

THE 13TH GUEST



Z E E L A Z A F A R

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DEDICATION

To my parents, **Muhammad Zafar Iqbal** and **Rafat Jahan**,
For giving me the opportunity to pursue my dream of becoming
a writer.

This book is dedicated to you.

*“Time never buries the truth. It only teaches
it how to wait.”*

~Zeela Zafar

PREFACE

Ever since I discovered English mystery novels, I have been fascinated by them. The suspense, the unexpected twists, the chilling atmosphere, and the satisfaction of uncovering the truth have always kept me turning pages late into the night. Those stories inspired me to ask a simple question: *Could I write one of my own?*

The 13th Guest is my answer.

This is my very first English novel. Writing in a language that is not my native one, has been both exciting and challenging. Along the way, I learned something new with every chapter, every scene, and every mystery I created. Like every first step, this book is part of my journey as a writer.

If you are looking for a story filled with eerie moments, hidden secrets, suspicious characters, and a murder waiting to be solved, then I hope you will enjoy this journey as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Thank you for giving my first English novel a chance. I sincerely hope *The 13th Guest* keeps you guessing until the very last page.

Happy reading.

~ *Zeela Zafar*

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Although this story is written in English, it is set in Pakistan. As you read, you may notice certain cultural differences, traditions, expressions, and names that reflect the setting and its people.

Rather than changing these elements to fit a different culture, I chose to keep them authentic. They are part of the story's identity and, I hope, part of its charm.

Thank you for stepping into this world. I hope you enjoy the mystery, the suspense, and the journey that awaits.

~Zeela Zafar

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PROLOGUE

The first strike of the shovel broke the earth. It felt unbearably heavy.

The second... Heavier still.

With every scoop of soil from that particular flower bed, his breathing grew more labored.

It was a bitterly cold day. The towering pine trees stood draped in white, buried beneath fresh snow. The world around him was silent. A mound of freshly turned earth lay beside the grave.

Despite the freezing air, beads of sweat had begun to gather on his forehead. He didn't have to dig very deep.

Soon...

He found what he had come for.

Setting the shovel aside, he slowly dropped to his knees.

Then he leaned forward...

With both hands...

With every ounce of strength he had left...

He pulled the body from the earth. It was wrapped in old, dirt stained clothes. The face had not yet decayed beyond recognition... But its color had long faded into deathly white.

He gently lifted the head into his lap. Rested his forehead against it. And broke down.

He cried until there were no tears left. Only then did he raise his head. With trembling fingers, he brushed the dirt from the lifeless face... Slowly. Tenderly.

As though afraid that even now he might hurt him.

Then, in a voice barely louder than a whisper, he said,

“Forgive me.”

The silent pines...The towering, watchful mountains...They bore witness.

They watched as he filled the grave once more. Covered it with fresh soil. Planted flowers above it. Turned it back into nothing more than an ordinary flower bed.

And then...

He lifted the body onto his shoulders. And walked away.

Toward the forest.

Alone.

The 13th Guest

ZEELA ZAFAR

Chapter One

“So... this is the place?”

I set my suitcase down on the gravel beside the road and looked up at the hotel perched on the hill. Dry leaves crunched beneath the weight of my luggage before settling back into silence.

“Yes. This is it,” Yusuf replied, handing the driver his fare.

“I have to admit,” I said, studying the building, “it really does look haunted.”

The hotel stood alone atop the highest ridge in the valley, its towering spires giving it the appearance of an abandoned Victorian manor rather than a place meant to welcome guests. There wasn't another house anywhere nearby. Beyond the hill, the land dropped into a ravine nearly a thousand feet deep, and at its bottom lay a small town, its scattered lights glowing faintly in the distance. Dusk was drawing to a close.

A bluish haze had settled over everything. Sunset was still an hour away, yet thick black storm clouds had swallowed the sky so completely that darkness had arrived long before its time. The wind howled across the mountains, carrying a bitter cold that seeped through my clothes and into my bones.

“Well,” Yusuf said with a teasing grin, “since you've already decided to waste your vacation here, I don't suppose that question matters anymore.”

“My vacation isn't going to be wasted,” I said, smiling back. “You'll see.”

The hotel stood in complete silence. Its windows were dark. The wind grew stronger by the second, hurling dead leaves across the courtyard. It felt as though a storm was only moments away.

“Is the owner even here?” I asked, staring at the enormous arched entrance, its heavy wooden doors locked shut.

“He should be,” Yusuf replied. “I told him we'd arrive this evening. He was supposed to be waiting for us.”

As he spoke, the wind intensified. Leaves spiraled wildly through the air while lightning flashed somewhere behind the

mountains. Before I could say another word, a boy, no older than sixteen or seventeen, came sprinting toward us.

“I'm terribly sorry,” he said between breaths. “I was offering my prayers. That's why I'm late.”

The apology had barely left his lips when thunder exploded overhead, making all three of us flinch.

“Open the door before I freeze to death,” I muttered, shivering.

“Yes, sir. Just a moment.” The boy hurried to the massive arched doors. A thick iron bar held both panels together, secured by an oversized padlock. After fumbling through a ring of keys, he found the right one and unlocked it. Then, planting both feet firmly on the ground, he threw his weight against the iron latch until it finally gave way with a groan.

Thunder rolled continuously across the valley now. The wind had become a gale.

“Looks like these doors haven't been opened in a long time,” I whispered to Yusuf .

“They usually aren't,” he replied. “Only the occasional madman like you comes all the way up here. The rest of the time, the hotel stays closed.”

At last, the boy forced both towering doors open.

“You can go inside,” he said, stepping aside.

Yusuf and I exchanged uncertain glances before looking into the darkness waiting beyond the entrance.

“You're sure we should?” I asked.

“The main power is off,” the boy explained. “I'll switch it back on. Here... take this until I return.” He handed me a small flashlight before disappearing into the storm.

“Come on,” I said. Dragging my suitcase behind me, I stepped inside. Yusuf followed close behind, no doubt cursing me under his breath while silently reciting every prayer he knew.

The narrow beam of the flashlight barely pierced the darkness.

The hotel felt... wrong. I couldn't even tell where we were standing. Outside the tall stained glass windows, trees swayed violently in the storm, their twisted silhouettes scraping against the glass whenever lightning illuminated the sky.

“This building dates back to the British era,” Yusuf said quietly.

“Before that, during the Mughal period, it was a private mansion. Years later, the owner converted it into a luxury hotel.”

“I know.” A bolt of lightning split the sky. For a brief instant, soft violet light streamed through the arched windows, revealing the vast entrance hall before darkness swallowed it again.

“I've heard there was a massacre here during British rule,” Yusuf continued.

“There were massacres all over the country in those days,” I replied dismissively. “That doesn't automatically make every old building haunted.” The words had barely left my mouth when a deafening crack of thunder shook the valley. A violent gust slammed the enormous front doors shut with such force that both of us jumped. Before Yusuf had a chance to panic, the lights suddenly flickered to life. Warm golden light flooded the hall.

“Thank God,” I breathed, switching off the flashlight.

For the first time, I could see where we were. The entrance hall was magnificent. The floor was crafted from polished hardwood,

while intricate carvings decorated the high ceiling overhead. Twin staircases curved upward on either side before meeting at a balcony that overlooked the hall below. Beyond the railing stretched long corridors lined with identical doors, each one firmly closed. A reception desk occupied one corner of the room. The rest of the hotel was eerily empty.

“I still can't believe this place was once considered a seven star hotel,” I said, looking around the deserted hall. “And now... look at it.”

“After that incident, the hotel was shut down,” Yusuf replied quietly. “It never truly reopened. Once upon a time, influential businessmen and wealthy travelers competed for reservations here. But after that incident happened... no one wanted to come back.”

“That's not entirely true.” The unfamiliar voice made us spin around. The boy stood behind us again. His clothes were soaked through. Rain had begun pouring outside.

“I heard a few people stayed here in recent years,” I said.

“Not a few,” he replied. “Exactly twelve.”

“Forget all that for a moment,” I said, cutting him off. “Where's the owner of the hotel?”

“He's out of town on some business,” the boy replied. “He'll be back tomorrow morning.” Then his expression hardened. “But, sir... please don't change the subject.”

Yusuf and I exchanged a glance.

“I'm not changing the subject,” I said evenly.

Outside, thunder rolled across the mountains with explosive force. The wind battered the old building, causing the window shutters to bang open and shut in restless rhythm.

“Sir...” The fear in the boy's voice was unmistakable now. “You shouldn't have come here. You need to leave before sunrise.”

“Why?” I looked him up and down. He was probably just another village kid with another ridiculous ghost story to tell.

“Before you...” he began slowly, “...twelve people stayed at this hotel. Twelve different guests, on twelve different occasions.”

He swallowed. “Every single one of them disappeared.” Neither Yusuf nor I interrupted him.

“They vanished overnight. At first, we assumed they'd slipped away without paying their bill.” His voice faltered. “But later... we learned that all twelve had been reported missing immediately after coming here. They were never found.” For a moment, neither of us spoke. The revelation hung heavily in the silent hall. Then the boy took another hesitant step toward us.

“You have to leave,” he pleaded. “You're the thirteenth guest.” His face had turned deathly pale. “And thirteen...” he whispered, “...has never been a lucky number.”

“You have to go.”

“Please...”

“Leave before it's too late.”

“Enough!” My voice exploded through the hall. The boy froze. Even the thunder outside seemed quieter for an instant. The walls of the old hotel echoed with the force of my shout, making the entire building feel as though it had trembled.

“Easy, Naveed!” Yusuf said, placing a hand on my shoulder.

“He's just a kid.”

I drew a slow breath, forcing myself to calm down, then gave a slight nod.

“Show us our room,” I said coldly. “And don't let me hear another word of this nonsense.” The boy held my gaze for a long moment. There was something unsettling in his eyes, as if he wanted to say more but knew I wouldn't believe him. Without another word, he turned and started walking down the corridor.

I followed.

After all...

I had never believed in ghost stories.

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Chapter two

January 2010

It was just another ordinary day among the countless ordinary days of my life.

I sat in the chair behind my office desk, my head resting against the backrest while the rest of the staff carried on with their routine work outside my office. Through the glass door, I could see one of our investigation officers locked in a heated discussion with a young man.

I looked away from them and let my eyes settle on the nameplate lying neatly on my desk.

SSP Naveed Alam

My name gleamed in bold letters. Closing my eyes again, I leaned back into my chair.

My name is Naveed Alam, and I'm an FIA officer. Going undercover, disguising myself, and tracking down criminals has always been the part of the job I enjoy the most. Life rarely gives me a chance to breathe. The only days I truly look forward to are

my annual vacations. Those few precious days when I can travel, breathe freely, and return refreshed, ready for another year of chasing criminals. Or at least...

