat gehri ho gayi. Ek ajeeb si thandi muskurahat. Jaise kisi shatranj ke khel me checkmate hone ke baad bhi, use malum ho uske paas jeetne ka abhi bhi chance hai dusre tareeqe se. Aur use maja aa raha ho opponent ko thodi der ki khushi dene par.

“Aapko nahi pata, Miss. Sana?” Uska lehja chhupane wala nahi, dikhane wala tha.

“Main wahi hoon, jo hamesha tha.” Meri rooh kaanp gayi. “Aur ab aapko bhi pata chal gaya.”

“Jaane anjaane...”

Ek lamha tha jo abhi bhi tod nahi raha tha. Fir usne ek aur kadam peeche liya.

“Nahi... meri marzi se.”

Mujhe mehsoos hua jaise koi aakhri parda gir chuka ho.

“Aariz Malik?”

Meri awaaz ek sard fiza me goonj uthi. Ek pal ke liye Ryan jhatka kha gaya. Uska chehra pehle shock, phir disbelief, phir gusse aur confusion se bhar gaya.

“Tum kya keh rahi ho?”** Ryan ne mujhe dekha, lekin meri nazar ab bhi Shalaan par thi.**

Nahi... Aariz Malik par. Uske chehre ka expression badla nahi. Bas ek sookhi si muskurahat aur gehri ho gayi.

“Haan...”Ek halka sannata. “Kitne saalon ke baad yeh naam suna hoon.”

“Kitne saal hue?” “15 saal.”

“15 saal... Is naam ko sunne ke liye mujhe kitna kuch karna pada hai.”

Usne ek lambi saans li. Phir dheere se wahan rakhe ek pathar par baith gaya. Aaram se, bechaini ke bina. Jaise sab kuch uske plan ke mutabiq ho raha ho. Neeche se ek sukhay ped ki tehni uthai, uska ek tukda toda, aur apne daanton me fansa liya. Dheere dheere muskurane laga.

Mujhe laga jaise mere samne sirf Shalaan nahi, ek pura bhool bhulaiya ka jaal ho.

AARIZ MALIK

Main sirf 8 saal ka tha. Itna chhota ki duniya ka sach samajhna mushkil tha, par itna bada bhi ki chupke se maa-papa ki baatein sun sakoon. Ek raat, maa papa soch rahe the ki mujhe neend aa chuki hai. Par main jaag raha tha.

“Operation ke baad toh hum log fans hi gaye...” maa bechaini se bol rahi thi.

Maine apni aankhein band kar li. Operation?

Mujhe sirf itna yaad hai ki hospital ke safed kamre me din aur raat ek jaise lagte the. Machines beep karti thi. Nurses aati jaati thi. Aur papa hamesha kisi se phone par baat karte rehte the—ek donor ka intezaar tha. Ek din, ek accident case aaya.

Ek baccha... Shalaan Ahmad. Mr. Faisal Ahmad ka beta. Deep coma me chala gaya tha. Doctor ne unhe ek din bataya ki “Dheere dheere uske organs damage hone lagenge. Agar aap uska heart donate kar sakein, toh ek bacche ki jaan bach sakti hai.”

Mrs. Nafisa Ahmad ne turant mana kar diya. Unka beta wapas aayega, yeh yakeen tha unhe. Par waqt kisi ka intezaar nahi karta. Din guzarte gaye... aur ek din, unhone faisla le liya. Aur mujhe ek naya dil mil gaya... par ek shart par jo unhone us waqt nahi bataya tha.

Mere operation ke do mahine baad, mera birthday aaya. Papa mujhe ghumane le gaye the.

Maine zid ki “Mujhe ice-cream chahiye, abhi.” Papa ne mere sir par haath rakha. Ek ajeeb si udaasi thi unke chehre pe.

Papa muskurane ki koshish karte hue bole “Jab bilkul theek ho jaoge, tab bade bade dabbay bhar kar ice-cream launga.”

Maine maan liya. Mujhe kya pata tha ki yeh wada kabhi pura nahi hoga.

Kuch din baad... ek raat... Papa ka phone bajta hai. Call karne ke baad dono room me chale gaye.

