



BEFORE THE VALLEY DROWNS

A Story of Pakistan's Ticking Clocks

“The mountain does not fail all at once.
It simply waits for the state to look away.
Resilience is not built with concrete. It is built with truth.”

SHAFQAT AZIZ MALLICK

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A Story of Pakistan's Ticking Clocks

By:

SHAFQAT AZIZ MALLICK

Before the Valley Drowns
A Novel of Resilience, Floods and Hope in Swat and Beyond

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Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. While based on real environmental challenges, names, characters, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Experts' Lens

Najma Siddiqi

(Social Scientist, Author, Poet)



"It is time that issues we theorize about both nationally and globally, and exploit at all levels of society are given a human face. Trust Shafqat Mallick to take on this challenge!

He has studied closely the struggles and strengths of individuals and communities and the callousness of administrations, their financiers, and their service paraphernalia.

He brings together his observations, sensitivity, imagination, and his experience in journalism and development to weave a story that takes us for an amazingly realistic ride, also showing us how to get to the other side!

This story needs to be read for the learning it offers and the messages that we have been missing for a very long time."

Dr. Vaqar Ahmed

Former Civil Servant and Economist



"I read policy reports every day. But this novel made me feel the failures behind the data. 'Before the Valley Drowns' is not just a story, it's a shock to the system. It shows you mountains washing away because of timber mafias, a glacial tsunami wiping out an entire valley, and a journalist fighting to tell the truth while greed tries to silence her. Most powerfully, it reveals something I never

saw coming: how climate disasters can push women into silence, until a few brave people turn that shame into a national law. This presentation by Shafqat Aziz Mallick will make you angry, then hopeful, then ready to act. Pick it up. You won't put it down."

Farman Ali,

Executive Editor, The High Asia Herald

Former City Editor, The Express Tribune, Islamabad

Former News Editor, Daily Dawn, Islamabad



“For more than two decades, I have watched Shafqat Aziz Mallick's dedication, commitment to his progressive ideals and work. He has crossed the length and breadth of Pakistan, through its corridors of power and crumbling backstreets, through the buzz of journalism and the slow grind of public policy, chasing stories and digging out facts. He has done it with the quiet obsession of a professional who knows that every untold truth is a wound left to fester. He has witnessed the bruises of the land, the sufferings of the wretched of the earth, and *The Valley Drowns* is not the sum of that struggle but a slim, searing cut into the bleeding edge of a society in perpetual crisis.

What truly impresses me, however, is not just the vision but the craft. The rarity of Shafqat's work is that he has taken it raw and fused it with the sleek intelligence of AI-assisted articulation. The result is fantastic unsettling fusion of the conscience of the old school speaking through the amplified voice of the future. This is advocacy remade not through slogan, not through sentiment, but through truth sharpened on tomorrow's whetstone.

He still carries more stories in his bones. *The Valley Drowns* is a beginning. Let us hope it is a flood.”

Foreword

Freedom Gate Prosperity (FGP) is proud to present *Before the Valley Drowns*. This is not merely a work of fiction; it is a vital call to action and a mirror reflecting the environmental and social crises facing Pakistan today. While the climate crisis is often discussed in the abstract language of data, this book brings the human cost into sharp, unyielding focus.

This publication highlights the deep expertise within our organization. The novel is authored by Mr. Shafqat Aziz Mallick, Strategic Policy Advisor at Freedom Gate Prosperity. By weaving decades of experience in policy development into this narrative, Mr. Mallick has achieved what technical reports cannot: he has given a soul to the statistics. His work demonstrates the professional capacity FGP is cultivating to address our nation's most pressing vulnerabilities.

At FGP, we understand that true resilience is built with the truth and the courage to confront the "ticking clocks" of our collective future. This story takes us from the deforested slopes of Swat to the parched earth of Jhal Magsi, navigating the devastating impact of the timber mafia, the desperation of illegal migration, and the overlooked challenges of women's health during disasters.

What makes this work essential is its unwavering honesty. It looks past the "sarkari theatre" of reactive solutions to demand genuine policy reform and community-based adaptation. It serves as a bridge between the corridors of power and the raw reality of the soil, reminding us that development cannot take root if the environment sustaining it collapses.