That's what I used to believe. The last vacation I ever planned turned out to be the darkest mistake of my life. I never traveled alone. No matter how busy or serious my life became, there was always one person who accompanied me. My closest friend... Yusuf.

A commotion outside my office interrupted my thoughts. Opening my eyes, I looked through the glass door again. The same young man was now shouting at the Investigation Officer. I frowned.

Scenes like this had become part of our daily routine. People walked into our office convinced we could solve every problem in a single day. Impatient people!

I rested my head against the chair again, trying to ignore the escalating argument outside. A second later, my office door burst open. I straightened immediately. The same young man stormed inside while the Investigation Officer and a Sub-Inspector struggled to drag him back out.

“Sir... Sir, please listen to me!” Even as he resisted them, he kept trying to speak to me.

“Get out! How dare you come in here like this?” The officers continued pulling him away, but the young man fought back with surprising determination. I simply watched. Outbursts like this happened almost every day.

“My father's death wasn't an accident!” he shouted desperately. “He was murdered! Please... help me!”

“Let him go.” The room fell silent the moment I gave the order. The officers released him and stepped back.

“Sir... please...” Breathing heavily, he hurried toward my desk. “You have to believe me. My father's death wasn't accidental. Someone killed him.”

I studied him quietly. Almost every grieving family insisted the same thing. Everyone believed their loved one had been murdered.

“That's what everyone says,” I replied calmly.

“But I'm not just saying it.” He pulled out the chair and sat down.

“I have evidence.” That caught my attention.

“What kind of evidence?” Truthfully, I expected nothing more than suspicion and grief. Still, I let him continue.

“My father's phone contains a draft message.” His voice trembled.

“I think he was trying to send it to me... but he never got the chance. According to the message, he had received a parcel that terrified him. It looks like he was trying to explain more, but before he could finish writing...” His voice cracked. “...someone killed him.” For the first time, the case genuinely caught my interest.

“Show me the phone.” I said to man and looked toward my assistant. “Akbar, bring me the case file.”

“Yes, sir.” Akbar hurried out while the young man handed me an old Nokia keypad phone. I opened the Drafts folder. He was telling the truth. A draft message had been automatically saved in June 2009.

I opened it.

“Beta (Son)!... I think someone is going to kill me. Today I received a horrible parcel. What was inside it... it has shaken me to my core. Beta, someone is going to....”

The message ended there. Nothing more.

“What is your name?” I asked.

“Hamza.”

“Hamza... are you certain your father wrote this himself?”

By then Akbar had returned and placed the investigation file on my desk.

“Yes, sir.” He nodded confidently. “This was Abba's (Dad) personal phone, and the draft was saved on the exact day he died.”

I opened the file.

Victim: Naeemuddin

Time of Death: 2:00 PM

Date of Death: June 5, 2009

Cause of Death: Fatal head injury after falling down a flight of stairs. No signs of physical assault or forced struggle were found on the body.

I read through the report carefully before looking back at Hamza. There was enough here to make me doubt the official conclusion.

“So tell me...” I closed the file. “Where is this parcel?”

“I don't know.” His voice carried equal parts frustration and helplessness. “If I knew, I wouldn't be here asking for your help.” He took a slow breath before continuing.

“Abba died in a huge house where he lived alone. I've searched every room I could find, but I couldn't find any parcel. I was studying in another city when he died.”

I remained silent for a moment before making my decision.

“All right, Hamza. You have three days. If you find anything that resembles this parcel, contact me immediately. If you don't...” I closed the file. “...I'll come to your father's house myself. We'll find out what's really hidden there.” I stamped the file **IMPORTANT** and locked it inside the most secure drawer of my desk.

Relief spread across Hamza's face. As he thanked me, one thought echoed in my mind.

His father hadn't died in an accident. He had been murdered.

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Chapter three

The room assigned to us was on the first floor, tucked away along a long wooden corridor. It was surprisingly spacious, furnished with two single beds and an old fashioned heater standing against one wall. The ceiling rose high above us, carved with intricate patterns that hinted at the building's forgotten grandeur. Every wall was paneled in polished wood that had darkened with age, filling the room with the scent of cedar and dust. A full length mirror stood in one corner.

I walked over and stopped in front of it.

Beyond the arched windows, flashes of lightning streaked across the night sky with increasing intensity. Far below, the lights of the small town shimmered like scattered fireflies at the bottom of the valley. The room's yellow light reflected a stranger back at me.

I stood six feet two, broad-shouldered, with black hair already beginning to grey around the temples. A thin scar, no wider than a strand of hair but long enough to reach from the corner of my eye toward my cheekbone, cut across the left side of my face,

the only injury from years in service that had left a permanent mark. The mirror itself was old, stained with dark patches and fine cracks, making my reflection appear blurred and ghostly.

“What are you thinking?” Yusuf asked.

I looked at him through the mirror. He was bent over his travel bag, carefully arranging his belongings inside the wooden wardrobe.

“What's the boy's name?” I asked.

“Akram,” he replied without looking up. “He's worked here for years.”

“He was talking complete nonsense downstairs.” Leaving the mirror behind, I crossed the room and sat on the edge of my bed.

Yusuf let out a slow breath before straightening. “He wasn't.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“You know the story of this place. During the British era, Sikh forces attacked the hotel. The owners and the guests staying here were massacred.” He said.

“That much is history. It's documented. People being afraid of this place after that... that's understandable.” I replied.

He looked at me for a moment.

“But the government never demolished the building. They left it standing exactly as it was. And over time... the stories grew. I've read every article I could find about this hotel,” I said. “Old newspapers, historical records... none of them mentioned the things that boy was talking about.”

“I'm telling you,” Yusuf interrupted quietly, “he was telling the truth.”

I stared at him.

“Before us, twelve different people came here on twelve different occasions. Just like you, they came looking for adventure. They laughed at ghost stories and dismissed the rumors.” He hesitated. “Every single one of them disappeared.” Silence settled between us.

“If you don't believe me,” he continued, “check the department records when we get back. Twelve missing persons. All connected to this hotel.”

Without saying a word, I stood up and walked to the door. I slid the bolt into place before returning to my chair opposite him.

“Yusuf,” I said calmly, “if that's true, then ghosts have nothing to do with it.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Someone inside this hotel is responsible.”

“And who would that be?” he asked. “The old owner? Akram?”

He shook his head. “I didn't believe these stories either. But I visit this town often, Naved. I've seen things here with my own eyes.”

“Like what?”

“I've seen someone walking across the roof in the middle of the night. The hotel was closed. There wasn't supposed to be anyone inside.” He swallowed before adding, “Sometimes... I've seen the silhouette of a woman standing at those windows with her hair hanging loose.”

“That only convinces me further.” I leaned back in my chair.

He looked at me questioningly.

“If people are seeing movement inside an abandoned hotel, then someone is living here in secret. It doesn't even have to be the owner's doing. Criminals often hide in deserted places like this.” The detective inside me had already begun piecing the puzzle together.

Before Yusuf could respond, every light in the room went out. Darkness swallowed the hotel.

“What happened?” Yusuf asked.

“It's probably the storm,” I replied. “The power must've gone out.” The words had barely left my mouth when a violent pounding echoed through our door.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Yusuf and I exchanged a startled glance. I raised a finger to my lips, signaling for silence. Slowly, I reached beneath my jacket and drew my pistol. The room was almost completely dark now. Only the occasional flash of lightning spilling through the windows allowed us to see anything at all.

The knocking came again, louder this time. Keeping my weapon ready, I edged toward the door. Behind me, Yusuf stood frozen,

barely breathing. I unlatched the door as quietly as I could. Then I pulled it open.

Both of us froze.

Standing outside was an elderly hunchback, perhaps in his mid-sixties. His hair was completely white, deep shadows circled his eyes, and several of his front teeth were missing. An old lantern swung gently from one hand, its flickering light casting grotesque shadows across his weathered face.

“W-Who are you?” For the first time that night... Even I struggled to speak.

“I’m the owner of this hotel,” he said, his voice somehow even more unsettling than his appearance. The old man smiled.

“Everyone here calls me Nimmo Baba.”

“You were supposed to arrive tomorrow, Nimmo Baba,” Yusuf said, finally recognizing him. He stepped forward until he was standing beside me.

Yusuf had grown up in this valley. He knew these mountains, these people, and their stories far better than I ever could. I, on the other hand, had come here for one reason alone. I wanted

adventure. The moment Yusuf had told me about this mysterious old hotel perched on the mountain, I'd decided to spend my vacation here.

“That was the plan,” the old man replied. “But I came back early... for my guests.” He paused, his eyes drifting toward me. “Or rather...” A crooked smile tugged at his lips. “**For the thirteenth guest.**”

A powerful gust of wind swept through the corridor. Somewhere at the far end, a loose window slammed violently against its frame.

“What brings you here?” I asked, unable to ignore the strange emphasis in his words. “Did you need something?”

“I just told you,” he said, still smiling. “I wanted to meet my guest... my thirteenth guest.” His manner unsettled me, but I kept my expression unreadable.

“Akram will bring your dinner shortly,” he continued. “Don’t worry about that. You should both get some rest. We’ll talk again in the morning.” He turned to leave, then stopped as if he'd suddenly remembered something.

“Oh.” Holding out the lantern, he looked at Yusuf. “You should keep this. It’ll be useful tonight.”

“Thank you, Nimmo Baba.” Yusuf accepted the lantern. “But... how will you find your way back in this darkness?”

The old man’s smile widened. “This is my mansion,” he said softly. “I could walk through it blindfolded.” With that, he disappeared into the darkness of the corridor.

Yusuf carried the lantern inside the room. I remained where I was. Something about the old man bothered me.

I watched him from the doorway as he shuffled away. Beyond the circle of lantern light, the corridor was swallowed in darkness. Every few seconds lightning flashed through the arched windows, illuminating him for the briefest instant before plunging everything back into blackness.

Another flash. He had reached the middle of the corridor.

Darkness.

Another flash. He was farther away now.

Darkness again.

When the lightning split the sky a third time... He was gone.

I frowned. That was impossible. The corridor stretched straight ahead with no side passages, no doors left open, nowhere for him to disappear. He couldn't possibly have reached the staircase in only a few seconds.

A chill crept up my spine. I hurried to the railing overlooking the lobby below. No one.

The staircase was empty. The hall beneath me lay silent. Nimmo Baba had simply... vanished. For the first time since arriving at the hotel, an unfamiliar unease settled over me.

I turned to head back inside and nearly jumped out of my skin.

Someone was standing directly behind me, holding a lantern.

“What happened?” the boy asked with an amused grin. “Did I scare you?” It was Akram.

My heart pounded painfully against my ribs.

“W-What are you doing here?” I managed to ask.

“I brought your dinner.” He lifted the tray in his other hand as if that explained everything. I stared at him. I hadn't heard a single footstep.