Maa papa ki awaaz andar kamre se aane lagi. Maine dheere se darwaza khola aur sunne laga.

Maa gusse me dikh rahi thi aur bolne lagi “Humne apne bacche ki jaan bachane ke liye jo bhi karna tha kiya, unhone hamari bahut bari madad ki... par ab wo keh rahe hain ki hume apna baccha de dein”

Papa aur aage bolte hue bole ki “Nafisa Ahmad kehti hai... meine use apne bete ke dil ke badle zindagi di hai.”

Maa rone lagi. Papa khamosh ho gaye aur khidki ke bahar dekhne lage.

Ek hafte beet chuke the Raat ka waqt tha. Main uper apne room me tha. Khidki se bahar dekh raha tha. Tabhi maine dekha— ek kaali gaadi hamare gate ke saamne ruki.

Mrs. Nafisa Ahmad aur ek aadmi... Bilal Kasuri gari se utar gaye aur gate ke andar aa rahe the. Uske haath me ek bada sa bag tha.

Mujhe andar ek ajeeb si bechaini mehsoos hui. Wo andar chale gaye. Kuch der tak sab shaant tha...

Phir ekdum se cheekhne ki awaaz aayi. Mein apne kamre me hee raha, maa mujhe strictly boli thi aaj tum room se bahar nahi niklogi shayad unhe pehle hee inke aane ke bare me malum tha.

Aur phir thodi der baad goli chalne ki awaaz.

Ek dum se sab jam gaya.

Fir dusri goli.

Maine neeche daud lagayi... Par tab tak sab chale gaye the. Mere saamne...

Maa aur papa ki laash sofa par padi thi. Khoon zameen par ek laal dari ki tarah fela tha.

Meri sans atak gayi. Dil tez se dhadakne laga. Maine darwaze ki taraf dekha... Kuch log daud kar aa rahe the.

Mere heart me ek tez dard utha...Aur main wahin behosh ho gaya.

Ek subah mujhe mehsoos hua ki main zinda hoon. Kahin door koi awaaz sunai de rahi thi, lekin sab kuch dhundhla tha. Jise dekhne ki koshish kar raha tha, uska chehra ek ajeeb si dhundh mein chhupa hua tha. Dheere-dheere sab saaf hone laga. Ek aadmi aur ek aurat—mere samne khade the.

Aurat aage badhi, bed ke paas baith gayi aur muskurai.

"I'm Sana. And he's Ryan," usne kaha, ek ajeeb sa thehrav tha uske lehze mein.

"Hum log us bure insaan ko pakadne aaye hain jo tumhare parents ko hurt karne ki koshish kar raha tha."

Parents... Maa... Papa...

Ek dum se dimaag mein tufaan mach gaya. Seene mein dard ke sath ek ajeeb si bechaini uthne lagi. Main jhat se uthne ki koshish karne laga, meri saansein tez ho gayi. "Maa... Papa...!" Main cheekhne laga, chhilane laga.

"Mujhe maa papa ke paas jaana hai!" Main puri taqat se chilla raha tha. "Mujhe unhe dekhna hai!"

Sana ne mujhe rokne ki koshish ki, par tab tak ek nurse daudti hui aayi.

"Calm down, beta, calm down!" Usne mere kandhe pe haath rakha, par main sun hi kaha raha tha?

"Nahi! Mujhe unse milna hai! Chhod do mujhe!"

Maine apna haath jhatak diya, lekin tab tak nurse ne injection laga diya. Aur phir andhera...

Agli subah Jab aankh khuli, toh sab sunaata ho chuka tha. Room ki safed deewarein mujhe jail jaisi lag rahi thi. Main akela tha. Dheere-dheere reality samajh aane lagi.

Maa-papa nahi rahe. Uske baad koi detective nahi aaya. Koi rishtedaar nahi tha. Main bas ek anjaan police protection ke andar hospital ke kamre mein pada tha.

Ek mahina guzar gaya. Har din ek naya zakham jhel raha tha. Lekin ek din, Mrs. Nafisa Ahmad aayi. Maine unhe dekha. Pehchaan gaya. Lekin main chup raha.