Our mission is rooted in inclusive prosperity and the empowerment of marginalized communities. We believe that awareness is the first step toward action. Whether you are a student, a policymaker, or a concerned citizen, these pages offer an urgent distillation of the crises dismantling our future and a call to protect our people.

We are publishing this work to challenge indifference and inspire a new generation of advocates for climate justice. To ensure this narrative reaches its audience with the highest level of clarity and editorial precision, the final manuscript was refined using advanced digital linguistic tools. This allowed us to harmonize traditional storytelling with modern technical resources to better serve our readers.

On behalf of Freedom Gate Prosperity, I congratulate Mr. Shafqat Aziz Mallick for producing a resource that is as emotionally resonant as it is intellectually necessary. I invite our partners, academic institutions, and civil society to engage with this narrative so that together, we may build a Pakistan that is responsible, sustainable, and truly resilient.

With a shared commitment to our future,

Muhammad Anwar
Chief Executive Officer,
Freedom Gate Prosperity (FGP)
Islamabad, 2026

Author Note

For decades, my life has been defined by a constant, jarring commute between two entirely different Pakistans.

As a journalist and later as an advisor navigating the highest tiers of the national and international development sectors, my work required me to sit in the hushed, air-conditioned corridors of power in Islamabad. But my conscience—and the actual execution of policy—required me to stand in the field. From the fracturing mountains of the north to the sinking coastlines of Sindh and the baked, drought-stricken plains of Balochistan, I have witnessed the profound disconnect between the state's ledgers and the soil's reality.

To compile the sheer volume of what I have observed in these years—the sweet, unbreakable resilience of our local communities, contrasted against the harsh, devastating realities of systemic apathy and greed—would require no less than twenty books. I have seen the quiet heroism of frontline workers, and I have seen the devastating consequences of policies that prioritize concrete over human life.

But time is a luxury this country no longer possesses.

Therefore, *Before the Valley Drowns* is not a comprehensive memoir of the development sector. It is an urgent distillation. I wrote this novel to capture the immediate, intersecting crises that are actively dismantling our future. It covers the unchecked deforestation that turns rain into lethal stonefloods; the economic desperation driving our youth into the deadly shadows of the Dunki migration routes; and the profound, institutional blindness that completely strips vulnerable women and girls of their health and dignity during climate disasters.

Spreadsheets, vulnerability reports, and policy briefs are the architecture of my profession, but I have learned that data alone rarely breaks through the armor of bureaucratic indifference. We need

narratives that force us to look at the human cost of our ticking clocks.

To bring this urgency to life with the precision it demands, I have embraced the modern tools of our era. Just as writers once transitioned from typewriters to word processors, and from heavy printed thesauruses to digital grammar checks, I must give credit to modern AI. I have utilized it not merely to refine syntax, but to help connect the complex dots of these intersecting crises and sharpen the tone, ensuring this narrative hits with the exact, uncompromising impact it deserves on a global scale.

But make no mistake: while technology helped shape the delivery, it cannot prompt-engineer decades of survival, fieldwork, and high-stakes policy warfare. The soul of this story is drawn exclusively from the dust and data of my own lived experience. The individuals you will meet in this book are not mere inventions; the characters are drawn directly from real, living people I have encountered on the frontlines. The ideas, the events, the specific failures, and even the dialogues are rooted in actual experiences, intentionally fictionalized and simplified to protect identities while preserving the absolute truth of their struggles.

This story is an alarm bell. My hope is that we finally choose to listen to it, before the water reaches our own doors.

Shafqat Aziz Mallick
Islamabad, 2026

Chapter - 1

THE DELUGE

Late Summer. Kalam, Swat Valley.

The Swat River was no longer water. It was a moving wall of mud, shattered pine, and the violent roar of a collapsing ecosystem.

Inside Room 4 of the Pine View Guest House, Shaayan Mallick sat illuminated by the harsh, fading white glare of a rechargeable LED emergency light. Its battery indicator blinked a frantic red. The local grid had surrendered to the storm two days ago, a routine casualty of the valley's fragile infrastructure under the weight of shifting monsoon patterns.