Not one.

“Here...” I muttered, taking the tray from him a little more roughly than I'd intended. As he turned to leave, he glanced back over his shoulder.

“Whatever you do,” he said quietly, “don't leave your room tonight.” Then he walked away.

I remained standing in the corridor, watching him disappear into the darkness. How had he gotten behind me? He'd been carrying a lantern. I should have seen its light long before he reached me.

Unless...

He had been standing behind me the entire time. The thought sent another shiver down my spine. Shaking it off, I hurried back into the room.

“What happened?” Yusuf asked. He was already sitting on his bed, reading one of his favorite books beneath the lantern's warm glow.

“Nothing.” I set the dinner tray on the table between us and forced my voice to remain steady. “Akram brought the food.” I shut the door firmly and slid the bolt into place. The wind outside had grown stronger. The arched windows rattled violently, threatening to fly open at any moment. I crossed the room and secured them before sitting opposite Yusuf.

“I have to admit,” I said, “Nimmo Baba is the one who seems haunted.”

Yusuf burst into laughter.

“No,” he said, still smiling. “He wasn’t always like this. He changed over the years.”

“Believe what you want,” I replied, reaching for my plate. “But something illegal is happening inside this hotel.”

“If that’s true,” Yusuf said between bites, “then you’ll figure it out.” He smiled knowingly. “After all... you’re the detective.”

I returned the smile. He was right. My mind had already begun weaving together the first threads of the mystery.

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Chapter four

“So this is your father’s house?” I asked, surveying the deserted building before me.

“Yes.” Hamza nodded. “This is where he died. I’m certain the parcel is still somewhere inside.”

“I gave you three days,” I reminded him as we stepped through the front door. “Did you find anything?”

“No sign of the parcel,” he admitted. “But there’s something I need to show you.” Without another word, he led me toward the basement.

A foul, rotten smell drifted up the staircase. Covering my nose, I followed him down. The moment I reached the bottom, my eyes fell upon something that stopped me dead in my tracks.

“W-What is this?”

“I wanted you to see it for yourself.” I looked down again.

Footprints.

A trail of them stretched across the basement floor, as though someone had walked in... and then turned back. The problem wasn't the footprints themselves.

They were stained with dried blood.

It looked as if someone had stepped into a pool of blood before coming down here. Months had passed, and the old blood had begun to rot, leaving a sickening stench hanging in the air.

Without wasting another second, I pulled out my radio and pressed the transmit button.

“Akbar.”

“Akbar here, sir. Over.”

“Bring the team to the basement immediately.” It took only a few minutes before Akbar arrived with the forensic officers. He crouched beside the footprints, studying them carefully.

“The trail begins at the foot of the basement stairs,” he said.

“Whoever left these prints walked around the room before heading back toward the staircase.” He frowned. “But the prints disappear before reaching the steps. It’s almost as if the person never actually left the basement.” He looked up at me.

“Your father died on the staircase in the lounge upstairs. If someone stepped in his blood and then came down here, we should find bloody footprints all the way from the lounge to the basement, including on the stairs.” I said turning towards Hamza, he nodded slowly.

“And whoever it was...” he murmured, staring at the floor, “...doesn’t seem to have come back out.”

“There’s no guarantee this is your father’s blood,” Akbar said as he carefully collected samples from one of the footprints.

“Yup, Akbar is right,” I agreed. “We’ll have to run a DNA analysis.” I glanced at Hamza. “And we’ll need a sample from your father’s body as well.”

“But... it’s been six months since he was buried.” His face fell.

“Then we’ll reopen the case,” I said. “We’ll obtain a court order and exhume the body.”

Akbar continued measuring the prints.

“Sir...” He looked up. “The shoe size is approximately twelve.” Instinctively, my eyes dropped to Hamza's feet. He was a short

young man. There was no way his shoes were anywhere near that size.

“Does anyone in your family wear size twelve shoes?” I asked. He shook his head.

“No. We’re all of average height. No one in this house wears shoes that large.” I rubbed a hand across my forehead. The case had just become a lot more complicated.

“Search every inch of this basement,” I ordered. “Collect every possible sample and send everything to the forensic lab. I also want a full crime scene team here.” I paused. “We won’t know anything for certain until the exhumation.” Carefully avoiding the bloody footprints, I climbed back upstairs. The moment I stepped out of the basement, I froze.

Someone was standing directly in front of me.

A painfully thin boy, little more than skin and bone, stood only a few feet away. His head was tilted unnaturally to one side as he stared at me with cold, unreadable eyes.

“What do you want?” I asked, irritation creeping into my voice. He didn't answer. He simply kept staring.

“If you have something to say, then say it. Otherwise, move aside.” Nothing. Not a word. Only those unsettling eyes fixed on me.

“Kami!” Hamza hurried over from behind and gently pulled the boy back. “Move aside. They’re our guests.”

The boy pointed at me.

“Ah... ah.....” Strange, broken sounds escaped his throat.

“It’s all right,” Hamza said softly, trying to calm him. “He’s here to find Father’s killer.” The boy continued making the same incomprehensible noises.

“Come on,” Hamza urged. “Go inside.” After one last lingering stare, the boy slowly turned and walked away.

I watched him disappear down the hallway before turning back to Hamza.

“Who is he?”

“He is Kami,” Hamza replied. “He’s the son of one of our old servants. His father died when he was very young, and my father raised him like one of his own children.”

“Does he have some kind of mental illness?” Hamza shook his head.

“No. He used to be perfectly normal. He went to school. He talked. He laughed.” His expression darkened. “But on the day my father died... something changed. He hasn’t spoken properly since. He barely says a word now. All he does is stare at people... as if he’s terrified of everyone.”

“I see.” I nodded thoughtfully, placing a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Don’t lose hope, Hamza. We’ll solve this case.” I glanced at my watch.

“I have to get back to work.” After saying goodbye, I headed for my car.

Just before climbing in, the image of the boy flashed through my mind again

that unnaturally tilted head...

those cold, lifeless eyes...

An involuntary shiver ran down my spine.

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Chapter five

I had no idea what time it was when I woke. A faint noise had pulled me out of sleep. Instinctively, I tried to sit up.

I couldn't.

It felt as though an enormous weight had been pressed onto my chest. My arms refused to move. My legs wouldn't obey me. Panic surged through my body as I struggled to turn my head toward Yusuf's bed.

“Yusuf...” I tried to call his name.

Nothing. Not a sound escaped my throat. My vision blurred around the edges. Every desperate attempt to move only made the paralysis more terrifying. It was as if my mind had awakened while the rest of my body remained trapped in sleep.

Then...

The bedroom door creaked open. A figure dressed entirely in black slipped silently into the room. Its face was hidden beneath a hood, and it moved without a sound, gliding through the darkness like a shadow.

“W-Who are you?” I screamed inside my head. My lips never moved.

The electricity still hadn't returned. Whether the storm had started again or had never stopped, I couldn't tell. Rain lashed against the windows while the curtains billowed wildly in the wind. Before going to bed, I'd turned the lantern down to its lowest flame. Now its weak glow barely illuminated the room. It was just enough for me to watch the stranger drawing closer.

“Yusuf...” I forced every ounce of strength into my voice.

“Yusuf!” He didn't stir. The figure stopped beside my bed. Only then did I notice the dagger clutched in its hand. Fresh drops of blood slid from the blade, falling silently onto the wooden floor. The stranger walked to the small table beneath the window and gently laid the dagger down.

A flash of lightning tore across the sky. For the briefest instant, the room blazed with white light. I caught a glimpse of the intruder's face.

Or what little of it I could see. The hood concealed everything except a pair of lips...

smiling.

Then darkness swallowed the room once more. The figure turned...

and began walking toward Yusuf. My heart lurched.

No...

What was he doing? Why was he going to Yusuf? I fought with everything I had to move.

My fingers.

My legs.

Anything.

Nothing responded. I was trapped inside my own body.

The figure reached Yusuf's bed.

Slowly...

deliberately... it placed both hands around Yusuf's throat.

"Yusuf!" I screamed with every fragment of strength left inside me. The sound never escaped my lips.

Yusuf's body twitched weakly beneath the attack. His hands moved only slightly, his feet barely shifting against the mattress. He wasn't fighting. He couldn't. Just like me... he couldn't move. “Please...” I begged silently.

“Leave him alone...” The stranger didn't stop. Its hands tightened around Yusuf's neck.

“Yusuf!” I made one final, desperate attempt to shout, and everything went black.

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Chapter Six

The last watch of the night. The world lay exhausted in sleep, wrapped in a silence so complete it seemed frozen in time. A handkerchief covered my nose as I stood beneath the beam of my flashlight, watching the grim work unfold before me.

“How much longer?” I asked the gravediggers.

“Just a little more, sir,” one of them replied, wiping the sweat from his forehead. The irony wasn't lost on me. The night was bitterly cold, the chill creeping into the bones, yet digging up a grave in the dead of night was enough to make anyone break into a sweat.

The court had granted permission for the exhumation only that evening. Until then, the case had remained tied up in legal procedures for an entire week. The moment the order came through, I wasted no time. I gathered my team and headed straight for Naeemuddin's grave. By the time everyone assembled and we reached the cemetery, darkness had already settled over the hills.

The excavation had been going on for nearly an hour and a half.

“We’re through!” one of the gravediggers called out. The other tossed aside his shovel, and together they pulled away the wooden planks covering the grave.

The instant the coffin was exposed, a wave of putrid air burst out. Akbar, standing beside me, gagged and turned away. Hamza's eyes filled with tears.

“Step back,” I instructed the gravediggers. Then I looked at Akbar.

“Go down and collect the samples.”

“Me...?” His eyes widened.

“Yes. Get down there and do it.” There was no arguing with an order.

With obvious reluctance, he pulled a mask over his face, slipped on a pair of gloves, and climbed into the grave.

Several minutes later, he emerged carrying a small evidence pouch containing tissue samples preserved in a chemical solution. His face had gone pale. I took the bag from his trembling hands.

“Good. We’ll have these sent for DNA analysis immediately.” I handed the evidence to another officer while the gravediggers began filling the grave again.

As we walked back toward the cemetery gate, Hamza broke the silence.

“What if the DNA matches the bloodstains we found?”

“Then our suspicions become much stronger,” I replied. “It would mean your father’s death wasn’t an accident. Someone had a hand in it.” We stopped beside my vehicle.

“What about the parcel?” I asked. “Did you find it?”

He shook his head.

“No. I’ve searched everywhere I could, but there’s nothing. The house is enormous, it’s our ancestral mansion. Looking for one parcel alone... it’s like searching for a needle in a haystack.” I nodded.

“All right. I’ll come to your house in a day or two. We’ll search it together. We have to find that parcel. Without it, we’re just shooting in the dark... and we’ll never find the killer.” I opened the car door and got in.