Us din mujhe ek aur sach pata chala—unhone mujhe adopt kar liya tha.

Mrs. Nafisa apne bete ke saath jitni obsessed thi, ab utni hi obsessed mujhse ho gayi thi. Mujhe lekar abroad chali gayi. Kisi ko nahi pata tha ki unka asli beta mar chuka hai. Mera naam bhi badal diya—"Shalan."

"Beta, tum mere apne ho... bilkul mere jaan ho," Nafisa ke shabd mere kaan me goonj rahe the.

Lekin mujhe sab samajh aata tha. Wo mujhe apne asli bete ka replacement bana rahi thi. Usne kabhi nahi kaha ki main adopted hoon. Par mujhe uska dukh dekhna accha lagne laga tha.

Jab mujhe chot lagti thi, Nafisa tadap uthi thi. Aur mujhe us tadap ko dekhne mein maza aata tha. Isliye main hamesha kuch na kuch aisa karta jo mujhe dukh pahunchaye—taaki mujhe Nafisa ka dukh dekhne ko mile.

Ek din, Nafisa ki cousin Rabiya aunty apne bete Aayan ke saath aayi. Uski maa hamesha mujhe usse compare karti thi—

"Dekho Aayan ko, kitna accha ladka hai!"

"Aayan kitna samajhdar hai, tum bhi usse seekho!"

Mujhe gussa aaya. Bohot zyada.

Ek din, main Aayan ko seedhiyon ke corner pe le gaya.

Hall mein Nafisa aur Rabiya baatein kar rahi thi.

Main khud seedhiyon se gir gaya. Sar se khoon behne laga. Nafisa daudti hui aayi.

"Shalan! Beta, kya hua?"

Maine rone ka natak kiya, "Aayan ne mujhe dhakka diya!"

Nafisa ka chehra ekdum safed pad gaya. Usne Rabiya ki taraf dekha. Rabiya shocked thi.

"Aisa nahi ho sakta! Mera beta aisa nahi hai!"

Par Nafisa sun kaha rahi thi? Uske dimaag me kuch aur hi chal raha tha.

Kuch dino baad, Mrs. Nafisa ne picnic plan ki.

Hamlog park me gaye the. Wahan ek bara sa pond bhi tha. Picnic ke dauraan, Nafisa ne Aayan ko pond ke paas khelta dekh kar use pond me dhakka de diya.

Aur main door khada ek per ke piche yeh dekh kar muskurata raha. Aur Aayan paani me tarpta raha.

Par Nafisa?

Usne Aayan ko dekha bhi nahi. Seedha Rabiya ke paas jaakar baatein karne lagi. Jab Rabiya ko yaad aaya ki Aayan gayab hai, tab tak der ho chuki thi.

Aayan is duniya mein nahi raha.

Nafisa pagal thi. Aur mujhe usi pagalpan ka faayda uthana tha.

Mere maa-baap ka case Mr. Ahmad ne band karwa diya.

Pehle unhone ne kisi ki madad se agency walon ko samjhane ki koshish ki, par kisi ne nahi suna.

Toh Sana ke bhai Omar Bashir ko kidnap karwa diya. Aur Sana ne case band kar diya.

"Agar Omar nahi hota, toh aaj mere parents ke murdererer jail mein hote."

Aur isiliye, sabse zyada nafrat mujhe usi se thi.

Hamlog wapas India aa gaye the ab ghar bore kar raha tha. Nafisa ke dimaag se khelna ab mazedaar nahi lag raha tha. Mujhe naya game chahiye tha. Ek aisa game jisme sabke past ka hisaab ho sake.

Isiliye hostel jaana zaroori tha.

Kyunki Mr. Ahmad ko humesha shak rehta tha ki mujhe apne asli maa-baap ke baare mein sab pata hai.

Jo sach tha bhi.

Par hostel jaana asaan nahi tha. Toh maine khaana peena band kar diya. Nafisa ka dil pighalne laga. Uska dukh meri jeet thi. Aur bas—main hostel chala gaya.