Shaayan dragged a hand over his face, feeling the exhaustion settled deep in his jaw. He was a man who had spent decades navigating the labyrinth of Islamabad's policy corridors, translating impending disasters into risk assessments. Yet, staring at the thick, spiral-bound Vulnerability and Adaptation Report resting on his desk, the disconnect between the pristine paper and the chaos outside felt almost mocking.

He had spent the week mapping the bald, scarred patches on the upper slopes. The local timber mafia, emboldened by political apathy, had

stripped the mountains of their natural anchors. The earth was simply letting go.

A heavy knock rattled the door before it was shoved open. Tariq, the guest house manager, stood in the frame, water streaming from his soaked shalwar kameez.

"Mallick Sahib, niklein yahan se!" Tariq's voice was stripped of its usual deferential warmth, replaced by a tight, clipped urgency. "You must leave the room. Now." "The lower bazaar is gone. The water is hitting the underside of the suspension bridge."

Shaayan stood up, his mind instantly shifting from analytical to operational. If the river was touching the bridge, the volume of glacial melt and runoff was completely unprecedented. "My jeep?"

"Keechar mein phans gayi hai," Tariq replied grimly. "Buried near the mosque. We are moving everyone to the higher ridge behind the compound." Take only what you can carry. We have three minutes before the retaining wall gives."

Left alone, Shaayan moved with practiced, quiet efficiency. He shoved his passport and wallet into a dry-bag. Next went his laptop and the heavy Vulnerability report—useless against the water, but vital for the battles that would follow in the capital. Lastly, he grabbed a small, tightly sealed glass jar of flaxseeds and dates from the nightstand, slipping it into his jacket pocket. It was a strict dietary habit that tethered him to routine, even when fieldwork stripped everything else away.

As he hoisted his rucksack, a sharp ache flared in his knees—the quiet, lingering legacy of his years on the national tennis courts, awakened violently by the damp, freezing air. He ignored it, zipping his jacket to the chin.

Stepping out onto the veranda, the sheer scale of the devastation commanded silence.

The air tasted of raw earth and bruised pine. Shaayan watched as a massive, fully-grown cedar tree, roots completely exposed, was tossed down the churning rapids like driftwood. The trees fall, the slopes collapse, the river chokes. The chain of causality he had spent years trying to explain to indifferent ministers was playing out in terrifying real-time.

"Hold the case! Keep it elevated!"

The sharp, commanding voice cut through the roar of the river.

Shaayan turned. A few yards away, struggling up the slick, muddy incline toward the ridge, was Zubia Qureshi. He recognized her instantly. She was a senior investigative anchor for a major national network, known for her relentless, forensic breakdowns of environmental corruption.

She wasn't panicking. She was furious. She was trying to drag a heavy, waterproof Pelican case—undoubtedly housing her camera hard drives and footage of the illegal logging camps—up the treacherous slope. Her boots lost traction, sliding backward in the thick clay, the weight of the case threatening to pull her down toward the collapsing retaining wall.

Shaayan didn't hesitate. He crossed the distance in three long strides, his boots digging into the mud. He grabbed the opposite handle of the Pelican case just as her grip faltered.

Zubia's head snapped up, her eyes locking onto his through the sheets of rain. There was no time for introductions or gratitude.

"Pull on three," Shaayan shouted over the deafening rush of the water.

She nodded, her jaw set.

"One. Two. Three!"

They heaved together. The Pelican case crested the slick lip of the mudbank, and Zubia scrambled up behind it, chest heaving. But the victory was entirely hollow.

The ridge Tariq had pointed toward was no longer a refuge; it was an island shrinking by the second. The river hadn't just breached its banks—it had changed its entire course, cutting through the lower terraces and wrapping around the guest house compound.

They scrambled onto a massive, flat slab of granite—a geological anchor that had survived centuries. Below them, the guest house groaned. Shaayan watched as the retaining wall simply folded. The water didn't crash; it consumed. In seconds, the building where he had been sitting was swallowed by the black-brown torrent.