Now all I could do... was wait for the DNA report.

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Chapter Seven

I stood motionless, my eyes fixed on the table before me.

Morning light had spilled across the room. Outside, the sky hung heavy with clouds, and a fine drizzle tapped softly against the arched windows. The air was bitterly cold. Under different circumstances, it would have been a beautiful morning.

But the shock of what had happened only moments ago had drained every trace of beauty from it.

“How is this even possible?” Yusuf murmured, still sounding dazed.

It was eight in the morning. Raindrops streaked down the windowpanes.

“How could this dagger possibly be here... when the door was bolted from the inside?” he said, stepping toward the bloodstained dagger lying on the table. He reached out to pick it up.

“Don’t!” I stopped him sharply. “Don’t touch it.”

“When I woke up this morning, I thought it had all been a nightmare.” My gaze never left the dagger. “But seeing this here proves it wasn’t. Someone really did enter this room.”

“And he strangled me,” Yusuf said quietly.

I looked at him in surprise. “You saw him too?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Then why didn’t you do anything? You didn’t even fight back.”

“I couldn’t.” His voice was grim. “Just like you said you couldn’t move... neither could I. My arms and legs simply wouldn’t respond.”

“Yusuf, listen to me carefully.” I grabbed him by the shoulders.

“What?”

“Akram brought us dinner last night. Not long after we ate it, we both ended up in that condition.” I paused. “We’re not eating anything he serves us again.”

For the first time, Yusuf seemed to agree without argument.

“But if the door was locked from the inside,” he said, “how did he get in?”

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my forehead. “In that half conscious state, I thought I saw him opening the door and walking in. But I could be wrong. I wasn’t fully aware of what was happening. There might be another way into this room.” Every possibility raced through my mind.

“But why would Akram do this?” Yusuf asked. “He was the one who brought us the food. Even if we assume he drugged us... why? If he wanted us dead, he could’ve just killed us.”

“He doesn’t want to kill us,” I said. “He wants to frighten us.”

“But why? What does he gain by scaring us?”

“That’s exactly what we need to find out.” I looked him straight in the eye. “Until then, we don’t eat or drink anything inside this hotel. If we need food, we’ll go down to the village and buy it ourselves.”

“All right.” He nodded. “Oh... I almost forgot. I brought the case files on those twelve people who disappeared after staying here.”

“And you didn’t think to give them to me sooner?” I stared at him.

“You were so excited about this adventure. I thought it’d be more fun to show you once we got here.” A guilty smile crossed his face.

“Give me the file.” My tone left no room for debate. “I intend to uncover every secret this hotel is hiding.”

Using a handkerchief, I carefully wrapped the bloodstained dagger, sealed it inside an evidence bag, and placed it securely in my backpack. By then, Yusuf had already taken out the file.

“Here.” He handed it over.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. We exchanged a quick glance.

“I’ll get it.” I slipped the file beneath my pillow and walked to the door, one hand reaching for the handle while the other rested on my pistol. I opened it just enough to see outside.

“Breakfast.” Akram stood there, holding a tray. I took it from him and was about to shut the door when he spoke.

“Did you sleep well last night?”

“Yes.” I answered without hesitation and closed the door in his face. Back inside, I placed the tray on the table.

“I hate wasting food,” I said, “but we don’t have much choice.”

“We could’ve just given it back,” Yusuf suggested.

“He would’ve become suspicious.” I sat down on the bed, opened my backpack, and pulled out a packet of naan khatai biscuits I’d packed for the journey.

For now, they’d have to do. Then I reached beneath the pillow.

It was time to read those files.

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Chapter Eight

According to the DNA report, the blood found in the basement belonged to Naeemuddin. There was no room for doubt anymore.

It had been murder.

“So you’re telling me,” I said, looking at Hamza, “that when your father died six months ago, you never noticed the bloody footprints in the basement?” For the past two days, we’d been searching his ancestral mansion. It was enormous, and despite covering room after room, we still hadn’t found the mysterious parcel.

“The basement isn’t used very often,” Hamza replied. “After my father’s death, I was in complete shock. I wasn’t paying attention to things like that. It wasn’t until I had to go down there for something later that I noticed the footprints.”

“If the killer pushed your father down the stairs,” ASP Shiraz said, “and then walked all the way to the basement with blood on his shoes, why aren’t there any footprints anywhere else? Why do they only begin inside the basement? And more

importantly...” He frowned at the evidence photographs. “Why don’t they continue on the way out?” Shiraz had joined my team only the previous week, but he already had a reputation for noticing details everyone else overlooked.

I, however, wasn't listening. My attention had drifted to the garden outside the window.

“Maybe he realized his shoes were leaving bloody prints once he got into the basement,” Hamza suggested. “He could’ve taken them off there.”

“We can’t rule that out,” Shiraz admitted. “But it still doesn’t explain the missing footprints outside. How could he have cleaned every trace so quickly?”

There was something... Something about the garden that refused to leave my mind.

“This whole situation is bizarre.” Hamza looked at me expectantly. “What do you think, Mr. Naveed?”

I ignored the question.

“What’s over there?” I asked instead, pointing through the window. Hamza followed my finger.

“That’s... a flower bed.”

“Has fresh soil been added to it recently?”

“No.”

“Then why is the ground raised?” I asked quietly. “It looks as if the earth has been disturbed.”

“Not necessarily. Sometimes the gardener shifts the soil around while trimming the plants.” For the first time, Hamza hesitated. It was a weak explanation.

“Do you have a shovel?”

“...What?”

“A shovel,” I repeated.

“No.”

“I saw one outside,” Shiraz cut in immediately, pointing toward the garden. “It’s leaning against that wall.” Hamza's face visibly darkened.

That was exactly why I liked working with Shiraz. Nothing escaped him.

“Come on.” Without another word, I left the room and headed toward the garden.

“Mr. SSP, you’re misunderstanding this,” Hamza insisted as he hurried after me. “There’s nothing there.”

“If there’s nothing there,” I asked without slowing down, “then why are you so nervous?”

“I’m not nervous.” His voice sharpened. “You’re wasting your time. Finding my father’s killer is far more important.” By then we'd reached the flower bed.

Kami was already standing there. His neck tilted unnaturally to one side. His cold, expressionless eyes were fixed on me. A familiar chill crawled down my spine.

“Dig.” I looked at Hamza.

“Me?” He pointed at himself.

“No,” I replied dryly. “Me, of course.”

“...Fine.” He lowered his head. Taking the shovel, he struck the soil.

Once.

Twice.

On the third strike, the blade hit something solid. He froze.

“Give it to me.” I took the shovel from him and cleared away the loose earth myself. Within moments, the corner of a large object appeared beneath the soil.

“I’ve got it.” Wearing gloves, Shiraz stepped forward and carefully lifted it out. It was a cardboard box. Across the top, written in faded ink, were three words.

For Naeemuddin.

Every one of us stared at it.

“Aah... aaah...” The sudden cries made us turn. Kami had clamped both hands over his ears and was screaming.

“Kami! It’s all right!” Hamza rushed toward him. “Nothing’s happened.” But Kami wouldn’t listen. Still shrieking, he turned and ran back toward the house.

“He gets like this sometimes,” Hamza said apologetically as he returned. “Please ignore him.”

“So...” I looked down at the box again. “This is the parcel?”

“I think so.” Hamza nodded. “The date on it is June 2009. It has to be the one my father mentioned.” His voice sounded emotional.

Yet for some reason... It didn't feel genuine. I pushed the thought aside.

“Let’s open it.” I slipped on a pair of gloves and carefully broke the seal. The box looked as though it had already been opened once before.

The moment I lifted the lid... All three of us froze.

My eyes met Shiraz's.

Shiraz looked at Hamza.

Then, with trembling hands, I reached inside and slowly lifted out the contents.

It was a suit.

Soaked...

in blood.

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Chapter Nine

“So every single one of them had come here with someone else. One person would disappear, while the other was always found alive, but badly injured. And those who survived either lost their sanity... or insisted that jinn (Evil Spirit) had killed their companion.” I closed the file after nearly two and a half hours of reading.

“That’s right,” Yusuf replied. I let out a slow breath and shut the folder.

“So... what now?” he asked.

“Let me think.” I rose from my chair and walked over to the window. Rain still drummed steadily against the arched panes. The mountains beyond were swallowed by thick mist, their peaks hidden beneath low-hanging clouds. As I stood there, trying to piece together my next move, something outside caught my eye.

Down in the porch, Nimmo Baba was climbing into his battered old jeep. Akram was loading supplies into the back, as though they were preparing for a trip.

“Yusuf.” My voice came out sharper than intended. He was beside me in an instant.

“What is it?”

“Nimmo Baba’s leaving. That means only Akram will be here.” I kept watching the jeep. “Find some way to keep him occupied. I’ll search the hotel.” A plan had already begun forming in my mind.

“But this place is enormous.”

“Just keep him busy.” Without waiting for another question, I hurried out of the room. I had no idea where to begin. But I knew one thing. If Yusuf was handling Akram, I wouldn’t have to worry about interruptions.

If something illegal is happening inside this hotel, I thought as I descended the staircase, the guest rooms aren’t where I’ll find it.

I need to search the places where someone could stay hidden. I crossed the lobby and stopped behind the reception desk.

Through the front windows, I caught sight of Yusuf and Akram sitting on a pair of chairs in the lawn, deep in conversation.

Perfect.

Behind the desk stood a large rack lined with dozens of keys. Room keys.... I sifted through them impatiently until one key caught my attention.

BASEMENT.

I grabbed it immediately. Now the only question was...Where was the entrance?

Scanning the lobby, I noticed a small wooden door tucked beside the staircase. I unlocked it. Beyond lay a narrow corridor. Long. Dark. Silent.

I pulled a small flashlight from my pocket and switched it on before moving forward. With every step, the sound of rain faded behind me. The gloomy daylight disappeared, swallowed by the darkness ahead. The corridor stretched on for what felt like forever.

Finally, it ended at a staircase leading underground. I descended slowly. The basement resembled an old storage room. Broken furniture, Stacks of bricks, Rusted metal sheets, Loose stones, Bundles of firewood, probably stored for winter. Nothing looked unusual.

I swept my flashlight across every corner. Nothing. Not a single thing worth noticing.

Then... Footsteps.

A cold shiver shot down my spine. Someone was coming down the stairs. The footsteps grew louder. Without thinking, my hand slipped to the pistol holstered at my waist. Every muscle in my body tensed.

The moment the footsteps reached the bottom of the stairs, I spun around and leveled my gun at the figure.

“What are you doing? It’s me!” Yusuf hissed, startled.

I exhaled in relief and lowered the pistol. He was holding the lantern.

“What kind of stunt was that?” I muttered. “And weren’t you supposed to be keeping Akram busy?”