Bilal Kasuri—jisne Mr. and Mrs. Ahmad ke liye kaam kiya tha, ab ek dukan chala raha tha. Use dhoondhna asaan nahi tha, par main use dhundhne me safal raha. Uska kaam khatam ho chuka tha, par mera abhi baaki tha.

Main uski dukan tak pahucha. Chhoti si jagah thi, purane lakdi ke shelves par bartan rakhe the. Ek kone me chulha jal raha tha, jisme pani ubal raha tha. Bilal counter ke peechay khada tha, jaise hi mujhe dekha, bina kisi hairani ke bola—

"Kab badla lena hai?"

Uske lehze me ek ajeeb sa sukoon tha, jaise yeh sawaal uske liye aam ho.

Main seedha uske samne ek kursi kheench kar baith gaya. Haath me rakha ek chamach uthaya aur usse halke se table par tapka diya. Phir bartan uthakar idhar-udhar dekhne laga, bina kisi jaldi ke.

"Kitna bharosa kar sakta hoon tum par?"

Bilal ne ek gehri saans li. Uski aawaz patthar ki tarah thandi thi.

"Chahe maar do, shikayat nahi karunga. Police ke hawale kar do, tab bhi nahi. Ab tum soch lo" Maine halka sa muskuraya. "Toh phir plan suno..."

Mera plan simple tha—use sirf ek jhooth bolna tha. Mrs. Ahmad ke paas jaake kehna tha ki Faisal Ahmad ne mujhe maarne ka order diya hai. Aur agar tumne yeh baat kisi se kahi, toh woh tumhe bhi khatam kar dega.

"Unhe aur behkana. Kehna ki tum mujhe nahi maar sakte, kyunki main unka beta hoon, aur unhone tumhare bure waqt me tumhara saath diya hai."

Bilal bina kuch kahe mujhe dekhta raha. Maine aage kaha—

"Jab woh tumhari baat par yakeen kar le, tab unke haath me ek gun de dena. Unka gussa dekhna. Aur jaise hi Faisal Ahmad ghar aaye, woh gun chala degi. Aur jaise hi woh usse maare, tum bhi usse maar dena."

Meri baat sunne ke baad Bilal halki si hasi hansa. "Bahut tang kiye ho Mrs. Ahmad ko."

Mujhe uska chehra dekhna bilkul bhi pasand nahi tha. Uske chehre par har jagah kaat ke nishan the, jo uske liye fakhr ki baat thi.

"Ek aur kaam. Wahan ek jali hui cigarette chhod dena, aur ek bina keychain ki chaabi."

Bilal ke chehre par hairani aayi. "Kyun?"

Maine uski taraf jhuka aur dheere se bola—

"Taki game lambi chale... agar players apna dimag nahi lagayenge, toh main lagwaunga."

Raat me sab kuch mere plan ke mutabiq hua. Bilal ne ghar me ghuskar Mrs. Ahmad ko wahi bataya jo maine kaha tha. Jaise maine socha tha, waisa hi hua—uske andar ek junoon jaag gaya.

"Faisal ne yeh kaha?" Nafisa Ahmad ka chehra laal ho raha tha.

"Agar meine yeh baat aapko batane ki bhi koshish ki, toh woh mujhe bhi maar dega." Bilal ki awaaz dari hui thi, jaise woh sach me dar raha ho.

Usne gun uthakar table ke neeche rakhi. Gun chhupa kar load ki thi. Jaise hi Faisal Ahmad ghar aaya, uska bas ek sawaal tha—

"Kya aapko shaq hai ki Shalan hamare khilaaf sazish kar raha hai? Ya usse pata chal gaya ki humne uske asli maa-baap ko maara tha?"

Faisal Ahmad ko laga, unki biwi ko bhi shaq ho gaya hai. Woh khul kar bolne laga, "Haan, tumhe nahi lagta?"

Ek second. Do second. Phir—

DHAAN!

Ek goli chali. Nafisa Ahmad ne apne pati par goli chala di.

Faisal Ahmad ne hairani se apni chhati pakdi. "Na...fisa?"