Zubia dropped next to her case, her hands scraped raw. She looked at Shaayan, her usually sharp features pale beneath the rain. "The road is gone," she said, her voice barely carrying over the roar.

"The whole slope is going," Shaayan replied, his eyes scanning the impossible volume of water.

It happened with terrifying silence beneath the deafening noise of the river. The water began to pool around the base of their granite slab. Then, it was at their ankles. Freezing, thick with silt, pulling with a magnetic, invisible force.

Shaayan grabbed the strap of his rucksack tighter. "We need higher ground. Now."

But there was nowhere left. The water crested their knees. Shaayan felt the raw, kinetic power of the mountain bearing down on them. A massive, splintered trunk of a Deodar tree, stripped of its bark, shot out of the rapids upstream, hurtling directly toward their stone.

"Get down!" Shaayan roared, throwing his weight toward Zubia to push her flat.

The impact was a physical explosion. The stone shuddered beneath them. The water surged violently over the top, a wall of freezing darkness. Shaayan felt his boots lose the granite. He was airborne for a

fraction of a second, and then he was swallowed by the washing machine of the river.

He couldn't breathe. Mud filled his nose, his mouth. He was battered against unseen rocks, tossed end over end in a crushing, suffocating darkness. His lungs burned, screaming for air that wasn't there.

Suddenly, the current violently thrust him upward. He broke the surface, gasping a ragged breath of rain-lashed air.

Through the blur of the storm, he saw it—a fleeting, terrifying vignette of absolute helplessness. Thirty yards away, a local man was clinging to the splintered remains of a wooden roof, spinning wildly in the rapids. The man wasn't screaming; his face was frozen in the silent, wide-eyed terror of a soul that already knew it was lost. A second later, the roof slammed into a submerged boulder, and the man was pulled under the foaming brown water. He didn't come back up.

Shaayan felt a sickening jolt of despair. In that fragmented second, his mind flashed to the video that had haunted the nation years ago—the five brothers in Kohistan, standing on a shrinking rock amidst a roaring flash flood. Then another family, elderly, men, women and children. They had held onto each other for hours, staring at the sky, waiting for a government helicopter that never arrived, until the water finally rose and took them all. It's happening again, Shaayan thought, the bitter realization cutting through the freezing cold. The water takes us, and nobody comes.

Then, the river dragged Shaayan under again.

The cold was absolute now, numbing his limbs. As his brain began to starve for oxygen, time dilated. The panic started to recede, replaced by a strange, hyper-lucid reel of his life fracturing into sharp, disconnected images.

He saw his desk in Islamabad, piled high with unread policy drafts and

the National Resilience Framework. Unfinished. A lifetime of warnings, reduced to pulp in the Swat River.

He saw faces. His colleagues. Zubia, fighting for her footage on the muddy bank. And then, a quieter image—a face from the northern valleys, someone he had kept safely locked in the quiet corners of his heart, someone he had always meant to go back to when the work was finally done. I'm sorry, he thought to her, the apology dissolving into the dark water.

And then, with the bizarre clarity that only a dying brain can conjure, a deeply mundane, piercing thought struck him: Arya and Orio.

He saw his cats sitting patiently by the door of his home, their tails flicking, waiting for a dinner that wasn't coming. He had arranged temporary care for them before leaving the capital. But if the river took him, who would feed them? Who would ever tell them he wasn't coming back?

It was such a small, trivial thing against the backdrop of a catastrophic flood, but it broke his heart more than the unfinished policies.

His chest convulsed. The instinct to inhale the water was becoming unbearable. Shaayan Mallick was not a man who feared the end; he had spent his life staring into the abyss of climate ruin. But he feared this. He feared the slow, agonizing crush, the burning lungs, the terrifying lack of control.

Just let it be quick, he prayed to the churning blackness, his eyes squeezing shut against the grit. A rock to the temple. Snap the cord. Don't make me swallow the river.

His shoulder smashed into something impossibly hard—a submerged tree trunk or a boulder. Pain flared, white-hot and blinding, radiating through his ribs and up his neck.