“I did.” He grinned. “I kept him talking long enough to convince him to go into the village and buy the area’s famous dried fruit.” He lifted the lantern slightly. “He also told me Nimmo Baba has gone into the forest to cut firewood. He won’t be back before

sunset. When I found the corridor door open, I guessed you'd come down here." I nodded.

"Good." I glanced around the basement again.

"Doesn't matter. There's nothing here."

"No problem." Yusuf shrugged. "The hotel's huge. Plenty of other places left to search." He turned toward the stairs.

"Wait." He stopped.

"What?" I walked over to one wall and pressed my hand against it.

"Why is this wall wet?"

"It's raining outside. Maybe it's damp." Yusuf frowned.

"This is the basement," I replied. "Rainwater doesn't seep through underground walls like this."

He considered that. "Maybe a water pipe burst somewhere upstairs?"

I shook my head. "No."

Running my fingers over a narrow crack, I frowned.

"There's something behind this." I looked closer.

“This partition isn’t solid masonry. It’s made from compressed wooden boards.”

“You think we should break it?”

“Yes.” I slipped my flashlight back into my pocket. The lantern provided enough light. Yusuf placed it on an old wooden chair nearby, and together we began pushing against the wall. It shifted. Only slightly. But enough.

“It isn’t part of the original structure,” I said. “Someone built this later.” I found a narrow gap running down the middle.

“I need something long and sturdy. Something I can wedge in here.” Yusuf immediately began searching the storage room. While he did, I took out my flashlight again and peered through the crack. I couldn't see much.

A minute later, Yusuf returned with a rusted iron bar.

“This work?”

“It’ll do.” I forced it into the gap. Together, we pulled with all our strength. The partition groaned. Then slid backward a few inches.

We exchanged a look. Without a word, we shoved our hands into the opening and pulled again. The entire false wall lurched free. We stumbled backward as a cloud of dust exploded into the air. Both of us broke into coughing fits.

When the dust finally settled...

We stared at what had been hidden behind it. Five or six thick pipes ran through the concealed space.

And from one of them...

Water was steadily dripping.

“Seriously man! They were just water pipes.” Yusuf let out a disappointed sigh. “I told you, that dampness was from a leak.”

“No,” I murmured, my eyes fixed on the pipes. “This isn’t a leak.”

“What do you mean?”

“Look carefully.” I pointed my flashlight at the line of pipes.

“Every single one of these six pipes has a separate three-foot section joined in the middle. See these couplings on both ends?”

“Yeah... that’s normal if a pipe turns out to be too short.”

“For one pipe, maybe. Even two. But all six?” I looked at him.

“Does that honestly make sense?”

He shrugged. “Maybe they were all the same size during construction, and later they had to extend every one of them.”

I slowly shook my head. “No. Something’s hidden behind this. These pipes don’t look old. There’s no rust. No moss. In fact...”

I ran my fingers over the metal. “They look like they’re moved regularly.”

Yusuf frowned. “What exactly is going through your head?”

“You won’t believe me unless I show you.” Without another word, I began closing the valves one by one. Once the water supply was cut off, I loosened the short connecting sections.

Yusuf quickly understood what I was trying to do and helped me. Within minutes, all six middle sections had been removed.

A narrow opening, about five feet tall and three feet wide, appeared between the pipes. I reached out and pressed my palm against the wooden surface behind them.

Wood. I gave it a cautious shove. To our astonishment, it slid sideways like a door. Yusuf and I simply stared.

The wall we'd been looking at all this time.....wasn't a wall at all.

“What... is this?” Yusuf whispered, unable to hide the shock in his voice.

“I don’t know.” I pulled out my pistol and released the safety.
“But we’re going inside.”

Beyond the hidden doorway was absolute darkness. Yusuf picked up the lantern. Squeezing through the narrow gap between the pipes, we stepped inside.

The room beyond was unfinished, its floor nothing but packed earth. A foul, rotting stench hung thick in the air, and the ground beneath our feet felt strangely damp and sticky.

“Turn the lantern up,” I said quietly. “Bring it closer.” Yusuf stepped beside me and raised the lantern higher. The golden light spilled across the room.

For one frozen heartbeat, neither of us breathed. My heart slammed into my throat. A scream rose inside me... but never escaped.

We were looking at the most horrifying sight either of us had ever seen.

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Chapter Ten

“Sir, the forensic report on the bloodstained clothes is here.”

Shiraz stood before my desk while Hamza sat opposite me, trembling uncontrollably. My face remained expressionless, but every nerve in my body was stretched taut. “The blood belongs to the two people who disappeared a few years ago. Their families reported them missing, but they were never found.”

“So they aren’t missing anymore.” I lifted one corner of the blood soaked garment with an evidence stick. “They’re dead.”

“They were murdered,” Shiraz corrected.

I let out a quiet breath. “This case is becoming far more dangerous than I expected. From this point on, we examine everything, no matter how insignificant it seems. There has to be something that tells us who entered that house... and who killed Naeemuddin.”

“Are there any CCTV cameras installed in the house?” Turning to Hamza, I asked.

Before he could answer, Shiraz spoke. “There is one. It’s mounted above the staircase leading from the main hall.”

Both Hamza and I looked at him.

“What?” Hamza blurted out. “No! There’s absolutely no camera in my house.”

“There is,” Shiraz replied confidently. “I noticed it the day we visited. It’s hidden between the light fixtures, positioned so well that most people would never see it.” He gave a faint smile. “But I did. Detective’s eyes.” That much was true. Shiraz noticed details most people walked past without a second glance.

“Then why didn’t you tell me that day?” I asked.

“We were focused on other evidence. It slipped my mind.” His answer sounded slightly embarrassed.

“I’m telling you,” Hamza insisted, his voice rising, “there is no camera in my house.” The anger on his face caught both of our attention.

“It could have been installed by your father,” I said calmly.

“Maybe he no longer felt safe. Since you lived in another city, he might never have told you.”

“But there’s no recording system anywhere in the house,” Hamza argued. “What’s the point of a camera without one?”

“There doesn’t have to be one,” Shiraz explained. “Many modern cameras record directly onto a memory card. Remove the card, insert it into a laptop, and you’ve got all the footage.”

“Fine.” I immediately picked up the intercom.

“Akbar. Assemble a team and head to Naeemuddin’s house immediately. Shiraz will be leading the operation. I’ll brief him on the way.” After putting the receiver down, I looked back at Hamza.

“Please wait in the lobby. You’ll accompany the team.” He reluctantly got to his feet and left the office. The moment the door closed behind him, I looked at Shiraz.

“Lock the door.” He did as instructed before returning to my desk.

“You’re going with Akbar,” I said quietly. “Bring back that memory card at any cost.” I lowered my voice even further. “I don’t trust Hamza.”

“You suspect him?” Shiraz asked.

“Shouldn’t I?” He thought for a moment before nodding.

“Honestly... yes. I’ve started doubting him too. Especially when you wanted to dig up the flower bed. The look on his face said everything. And now he’s insisting there isn’t even a CCTV camera in the house.”

“Twice,” I said thoughtfully, “that boy, Kami, tried to come to me, screaming and trying to say something. And both times Hamza rushed in and dismissed him, claiming he wasn’t mentally stable.”

“So you think he’s hiding something?”

“I think...” I paused, making sure no one could overhear us. “I think Hamza murdered Naeemuddin.”

Shiraz stared at me in disbelief. “But... why would he kill his own father?”

“For the same reason people have killed their own blood for centuries.” I leaned back in my chair. “Money. Property. That mansion alone is worth millions.”

“Let’s assume you’re right,” Shiraz said. “Then why would he come to the police himself? The case had already been closed as an accident. Why reopen it?”

“Because that’s exactly what some criminals do.” I folded my hands together.

“They involve the police themselves to remove suspicion. As long as they’re seen cooperating, no one thinks to look at them.” Shiraz remained unconvinced.

“But there’s still one problem. Nobody even suspected it was murder. If the case had stayed closed, Hamza would’ve been safe. Why risk reopening it?”

“There are possibilities.” I considered each one carefully before answering. “Maybe he hired someone to kill his father. And now that person is blackmailing him... demanding more money. If that’s the case, reopening the investigation himself would help establish him as the grieving son before anything surfaced.” Shiraz slowly nodded.

“That... actually makes sense.” He turned toward the door.

“I’ll retrieve the CCTV memory card. Once we see the footage, we’ll know where we stand.”

“And one more thing.” He stopped and looked back.

“Talk to Kami.” I met his eyes.

“I have a feeling that boy knows far more than he’s able to say. If Hamza is involved, then Kami is probably terrified of him.”

“I’ll find out.” He nodded once before leaving the office. As the door closed behind him, I switched on my computer.

There was one thing I needed to know before anything else.

Where had Hamza been... in June 2009?

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Chapter Eleven

What we had just witnessed.....was the most horrifying sight of our lives.

“Yusuf!” I shouted, my voice cracking. “Get out! Move!” We stumbled backward and bolted out of the hidden room.

“We should seal the entrance,” Yusuf gasped once we reached the basement.

“We don’t have time.” I shook my head, breathing hard.

“Whoever built that place will know we’ve discovered it. We shut off all the water valves. The moment they realize there’s no water running through the pipes, they’ll come here.”

I looked him straight in the eyes. “Our only priority now... is staying alive.”

“You’re right.” We were so shaken that we fled the hotel without even collecting our luggage. The moment we stepped outside, the sky made our hearts sink.

The clouds had turned almost black, swirling violently above the mountains. Lightning ripped across the heavens with terrifying

intensity, each flash followed by thunder powerful enough to shake the earth.

A storm was coming.

“What do we do now?” Yusuf asked anxiously.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But we have to get out of here.”

“How?” he shouted over the howling wind. “We don’t even have a vehicle! We can’t make it all the way down to the town in weather like this.” Neither of us was thinking clearly anymore.

The thunder, the wind, the nightmare we'd just escaped...

Everything had shattered our composure.

“I’d rather die in the storm than stay here,” I said through clenched teeth. Yusuf gave me a bitter look.

“I thought you wanted to catch the criminals.” His words made me stop. I turned, grabbed him firmly by the shoulders, and forced him to look at me.

“Listen to me.” My voice softened.

“You’re my friend... my brother. I don’t care what happens to me. But I won't let anything happen to you. Your mother is

waiting for you. Your children are waiting for you to come home.” I took a slow breath.

“After what we just saw, you and I can’t handle this alone. We need an entire team.” I paused. “And right now, the greatest blessing we have is that we’re still alive.”

Yusuf lowered his head. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I lost my temper. I can’t think straight.”

“It’s alright.” I managed a faint smile. “That’s what friends are for.”

After a moment, he pointed down the mountain road.

“Let’s head toward the town. Maybe someone will give us a ride. My uncle lives there, we can stay at his place tonight.” I nodded.