Par tab tak doosri goli chal chuki thi. Mohalle me shor mach gaya. Bilal ka kaam poora ho chuka tha.

Main hostel me tha. Apna phone wahin chhod diya tha, aur laundry ke liye bahar chala gaya. Barish ho rahi thi—jo meri madad kar rahi thi. Koi shak bhi nahi kar sakta tha.

Chachu ka pehla choice The Shadow Agency thi—aur mujhe wahan entry mil gayi thi. Mera asli khel shuru ho chuka tha.

Mere saamne woh do log the jo apne aapko bohot intelligent samajhte the, justice dene wale banne ka dikhawa karte the, chahe khud kitni bhi gandagi me kyun na fase ho. Aise logon ke saath khelne me sabse zyada maza aata hai—jise apne raaz khulne ka dar ho. Aur yeh dar un dono ke chehron par hamesha dikhta tha.

Mujhe jaldi hi pata chala ki unki ek beti bhi hai. Game aur interesting ho gaya. Par meri talash Omar ki thi—chess ka woh mohra jo sirf marne ke liye utara jata hai.

Aur phir woh din aa gaya—jab mujhe use uske ghar me hi kidnap karna tha. Socha tha evidence mita kar maar dunga, par usne bhi game lamba karna chaha. Usne khud ko goli maar li.

Us din sab apni gaadiyon me baithe the, order ka intezaar kar rahe the. Par maine sabko behosh kar diya—unke danton me tracker tha, jiska koi fayda nahi.

Omar ki maut ka sirf thodi der ke liye sukoon mila. Par mera plan fail ho gaya tha. Evidence khatam nahi ho saka. Mujhe ek naye plan ki zaroorat thi.

Phir mujhe Faisal Ahmad ka tareeka yaad aaya.

"Agar main unki beti ko istemal karun toh?"

Bas. Game naye mod par thi.

Bilal is baar nahi maan raha tha. Woh maar-peet wali zindagi se door rehna chahta tha, sirf dukan chalana chahta tha. Murder nahi karna chahta tha. Aur ab mujhe us par bhi ghussa aane laga tha.

"Ab bas, Shalan. Yeh sab band karna chahta hoon."

Maine uski taraf dekha. "Bas kidnap karna hai, aur kuch nahi."

Bilal ne ek gehri saans li. "Phir? Uske baad?"

Uske in sawalon ke wajah se us par ghussa aane laga tha.

Present Time

"Mujhe aapke ghar ka address pata tha..." Meri awaaz thehri hui thi, jaise har lafz soch-samajh kar bol raha hoon. "Isliye Bilal wahan pahunch gaya, Rhea ko zakhmi kiya... aur Inaya ko utha kar le aaya."

Mere shabdon ke saath hi ek thanda sannata cha gaya. Miss. Sana ki aankhon ki chamak ek pal mein chali gayi. Ryan ne apni mutthi kas li. Vikram, jo abhi bhi cae me baitha hua tha.

"Aur aaj..."

Maine ek kadam aage badhaya. Un dono ki saanse tez ho gayi.

"Maine aap dono ko emotions mein lapet kar bhadka diya, taaki Bilal bhi apne past ka hisaab chuka sake... aur aap dono ne bhi apna role ache se nibhaya."

Mr. Ryan ka chehra ghusse se lal ho gaya. Ek jhatke se mere saamne aaye.

"Main tumhe apne haathon se jail bhejunga!"

Unki awaaz garaj rahi thi, jaise unka gussa ab ek aakhri hadh paar kar chuka ho. Maine ek halki si muskurahat di. Ek thanda, lekin gehra sukoon bhara mask.

"Kyun, Mr. Ryan?" Maine dheere se jhuk kar unki aankhon mein dekha. "Beti ka mamla aaya toh murder tak utar aaye?"

Mr. Ryan ek pal ke liye ruke, jaise unhe samajh nahi aaya ki jawab kya dein.

"Us raat bhi yahi kar lete na? Bilal Kasuri ko maar dete. De dete mere maa-baap ke qatil ko saza."