And then, mercifully, the violent world of the river faded into absolute,

silent black.

The smell brought him back before the light did. Iodine, damp cotton, and the sharp, unmistakable scent of strong phenol disinfectant.

Shaayan opened his eyes. The light was harsh, fluorescent, and buzzing with a low hum. A cracked ceiling fan turned lazily above him. He tried to swallow, but his throat felt lined with sandpaper and dried clay.

He was in a hospital bed. A thick canvas bandage was wrapped tight around his ribs, and an IV line trailed from the back of his bruised hand. Every muscle in his body felt as though it had been beaten with a mallet.

"You're awake."

The voice came from the right. Shaayan turned his head slowly, wincing as his neck protested.

Sitting in a rusted metal chair beside the bed, holding a small paper cup of tea, was Zubia. She looked battered. A white bandage was taped over her left eyebrow, her hair was pulled back into a messy, damp knot, and she was wearing a men's oversized jacket that clearly belonged to a hospital staffer. But her eyes were alert, calculating.

"Where..." Shaayan croaked, the word barely a whisper.

"Saidu Sharif," she said, leaning forward. "Rescue airlift brought us in yesterday morning. You've been out for nearly two days."

Shaayan closed his eyes, the memory of the freezing water crashing back into his skull. "Tariq? The others at the guest house?"

Zubia looked down at her paper cup. The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating. "Some," she said softly. "But the lower valley... Shaayan, it's gone. Whole settlements. The official numbers are in the hundreds. The real numbers..." She shook her head.

Shaayan stared at the cracked ceiling. The Vulnerability Report sitting in his ruined rucksack somewhere at the bottom of the Swat River. All

those pages. All those warnings.

"They pulled us out of an eddy near Bahrain," Zubia continued, her voice regaining a fraction of its usual journalistic edge. "Locals with ropes. You were holding onto a piece of corrugated iron like rigor mortis had already set in." She paused, studying him. "You saved my footage, Shaayan. The case got wedged between the rocks when we went under. I have it all."

Shaayan slowly turned to look at her. "The timber camps?"

"The barren slopes," Zubia corrected, her eyes hardening. "The freshly cut stumps miles above the natural landslide zones. The reason the water had nothing to stop it."

Shaayan felt a slow, dark anger uncoiling in his chest, pushing past the pain of his broken ribs. It wasn't just a flood. It was a crime scene.

"They're going to call it an act of God," Shaayan said, his voice finding its gravelly strength. "The ministers in Islamabad. They'll go on TV, ask for international aid, and call it an unprecedented natural disaster. Pure sarkari theatre."

"I know," Zubia said quietly, crushing the paper cup in her hand. "Which is why we are going to prove it wasn't."

Chapter - 2

THE PAPER DAMS

Six Months Later. The Secretariat, Islamabad.

The silence in the conference room was expensive. It was the kind of quiet that only exists behind heavy teakwood doors, insulated by thick carpets and the hum of central air conditioning.

Shaayan Mallick sat at the center of the long mahogany table. His ribs had healed, leaving only a dull ache when the weather turned cold, but the exhaustion in his eyes was permanent. Spread out before him was the revised National Climate Resilience Framework. It was leaner now, stripped of the academic jargon, replaced with hard, unforgiving data from the summer floods.

Across from him sat Secretary Asjad ali Qazi, a man whose career was built on the precise art of doing nothing while appearing incredibly busy. Qazi adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, lightly tapping a Montblanc pen against a glossy, hundred-page report the government had commissioned from a foreign consultancy firm.

"Jazbaati baatein hain, Mallick Sahib." Qazi adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, his tone dripping with practiced condescension. "It is a very passionate draft. But we are already securing international funding for

infrastructural reinforcement. Concrete retaining walls. Deepening the riverbeds. Tangible assets."

Shaayan leaned forward, interlacing his fingers. "With all due respect, Secretary Qazi, you cannot pour concrete over a systemic failure. The floods in Swat weren't just a weather anomaly. They were the result of aggressive, unchecked deforestation."

"We have strict anti-logging laws on the books," Qazi countered smoothly.