Nimmo Baba wasn't at the hotel. Akram probably hadn't returned either. Judging by the weather, he'd most likely stayed in town. For the moment, our escape seemed possible.

But we were wrong.

We hadn't even covered a few kilometers before the storm became almost impossible to fight. The wind roared through the

mountains with enough force to uproot trees. The rain came down in relentless sheets, turning the already slippery road into a river of mud. Dark clouds swallowed the daylight until it felt like night. Visibility dropped to almost nothing.

“We can’t keep going,” Yusuf said, finally stopping. Rain streamed down his face as both of us stood soaked to the bone, shivering violently in the freezing cold.

“We can’t stay here either.” The words had barely left my mouth when thunder exploded overhead.

At that exact moment, headlights pierced through the rain.

“A vehicle!” I stepped into the road and raised my hand.

The driver slowed. A jeep rolled to a stop beside us. The window slid down.

The moment I recognized the man behind the wheel, the little courage I had left vanished.

“N... Nimmo Baba?” He smiled pleasantly.

“Oh? Where are you two headed in weather like this?”

Yusuf looked at me. I looked back at him. Before either of us could answer, a towering tree nearby groaned violently before crashing into the ravine below. We instinctively stumbled backward.

“The storm’s only getting worse,” Nimmo Baba said calmly. “I turned back because traveling any farther would be dangerous.” He studied our soaked faces. “So...Where were you going?”

“We...” Yusuf answered carefully, “...were heading to town. I wanted to visit my uncle.”

“I would’ve taken you there myself,” Nimmo Baba said, “but there have already been two landslides ahead. The road is completely blocked.” Yusuf glanced at me.

“But we really need to go.”

“I won’t stop you,” the old man replied. “Just know that standing out here is far more dangerous.”

“We should go with him.” I leaned closer to Yusuf and lowered my voice. “I’m armed.” I discreetly touched the pistol hidden beneath my jacket.

“If anything happens, we’ll deal with it. But for tonight... We don’t have another choice.” He reluctantly nodded.

“Alright,” he said aloud. “We’ll come back.”

“Good.” Nimmo Baba's smile widened as he opened the jeep door.

“Get in.” Yusuf climbed into the back. I took the passenger seat. The jeep slowly turned around and began making its way back toward the hotel. Rain hammered against the windshield so fiercely that the wipers struggled to keep up.

I leaned back against my seat and closed my eyes. Behind me, Yusuf sat with his head buried in his hands. Neither of us had the strength to speak. What we'd seen that afternoon had pushed our minds to the edge.

I closed my eyes, hoping for a moment of peace.

Instead...

That hidden room returned. The dead. Standing upright. Some were nothing more than skeletons. Others still had patches of rotting flesh clinging to their bones, crawling with maggots.

There were twelve of them.

Every corpse was still wearing the clothes they had died in... As though they had been murdered, and then carefully arranged inside that room.

My eyes flew open. That image would haunt me for years. Yet despite everything, We were heading straight back to that house.

And perhaps...

It was the greatest mistake of our lives.

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Chapter Twelve

The room was silent except for the faint hum of the computer. Only five of us were present, me, Shiraz, Akbar, Hamza, and Kami.

The forensic team had extracted every video stored on the memory card recovered from the hidden CCTV camera. After reviewing months of footage, Akbar had finally called us in.

“Play it,” I ordered.

The recording began.

3 June 2009

Naeemuddin was sweeping the hall while Kami sat quietly nearby. Everything appeared perfectly ordinary. Until Hamza suddenly pointed at the screen.

“Someone’s standing by the window!” he exclaimed. Without taking my eyes off the monitor, I replied calmly, “We can see him, Hamza.”

A tall shadow like figure stood outside the hall window. The moment Naeemuddin turned his head, the figure immediately stepped back out of sight.

The recording ended.

“Next one,” I said.

4 June 2009

The same black clad figure wandered through the hall as if he owned the place. His face remained hidden, making identification impossible.

“Play the fifth of June,” I instructed. The next recording began.

Naeemuddin was once again sweeping the staircase when the doorbell rang. He hurried outside to answer it. The instant he disappeared, the black, clothed figure emerged from hiding.

Kami was busy collecting teacups from the table, completely unaware of the danger approaching him.

The stranger walked behind him. Then suddenly plunged a syringe into the back of Kami's neck. Kami collapsed to the floor, his body convulsing violently. Without hesitation, the masked man grabbed him and dragged him into another room. A

few moments later, Naeemuddin returned carrying a parcel. He took it into one of the rooms before stepping back into the hall.

The black, clad figure reappeared. He calmly poured a thick, oily liquid across the staircase. At that exact moment, Naeemuddin noticed him. He immediately ran after the intruder. The stranger sprinted upstairs.

Naeemuddin followed...

His foot slipped. He tumbled down the staircase, striking the floor with horrifying force. No one in the room spoke except Kami. The footage continued.

The killer slowly descended the stairs, walked straight through Naeemuddin's blood, and disappeared into the basement. Several minutes later, he returned.

This time, he wasn't wearing the blood, soaked shoes anymore. Instead, he was carrying cleaning supplies. With astonishing patience, he wiped away every bloody footprint outside the basement. He cleaned the oily substance from the stairs as well, But deliberately left Naeemuddin's blood where it was.

Once he was satisfied, he picked up his shoes and calmly walked out of the house.

Throughout the recording, Kami had begun screaming uncontrollably, clutching both hands over his ears. The video finally ended.

Hamza shot to his feet, his voice trembling with emotion. “You saw that! I told you someone murdered my father!”

I stood up slowly and walked toward him. Placing a hand on his shoulder, I smiled faintly.

“Yes...” I said quietly. “And the good news is... we’ve found the murderer.” His eyes widened.

“Really? Who is it?” Before he could react, I twisted his arm behind his back and pressed my pistol against the back of his head.

“You,” I said coldly. “You’re the murderer.” Hamza's face turned white.

“What nonsense are you talking about? Why would I kill my own father?” he shouted, struggling against my grip.

Shiraz stepped forward. “That’s exactly what you’re going to tell us.”

Kami continued screaming in the background.

“I didn’t do anything, SSP! You’re making a terrible mistake!”

Hamza yelled. Akbar looked at him sternly.

“You were in this city on the morning of 5 June.”

“That’s a lie! I wasn’t there!” I tightened my grip on his arm.

“A bus ticket was booked in your name for that exact day,”

Akbar continued.

Hamza shook his head frantically. “Yes, I booked it... but I never travelled!”

“So you admit buying the ticket.” Akbar smiled.

“I haven’t admitted anything!” The next instant, Akbar slapped him across the face so hard that his head snapped sideways.

Ignoring Hamza's protests, I turned toward Kami.

“Kami... did you see the killer?” Kami nodded frantically.

“Then point to him.”

“Yes, Kami... tell them who the real murderer is.” Hamza forced a nervous smile.

Kami's trembling hand slowly rose into the air. His lips quivered as broken sounds escaped his throat.

“Th... th... there...” Then his finger stopped... Pointing directly at Hamza.

For a brief second, the room fell completely silent. That was all the confirmation I needed.

“Arrest him.” Without taking my eyes off Hamza, I gave the order. Akbar and Shiraz immediately seized him from both sides as Hamza struggled wildly.

“This is all a lie! You’ve misunderstood everything!” he screamed.

No one listened.

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Chapter Thirteen

We got out in front of the hotel, where Akram came running toward us with an umbrella.

“Were you inside the whole time?” I asked, surprised.

“I arrived just as you were leaving the hotel,” he explained. “I even called out to both of you, but I suppose the thunder drowned out my voice.”

Keeping my lips pressed together, I walked inside without another word. Logs crackled in the fireplace, making the lobby pleasantly warm compared to the freezing storm outside. For a brief moment, the warmth eased my nerves...

But the fear never truly left.

“Go change into dry clothes,” Nimmo Baba said. “You can leave for the town tomorrow. By then, Akram will have dinner ready.”

“Alright.” I grabbed Yusuf by the arm and hurried upstairs. The moment we entered our room, I slammed the door shut and locked it from the inside.

Turning toward him, I said firmly, “We only have to survive tonight. Whatever happens, we are not eating or drinking anything here.”

“Okay...” he replied with a weak nod. Something about him looked terribly wrong.

“What’s happened to you?” I asked, moving closer. “Are you alright?”

“I... I don’t know.” He was shivering violently. I placed the back of my hand against his forehead. It was burning.

“You’ve caught a cold. Your fever’s getting worse.” His face had already turned crimson.

“I-I’m fine...” he insisted, though even his voice had grown heavy.

“Change your clothes immediately.” While Yusuf headed toward the bathroom, I searched through the luggage we'd left behind earlier, looking for a towel.

Then my heart skipped a beat.

The bloodstained dagger, I'd left it inside this very bag.

It was gone. I emptied the entire bag onto the floor, searching frantically.

Nothing.

From the bathroom, Yusuf called out, “Did something happen?”

Without looking up, I replied, “No... nothing. I was just looking for something. Here, take this towel.” I didn't want to worry him. A few minutes later, we had both changed into dry clothes and sat silently inside the room while the rain continued pounding against the windows. We hadn't opened the door even once.

Akram still hadn't brought dinner. Water had started running through the bathroom pipes again. Someone had reopened the water supply...

And God only knew what would happen next. Yusuf's condition was deteriorating rapidly.

“You need to eat something.” Looking at him, I said softly.

“No. I’m not eating anything in this place.” He shook his head.

I thought for a moment before replying, “Fine. I’ll make you some soup myself. Just come downstairs with me so I can keep an eye on you.”

Supporting his weakened body, I helped him downstairs and seated him on one of the sofas in the hall. The kitchen was directly across from us. Seeing us, Nimmo Baba smiled.

“Why did you come down, son? We were just bringing your food.” I forced a smile.

“Yusuf isn’t feeling well. He’ll only drink soup if I make it myself. Would you mind letting me use the kitchen?” It was a lie.

“Of course. Go ahead.” He even sent Akram with me to show me where everything was. The moment we entered the kitchen, Akram lowered his voice.

“You shouldn’t have come here.” His tone irritated me. Ignoring him, I pulled out a pot, opened the refrigerator, and began chopping vegetables.

Every few seconds, I glanced toward Yusuf. He sat on the sofa outside, his head drooping as sleep overtook him. Nimmo Baba remained seated nearby.

“Why do you keep saying that?” Without looking at Akram, I finally asked, His expression turned pale.

“Because... they live here.” My knife froze in midair.

“Who?”

“They demand human sacrifices. They demand blood.” His frightened voice became barely audible.

“Who are ‘they’?” I stared at him.

His lips trembled. “Baal... They’re jinn...”

At that exact moment... The electricity went out. The entire hotel plunged into darkness. I instinctively reached into my pocket for my flashlight. Then remembered I'd left it upstairs.