Maine miss. Sana ki taraf dekha. Wo ab bhi chup thi, lekin aankhon mein ek ajeeb sa sharmindgi ka rang tha.

"Aapke liye insaaf tab zaroori hai jab aapki apni family dukh mein ho, warna aur logon ko insaan mile ya na aapko kya hai, hai na?"

Miss. Sana ne gusse se ek kadam aage badhaya.

"Humne jo kiya, woh sirf justice ke liye tha!"

Meri muskurahat aur gehri ho gayi.

"Justice?"

Main Mr. Ryanki taraf badha, sirf ek kadam ka faasla tha humare beech.

"Aur aap, jail ki baat mat kariye, Mr. Ryan. Kyunki jail sirf mere liye nahi hogi." Maine dheere se apni pocket se ek pen drive nikali aur unke saamne ghumai. "Aap bhi jail jayiega. Aur Miss Sana, aap bhi... aur wo jo wahan car mein baitha hai—Vikram bhi."

Mr. Ryan ke chehre ka gussa ab ek lachar bechaini mein badal chuka tha.

"Mere paas aap logon ki poori recording hai. Goli chalane se le kar laash ko yahan tak lane tak ka pura saboot hai mere paas."

Sana ne mujhe ghoor kar dekha. Aur kaha

"Tumne hamesha humlogon se jhoot bola."

Maine sir halka sa jhukaya. Aur fir utha kar bola.

"Nahi. Maine sirf sach nahi bataya."

Maine un dono ko dekha—unke chehre pe likha tha ki wo ab bhi is sach ko samajhne ki koshish kar rahe hain.

"Par ek baat samajh lijiye," maine dheere se kaha, "mujhe aisa banane wale aap hee log hai to mujhe blame karne ki koi jarurat nahi hai."

"Tum mujhpar blame mat daalo," main Miss Sana ki is baat ko sun kar unhe ghoorte hue kaha.

"Jab aaplog mere jagah par aaye, jab aapko bhi laga law aapki help nahi kar sakta, to aap bhi wohi qadam uthaye jo meine uthaya tha isliye aap bhi mujhse alag nahi ho."

Mr. Ryan ne apni mutthi kas li, lekin kuch nahi bola. Main peeche hatne laga.

"Aaplog bhi 'justice... justice... justice' chillate ho na?"

Maine unke chehre dekhe aur bola. "Lekin kitne crimes aap log khud kiye hue hain?"

"Ab mein aapke secret ke sath rahunga aur aap mere. Mere andar khoon jarur Nafisa Ahmad ka nahi hai, par harkatein us jaisi hai. Pagal si" mein yeh keh kar hansne laga.

Unhone jawab nahi diya. Aur mujhe umeed bhi nahi thi.

Maine unhe unke purane ghalti ke liye unhe maaf kar diya. Pendrive hawa me fenk diya.

Aur wahan se chala gaya. Aur mur kar fir nahi dekha.

Peeche sirf guilt tha. Gussa bhi tha, kyunki unhe bas istemal kiya gaya.

Paanch Saal Baad - Berlin

Mein uske agle din Berlin chala gaya aur mein sabhi business ko wahin chhor kar chala aaya kyunki wo mera tha hee nahi.

Mujhe Rohan ke messages dekhne ki aadat ho gayi thi. Par maine kabhi reply nahi kiya.

Maine apna number badal diya tha. Kabhi kabhi social media par sabko dekh leta tha, bas ye jaanne ke liye ki sab zinda hain.

Meri zindagi akele guzarne ke liye bani thi... ya shayad maine hi use aisa bana diya tha.

Ab main ek crime reporter tha. Na revenge, na sirf kanoon ki baatein. Kabhi kabhi emotions bhi dekh leta tha.

Ek din, main Berlin Cathedral gaya.

Wahan Rohan aur Rhea nazar aaye.

Dil chaaha ki jaaun, unse baat karun.

"Kaisa hai tu, Rohan?"

"Rhea... ab sab theek hai?"

Lekin phir qadam rok liya.

Main mud kar nikalne hi wala tha ki peeche se ek awaaz aayi—

"Aariz Malik. Tum finally mil gaye."