"Laws that the timber mafia uses as toilet paper because local enforcement is compromised," Shaayan fired back, his voice low but sharp. "If you don't address the root environmental degradation—if you don't build community resilience and alternative livelihoods—your concrete walls will wash away next season. Adaptation isn't just engineering. It's policy enforcement."

Qazi sighed; the sound of a bureaucrat inconvenienced by reality. "Haqeeqat pasand banein, Shaayan. Be realistic. You are asking us to dismantle local power structures. That is a political minefield. We need actionable, donor-friendly projects. Not crusades."

"I am asking you to stop the country from drowning," Shaayan said.

"The meeting is concluded," Qazi stated, standing up and buttoning his suit jacket. "We will attach your... observations... as an appendix to the main infrastructural proposal. Good day, Mallick Sahib."

Shaayan didn't move as the room emptied. He stared at his framework. An appendix. A footnote to a disaster that had nearly killed him.

An hour later, Shaayan was sitting in a dimly lit corner booth of a café in Blue Area. The espresso in front of him had gone cold.

The bell above the door jingled, and Zubia slid into the booth opposite him. She dropped two thick manila folders onto the table. The bruise above her eye from Swat was long gone, replaced by the sharp, televised

polish her network demanded. But her energy was as restless as ever.

"You look like you just lost a war," she said, signaling the waiter for a black coffee.

"Just a battle against federal accounting," Shaayan replied, rubbing his temples. "Secretary Qazi is going with the concrete walls. No policy reform, just visible infrastructure contracts they can cut ribbons for."

Zubia didn't look surprised. "They need visible projects for the election cycle." She tapped the first folder. "And don't expect any help from Peshawar, either. The Provincial Forestry Department is completely compromised. If the province won't move against the timber cartels that stripped the Swat slopes, I will. I'm building the paper trail on them myself."

She slid her hand to the second folder. "But the environmental beat is only half my headache right now, Shaayan. The network is trying to kill this second investigation completely."

Shaayan frowned, looking at the thick file. "What is it?"

"Central Punjab. The Lalamusa pipeline," Zubia said, her voice dropping. "The Dunki routes," Zubia said, her voice dropping. "The illegal migration pipelines. Our macro-economy is stagnating, we have a massive youth bulge, and the state has zero framework to facilitate regular, skilled migration. So, the shadow economy fills the void." Highly organized syndicates in Gujrat and Lalamusa and some areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are making billions selling the Mediterranean dream to young men desperate for economic mobility."

"The human cost is staggering," Shaayan murmured, the reality of the two distinct crises settling over the table.

"Exactly," Zubia said, tapping the folders. "Two completely different beasts, Shaayan. The provincial departments protect the timber mafias in the north, and the federal agencies drag their feet on the human

smugglers in Punjab. It's a complete systemic paralysis."

Shaayan looked out the café window at the Margalla Hills. The disconnect between this polished city and the bleeding country was staggering. He was fighting a federal bureaucracy that only understood flashy, reactive solutions.

"Qazi wants data," Shaayan said softly, a new strategy forming in his mind. "He thinks resilience is just pouring concrete after a flood. He thinks the state's responsibility ends when the water recedes."

He looked back at Zubia. "You keep tracking those two syndicates. Shake the Forestry officials and hunt down the Lalamusa agents. But I need to prove how deep this systemic paralysis goes when there isn't a spectacular flood for the politicians to point at. I need to show them the blind spots they refuse to look at."

"Where are you going?" Zubia asked, recognizing the shift in his tone.

"South," Shaayan said. "To the dry lands. If I want to break their narrative, I have to show them what happens to the most vulnerable when the disaster is silent, and the state looks away entirely. I'm going to Jhal Magsi."

Chapter - 3



THE DUST AND THE NOISE

The newsroom of Channel 24/7 smelled of stale coffee, ozone from the servers, and the sharp, metallic tang of perpetual anxiety.

Inside the glass-walled office of the Director of News, the atmosphere was suffocating. Zubia Qureshi stood with her arms crossed, her eyes locked on Fahad, the network's Head of Corporate Strategy. Fahad was a man whose suits cost more than the annual budget of a rural school. He was currently jabbing a manicured finger at a paused frame of Zubia's upcoming documentary promo on the flat-screen TV.