Immediately I shouted,

“Yusuf! Are you still there? Someone get some light!” I wasn't worried about myself. I was worried about Yusuf.

No answer. My heartbeat quickened.

“Yusuf! Are you there?” Still...Nothing.

A terrible feeling settled inside my chest. Stumbling blindly through the darkness, I made my way toward where he'd been sitting. Just then...

A lantern flared to life. Its dim glow illuminated the hall.

“Yusuf!” He was slumped motionless on the sofa. I dropped to my knees in front of him. Grabbing his shoulders, I shook him desperately.

“Yusuf! Are you alright? Yusuf! Answer me! Why aren't you saying anything?” His body didn't respond. It felt... Empty.

“YUSUF!”

I looked up at Akram and Nimmo Baba, who stood watching me with strange, unreadable expressions.

“What's happened to him?” I shouted. “Tell me!”

“They took him... They took him... Baal has taken him...”

Instead of answering, both of them began murmuring in eerie unison.

“What nonsense are you talking about? Who took him?” My voice cracked. Ignoring me, they continued chanting.

I grabbed Yusuf once more. “Yusuf... please... answer me...” I shook him harder. His entire body suddenly rolled limply to one side. Everything inside me froze.

“They’ve taken him... They’ve taken the Thirteenth Guest...” Behind me, the chanting continued.

My trembling fingers found his neck. I searched for a pulse.

One minute...Two minutes...Nothing.

No heartbeat.

“No...” My head began shaking on its own.

“No... this can’t be happening...” The word escaped my lips like a whisper.

Then I screamed.

“YUSUF!” The sound echoed through every corner of the hotel. Tears blurred my vision.

“Yusuf... my brother... Yusuf!” I kept crying. Kept screaming.

“They’ve taken him... They’ve taken the Thirteenth Guest...”

Behind me, their voices never stopped.

“Get up... You can’t die... Your mother is waiting for you...” I clutched Yusuf’s lifeless body. I broke down completely.

My best friend...My brother...Yusuf...

Had died silently on that storm-ridden night.

“They’ve taken him...” The chanting continued.

Something inside me snapped. I surged to my feet and drove my fist straight into Nimmo Baba’s face. He stumbled backward. I grabbed him by the collar and yanked him close.

“What did you do to my brother?” I roared.

His terrified eyes met mine. “I did nothing... They did... They took him...”

“You’re not telling me the truth.” I released him. Without another word, I sprinted upstairs. I snatched my pistol from the table, loaded it, and rushed back downstairs.

It was...

The biggest mistake of my life.

The hall was empty. Nimmo Baba was gone.

Akram was gone. Even Yusuf's body had disappeared. Only I remained, standing beside the flickering lantern.

“Yusuf!” I shouted, searching every corner of the hall.

Nothing.

I ran outside through the main entrance. There was no one. Nowhere. Clutching my hair with both hands, I whispered hysterically,

“No... they can't take him... They can't...” Slapping my own face in desperation, I muttered,

“I'm taking you out of here... I won't leave you behind...” Rain crashed down from the heavens. Without thinking, I grabbed the lantern and ran toward the basement like a madman. When I reached the same hidden wall we'd uncovered that morning...

It had been sealed shut again. Someone had come after we left.

But fear meant nothing anymore. I only wanted Yusuf back.

Summoning every ounce of strength I possessed, I forced the wall aside. I had no idea where that strength came from. One by one, I shut every valve. Then I removed every pipe joint until

the hidden passage reopened. I shoved the secret door aside and stepped inside with the lantern.

My breath caught.

The room...

The room that had been filled with rotting corpses only hours earlier...

Was empty. No bodies. No skeletons. No unbearable stench of decay. Nothing. I staggered backward.

“No... That’s impossible... No...” It felt as though my mind was breaking apart. Tears streamed down my face.

“Yusuf... I can’t leave you here...” Then...

My eyes landed on the wall ahead. Strange symbols had been carved into the stone. Beside them...

A message.

I rushed forward and raised the lantern. The words came into focus.

“Every year, we require the blood of one guest. This time... the Thirteenth Guest was your friend.”

~Baal

My knees gave way.

“NO... YUSUF!” I screamed with everything I had. The thunder answered.

“YUSUF!” Once more... Even louder...

The heavens roared above me as I collapsed to my knees, utterly broken.

Chapter Fourteen

I slipped outside, but there was no one there. Neither Nimmo Baba nor Akram. The main door stood wide open. The rain and the storm had passed. The morning sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky. I had spent the entire night sitting in that basement, weeping. Seeing the front door open, I stepped outside. The porch was deserted. Crossing it, I reached the road. Then I walked for hours until I arrived at the nearby town. Only a madman would cover such a long distance on foot.

Yes...

I truly had gone mad. The town was bustling with people.

“Stop! Please help me! My friend is dead... They killed my friend! They’ve hidden his body. Somebody call the police...

My friend... my brother... he’s trapped in there!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, begging for help. No one stepped forward. They simply gathered around me, staring with pity, yet saying nothing.

“Why won’t any of you do something? Help me!” I shouted again.

“I think he’s insane.”

“I heard he was staying at that haunted hotel.”

“We warned these fools not to go there. But they never listen. This has happened so many times before.” Voices rose one after another from the crowd. Not a single person came to my aid. I dropped to my knees, clutching my hair and sobbing helplessly. I had never felt so utterly powerless.

“The jinn must’ve taken his friend and spared him, just like the others. Now he’s lost his mind too,” someone muttered. I shot to my feet, grabbed the man by his collar, and shook him violently.

“There are no jinn in there! My friend is inside! They murdered him!” I was screaming uncontrollably.

“Call the police!”

“He’s crazy! He’ll kill someone!” Someone finally called the police. Everything that followed felt as though it were happening in slow motion.

The police arrived and took me into custody. Since I was an FIA officer, they at least agreed to hear me out. But the expressions on their faces made it painfully obvious, they didn't believe a

word I said. They believed the old stories about jinn. They accompanied me back to the hotel. They found no body. Nothing that could prove my story. The room where Yusuf and I had stayed was spotless. There was nothing.

The case was closed. But I refused to give up. My department granted me leave due to severe psychological trauma and emotional distress.

Whenever I visited Yusuf's mother, she would ask about him...

And I could never answer. Eventually, I made a promise to myself. I would avenge my friend.

It was the evening of June 2009. I put on the special black outfit I always wore during covert operations. After packing all my surveillance equipment and weapons into a small backpack, I silently approached the rear of the hotel, careful not to make a sound. The very first thing I did was cut every electrical wire supplying the building. The hotel was swallowed by darkness. Using the cover of the blackout, I entered through the kitchen door that opened into the garden. From there, I slipped into the small storage room beneath the staircase and hid.

Exactly as I'd expected, Nimmo Baba and Akram were standing in the main hall.

“I’ve buried that boy named Yusuf along with all the other bodies in the garden,” Nimmo Baba said calmly. “Thank goodness we managed to finish before the police arrived. Otherwise, they would’ve had us arrested.” The same Nimmo Baba who always walked with a hunched back...

The same crippled old man...

Was now standing perfectly upright. Akram sat nearby, laughing without a trace of fear.

“We have already offered the blood of thirteen people to Baal. Now he demands the blood of eight more. We must do it as soon as possible. Once we fulfill his demand, Baal will lead us to the treasure that will make us powerful enough to conquer this land.” Akram's words made me shut my eyes tightly, forcing myself to stay calm.

“It is essential that Baal remains pleased,” Nimmo said.

“If we’d killed the people who came with the victims as well, we’d have reached the required number long ago,” Akram said bitterly.

“And if we had done that,” Nimmo replied, “who would’ve spread the stories throughout the town that this hotel is haunted? Everyone who came here left believing it was the work of evil spirits. Those so called ‘Thirteenth Guests’ were simply a little too clever.”

“Though, between you and me...” Akram chuckled, “...Baal is a jinn after all.” The two of them burst into laughter. I wanted nothing more than to wipe those smiles off their faces. But this wasn't the time. I had to wait.

“You handled the situation wisely,” Akram continued.

“Otherwise, killing Yusuf would’ve been very difficult.”

“It wasn’t just my brains,” Nimmo replied proudly. “It was your quick reflexes too. If you hadn’t plunged that syringe into his neck, he wouldn’t have died.”

“And you were the one who brought me the syringe.” I couldn't bear another second of their conversation. Taking advantage of

the darkness, I needed to find a place where I could hide. The cramped little loft like room had only a tiny oil lamp fixed to one of its walls. I reached out and grabbed it, wondering if it could still be lit. The moment I touched it, something happened that completely stunned me. The wall against which I had been leaning silently slid aside. Frozen in disbelief, I stepped forward. It wasn't a wall at all. It was a sliding door. Its paint and finish had been crafted so perfectly that, at first glance, it looked exactly like the surrounding wall.

I switched on my flashlight and stepped inside. The instant I entered, the door slid shut behind me on its own. Sweeping the beam around the darkness, I discovered an incredibly narrow spiral staircase leading upward. I started climbing. With every step, I found myself admiring the ingenuity of whoever had designed this hotel. At the top stood a heavy wooden door. I tried to push it open.

Locked.

I pulled my lock picking kit from my backpack, and within a few minutes, the lock clicked open. I slowly pushed the door

aside, and stepped through. That was the moment everything finally made sense.

The door I had just unlocked, was actually the wall of the very room where Yusuf and I had stayed.

I turned around and slid the hidden door back into place. Once it was closed, there wasn't the slightest indication that a secret passage existed behind that wall.

“So that’s how he entered that night...” I remembered our very first night in that room. He must have drugged us. That had to be why our minds and bodies were so heavily paralyzed that night. We had been unable to understand where he'd entered from. He wanted us to believe that the hotel was haunted.

The memory of Yusuf made my eyes sting with tears. I blinked them away and pulled a folded sheet of paper from my backpack. It contained everything I'd managed to gather about Baal before coming here.

According to ancient legends, Baal had once been worshipped as a deity. People prayed to him and sought his blessings. In return, they offered him gifts of gold and silver. But then, according to

the stories, something changed. Malevolent jinn attached themselves to the idol. Soon, Baal began demanding human blood instead of offerings. The people became convinced that if they failed to satisfy the idol's demands, divine wrath would fall upon them. So they began sacrificing human beings. And in return...

The legends claimed...

Baal rewarded them with unimaginable wealth. Now, I had no idea how much truth there was in those legends. But one thing in that article struck me as undeniably real.

Even today, there are fanatics who believe in the idol of Baal, and they offer human sacrifices to appease him. Similar psychopathic cult cases have been uncovered in several countries around the world. Such people believe that pleasing their deity will earn them unimaginable wealth, power, and prosperity. By now, I was convinced that Nimmo was one of those fanatics. He was the one who had spread the rumors that this place was haunted, ensuring that no one would interfere with what he was doing. Taking a deep breath, I pulled out the CCTV camera I had brought with me.