"You cannot run this, Sarmad," Fahad said, turning to the man sitting behind the massive desk. Sarmad Ali, the Director of News, rubbed his temples. He was a veteran journalist who had survived three regimes, but corporate ledgers were proving to be his toughest adversary.

"I am stating a fact, Fahad," Zubia interjected, her voice dangerously calm. "The logging trucks we filmed in Kumrat and Swat? The ones stripping the mountains that eventually collapsed and killed hundreds? They are registered to shell companies owned by the Al-Zarrar Group."

"Al-Zarrar owns fifty percent of the housing societies that buy ad time on this network!" Fahad snapped, his face flushing, a vein pulsing faintly

at his temple. "You are asking the network to slit its own throat over some trees."

"People drowned, Fahad. They didn't trip over a root," Zubia fired back, her voice dangerously calm. "The Swat slopes failed because Al-Zarrar's shell companies clear-cut the pines miles above the legal line. It's a crime scene."

Fahad scoffed, looking past her to Sarmad. "This is an activist's conspiracy theory. Where is the police report? Where is the FIA investigation? If you air this without an official indictment, Al-Zarrar will sue us into the stone age for defamation. It kills the business, Sarmad. Pull the segment."

"And what about the Lalamusa investigation?" Zubia challenged, refusing to let him dictate the room. "The human smuggling rings operating out of central Punjab? Sending our boys to drown in the Mediterranean? There is no Al-Zarrar ad money protecting them. Are we pulling that too?"

"We are pulling anything that exposes this network to a billion-rupee lawsuit without a verified paper trail!" Fahad shot back. He aggressively adjusted his cuffs, his corporate composure returning like ice. "The board meets at four. I expect both of these fires to be put out." He turned on his heel and walked out, pulling the heavy glass door shut behind him.

The silence in the office settled like dust over Sarmad's polished teak desk.

"He's right about the lawsuits, Zubia," Sarmad said softly, rubbing his tired eyes.

"Sarmad, you saw the raw footage from Swat," Zubia pleaded, stepping closer, pressing her hands flat against the edge of his desk. "You know I'm right about the timber cartel. And you know the Dunki agents in

Gujrat and Lalamusa are running a massive, illegal shadow economy."

"Being right doesn't pay the server bills, and it doesn't protect our broadcast license," Sarmad replied, leaning back heavily in his leather chair. "Listen to me carefully. I am not killing your journalism. But I am burying these stories until they are bulletproof. I need bank transfers. I need property deeds. Until you have documents that these cartels cannot deny in a high court, you do not mention their names on my airwaves. Do you understand?"

Zubia set her jaw. It was a gag order disguised as editorial caution. She was sitting on two of the biggest, deadliest systemic failures in the country, and she couldn't say a word about either of them.

"Fine," Zubia said, the word tasting bitter. "But I'm keeping my prime-time slot for Thursday. I'll pivot the angle entirely."

Sarmad looked wary. "To what?"

"To the victims," she said, her mind already racing toward a new geography. "Internal climate displacement. The farmers losing their land to sea intrusion in Sindh, washing up in the slums of Karachi. I won't name any corporate cartels or timber mafia rings. Just the raw, human reality of the dying coast."

Sarmad nodded slowly, a look of grim relief crossing his face. It was impactful journalism that wouldn't trigger a corporate lawsuit. "Do the internal migration piece. But watch your back, Zubia. The people you are quietly poking in Swat and Punjab? They don't just send cease-and-desist letters. They send messages."

Jhal Magsi, Balochistan. If the north had drowned, the south was burning to ash.

Shaayan Mallick stepped out of the hired Toyota Hilux, his boots hitting earth baked so hard it resembled cracked ceramic. The heat was a

physical assault, radiating upward and pressing down from a sky bleached of all color. There was no river here to roar. There was only the terrifying, absolute silence of a prolonged drought.

He adjusted his sunglasses, pulling his keffiyeh over his nose against the swirling dust. He was standing outside the Government Girls High School of a remote union council.