I knew perfectly well that no one else would be coming into my room. After placing my equipment neatly in one corner, I tried opening the door. It was locked from the outside. That meant the secret passage was now my only way in and out. Using the hidden corridor, I quietly made my way into the main hall. First, I made absolutely sure that both of them had gone to sleep. Then I placed one foot on the banister and carefully climbed onto it. Using a strong industrial adhesive, I mounted the camera high on the wall, right among the small decorative lights near the ceiling. My job was done.

Before leaving, I glanced toward the garden. Yusuf was buried there.

“I’ll bring you out of here soon, Yusuf,” I whispered, making him a silent promise. Afterward, I restored the power by reconnecting the electrical wires and returned to my room. The camera had been positioned so cleverly that it couldn't capture me entering or leaving through the secret passage.

Now...

I could keep an eye on those two monsters. On the morning of June 3rd, I was quietly surveying the hotel. Akram and Nimmo,

completely unaware of my presence, were in the main hall. I needed to inspect every inch of the garden so I could eventually recover Yusuf's body. I was examining one of the flowerbeds when I suddenly heard Nimmo Baba's voice. I immediately slipped behind a nearby wall.

“Hamza! Why can't you understand? I can't transfer the property into your name yet. You know we still owe Baal much more.” He was speaking on the phone.

Hamza...? At that time, I had no idea who Hamza was.

The person on the other end said something that instantly enraged Naimuddin, better known as Nimmo Baba.

“How dare you speak about Baal like that?” he snapped. “You know he'll soon reward us with wealth far beyond our imagination. You stood beside me during every single killing before. What's happened to you now?”

So...

It wasn't just the two of them. There was a third accomplice. Someone named Hamza. He was involved in the murders too.

“Take all the wealth you want after I die,” Nimmo barked angrily.

Die? I couldn't help smiling sarcastically. Funny...

A man like him actually believed death would spare him.

“Fine,” he said at last. “Come here on the fifth of June, and we’ll settle everything then.” He ended the call and walked back inside. That meant I had to make my move, before June 5th.

I slowly approached the arched window and peered inside.

Through the glass, I could see Naeemuddin, better known as Nimmo Baba, sweeping the hall while Akram sat nearby. The moment Nimmo Baba sensed someone's presence, I

immediately stepped away from the window. I wanted him to become consumed by fear. I wanted to kill him the same way he had killed everyone else. That entire night, I tormented him in every way I could. Sometimes I'd dash past his room.

Sometimes I'd knock something over behind him before disappearing into the darkness. Sometimes I'd call out his name from a distant room. By dawn, he was convinced that someone was hunting him. The mansion was enormous, and by then I had discovered most of its secret passages.

Turning Nimmo's own tricks against him was, satisfying. He was thoroughly terrified. That morning, he even made a phone call, telling someone he felt as though he was being followed.

On the morning of June 4th, Naeemuddin left for the forest to collect firewood. Whenever he went there, he wouldn't return until nightfall.

After what had happened the previous night, he was visibly shaken. He had frightened Akram as well, so Akram accompanied him into the forest. That made my job much easier.

First, I deliberately wandered around the hall, making sure I appeared on the CCTV camera. I did it intentionally.

If not today, then tomorrow, when that third man, Hamza, returned, he'd surely realize someone else had orchestrated all of this. Then...I'd make sure all the blame landed on him. I wasn't planning to spare anyone.

I'd already identified the patch of freshly turned soil where the garden had been disturbed. Ignoring that spot, I dug somewhere else. There... I found the same bodies we'd seen hidden beneath the basement. I removed the bloodstained clothes from two of

the corpses, carefully packed them into a parcel, and paid a local boy a few rupees to deliver it.

The following day, June 5th, the boy delivered the package. I had instructed him to keep Nimmo Baba occupied for at least ten minutes while handing it over. That was all the time I needed. I went straight to Akram, and drove a syringe into his neck. The very same way, he had murdered my Yusuf.

Akram, better known as Kami, collapsed to the floor, convulsing violently. He wasn't meant to die. The substance inside that syringe would rob him of his ability to speak... think... or reason. That was his punishment. Dragging him across the floor, I hauled him into a nearby room.

From the window, I saw Nimmo Baba closing the front door as he came back inside. I stayed hidden. A moment later, he disappeared into his room. Now he'd open the parcel...

And for the next few minutes...

He'd be trapped between shock and disbelief. That was all the opportunity I needed. From my bag of surveillance equipment, I took out a special chemical. It couldn't be detected by any

forensic examination. No postmortem. No laboratory test. Nothing.

I spread the substance across the staircase, then stepped back. I watched as Naeemuddin frantically typed a message to someone. Before he could finish, I deliberately made a noise. He rushed out immediately.

“You?” He stared at me in astonishment.

“Yes... me. Your game ends today, Naeemuddin.” The moment I spoke, I sprinted upstairs, knowing he'd chase me.

Just as I'd planned. He came running after me. Halfway up the staircase, his foot slipped. He lost his balance. Tumbled backward. And struck his head against the steps. Exactly as I had calculated. He died instantly. I deliberately walked through his blood and went down into the basement. From there, I collected cleaning supplies. I had plenty of time. I wiped away only the bloodstains that would have been immediately obvious. I wanted this whole affair to remain sensational. I wanted his son to spend days living in terror, wondering who had murdered his father. Exactly the same terror his father had inflicted upon every guest who came to that hotel.

Afterward, I carefully cleaned the slippery chemical from the staircase as well, making sure investigators wouldn't notice it during the initial inspection. Then I went outside. Using a shovel, I began digging the small flowerbed in the garden. It took every ounce of courage I had. My hands trembled. Tears streamed uncontrollably down my face.

Finally, After several moments...

I saw Yusuf's body. It hadn't decomposed much. I lifted him out gently. Rested his head in my lap, ran my hand across his closed eyes, and whispered,

“Forgive me, my friend.” Then I lowered my forehead onto his, and broke down completely. I cried for a long time. When I finally regained my composure, I wrapped his body in a white sheet. I took the same parcel that had been delivered inside the mansion, brought it outside, buried it in the flowerbed, and covered it carefully. I wanted the mystery to grow even deeper.

Then I carried Yusuf's body, collected all my equipment, loaded everything into my jeep, which I'd hidden in the forest behind the mansion, and drove back to the city.

When I reached the city, I showed Yusuf's body to his mother. I made her promise, that she would never tell anyone the truth. I knew that if I'd left his body at the mansion, then once Hamza was arrested, Yusuf's would have been the most recent corpse. His body would've been subjected to a postmortem. I couldn't bear the thought of him suffering even that indignity after death. So, I quietly offered his funeral prayer. And laid my friend to rest. I had avenged him.

And...

I had fulfilled the duty of friendship.

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Chapter Fifteen

“I avenged my friend. I fulfilled the duty of friendship.” I said with a smile as I finished telling Hamza the entire story.

“You... you can’t do this... You’re lying!” he looked at me in utter disbelief.

“It’s the truth. Every single word of it,” I laughed. “I thought you’d figure out much sooner that your father had been murdered. But you disappointed me. It took you six whole months.”

“No... it’s all lies! How could you do something like this?”

“Then, the first time I came to your hotel, your father’s mansion, to investigate, I saw Akram... or rather, Kami. He recognized me, even though he shouldn’t have. That’s why I came back again. The way he looked at me made it obvious he remembered me. I deliberately suggested digging up the flower beds so I’d see fear on your face, and so everyone else would see it too. Because you knew there were bodies buried in that garden. For you, allowing those flower beds to be dug up was dangerous. I wanted every suspicion to fall on you, and it did.” I smiled. “The

final nail in the coffin was Akram's testimony. He was actually pointing at me, but since you were standing right in front of me, and everyone already suspected you, they all assumed he was pointing at you."

"Lies... they're all lies!" he screamed as he grabbed the pistol I had intentionally left on the table and lunged at me. He fired the first shot. I leapt aside.

"Help! Somebody help me!" I shouted at the top of my lungs on purpose, making sure everyone outside would hear me and witness him attacking me. He aimed the pistol at me again. At that exact moment, I seized his wrist. The rest of the staff had already rushed into the room.

Now I had witnesses.

It was an enormous risk. But I had to do it.

His finger was still on the trigger, and I was gripping the same hand to stop him. Then I twisted his wrist and turned the gun toward his own chest. My back was facing the people entering the room, so none of them could see that I had redirected the pistol.

“Your game is over,” I whispered. Then I pressed down on the finger resting on the trigger.

The gun fired. The next instant, both of us were thrown apart, collapsing in opposite directions.

I could see the staff rushing toward us.

Blood was pouring from Hamza's chest.

His body writhed like a fish out of water, and then became completely still.

The officers helped me to my feet. They all believed I had shot Hamza in self-defense.

After all, I had never intended to kill him,

Or so they believed.

Besides, Shiraz had already gone to supervise the excavation of the flower beds out of suspicion. By now, he had surely found the other bodies.

And me? I stood absolved of everything. No one suspected me.

THE END

EPILOGUE

His wounds had not healed completely.

The bandages were gone, but some scars were never meant to disappear. Still...

The world never pauses for anyone. Not for grief. Not for regret. Not even for those who have buried a part of themselves.

Life goes on, until the very last breath.

Naveed hurried through his breakfast while buttoning the cuff of his shirt. His office bag rested by the door, his car keys lay on the table, and his phone had already rung twice.

Another ordinary morning. Or so he believed.

As he reached for the keys, his eyes accidentally fell upon the newspaper lying on the dining table. He rarely read newspapers. They were little more than decoration in the house. But today's headline caught his attention.

OFFICE EMPLOYEE GOES MISSING INSIDE A COMMERCIAL BUILDING

His hand froze. Missing persons. There was nothing unusual about that. He had investigated dozens of such cases.

But...

The next line made him read further. CCTV footage confirms the man entered the building yesterday morning, but no camera ever captured him leaving. An extensive search of the premises has failed to locate him. Naveed quietly folded the newspaper.

People don't disappear into thin air. There is always a door.

Always a mistake.

Or... Someone hiding the truth.

He picked up his keys and walked out without another glance at the newspaper. Outside, the city was already awake.

And somewhere, another mystery was waiting for him

FEDERAL INVESTIGATION AGENCY

CASE FILE: ONE

Case Title: *The 13th Guest*

Lead Investigator: *SSP Naveed*

Status: *CLOSED*

Primary Suspects: *Deceased*

Evidence: *Archived*

Justice: *Served?*

Next Assignment: *PENDING....*

*Not every mystery deserves an answer...
but every answer creates another mystery*

~Zeela Zafar