"Mallick Sahib, wait," his local guide, Rasool, warned. "Let me speak to them first."

But Shaayan was already walking toward the courtyard. Beneath the meager shade of a dying Neem tree, a fierce argument was unfolding.

A young woman stood facing a District Relief Coordinator. She was wearing a traditional Balochi chador, her posture unyielding. This was Hani. Shaayan knew her by reputation; she was the most relentless advocate for women's health access in the province.

At her feet lay three open cardboard boxes—standard government drought-relief kits.

"Rice, cooking oil, and Panadol," Hani was saying, her Urdu crisp, tapping the side of the box with her shoe. "Yeh mazaq hai? Is this a joke? I submitted the requisition list for this union council three months ago, Zafar Sahib. Where are the menstrual hygiene supplies?"

The Coordinator shifted uncomfortably, wiping sweat from his neck. "Bibi, majboori thi. Our hands were tied. The disaster budget was slashed. The supply chain from Quetta is broken. We had to prioritize essential survival items."

"You don't think managing a biological reality is a survival issue?" Hani's voice didn't rise, but it sharpened. "MHH is not a luxury. It is about access and availability. When the drought killed the livestock here, the local economy collapsed. Do you know what that did to the market? A packet of sanitary pads in the bazaar now costs what a family makes in

two days—if the shopkeeper even bothers to stock them anymore. Availability is zero. Affordability is zero."

The Coordinator looked at his clipboard, avoiding her eyes. "It is not a standard relief item, Bibi."

"And that is exactly the failure!" Hani fired back. "In an emergency, you plan for stomachs and fevers, but you completely erase the needs of menstruating women. And it's not just in these camps. Look at this school." She pointed to the dilapidated building behind her. "If a girl gets her period during class, there is no emergency stock here. The school has no budget for materials, and her family cannot afford to buy them. She has absolutely nothing to manage it with. So, she leaves. And after enough missed days, she never comes back."

She stepped closer to the Coordinator. "Without access to the actual products—whether in a disaster relief kit, a school dispensary, or a local shop—you strip these girls of their mobility and their dignity. Take these boxes back until they reflect the needs of the whole population."

Shaayan stopped a few feet away, mesmerized. She was dismantling the entire national disaster response framework with three cardboard boxes. She was exposing the blind spot in every policy he had ever drafted: the failure to classify menstrual products as critical, non-negotiable relief and developmental infrastructure.

The Coordinator muttered a defeated promise to "revise the next dispatch" before practically fleeing toward his jeep.

Hani watched him go, her shoulders dropping a fraction of an inch as the adrenaline faded. She turned, noticing Shaayan for the first time. Her dark eyes swept over his tactical boots, his notepad, and his undeniable outsider aura.

"Let me guess," Hani said, her voice laced with heavy exhaustion. "Another consultant from Islamabad. You've come to write a report on

our climate resilience."

Shaayan took off his sunglasses. "I write policies, not reports. My name is Shaayan Mallick."

"Policies," Hani repeated, the word tasting bitter in her mouth. "Do your policies know that climate change has a gender, Mallick Sahib? Or do they just count the dead crops?"

"Until five minutes ago, they just counted the crops," Shaayan admitted, his candor taking her slightly off guard. He stepped into the shade of the Neem tree. "The men I work with in the capital think disaster relief is just bags of wheat. I'm here because I know the system is broken, but I needed to see exactly where the supply chain fails the people they refuse to look at."

Hani crossed her arms, studying him. She didn't see the usual bureaucratic arrogance in his eyes.

"It fails at the very definition of 'essential,'" Hani said softly. "If you want to put that in your policy, Shaayan, I will show you what a complete lack of access looks like. But if you are just here to nod and feel sad, you can get back in your Hilux."

Chapter - 4

THE WHITE EARTH

Badin, Sindh Coastline.

The earth here didn't crack like the drought-hit plains of Balochistan. It crystallized.

Zubia Qureshi stood at the edge of what used to be a thriving rice paddy in the coastal belt of Badin. Now, it looked as though it had been dusted with a heavy, toxic snow. The soil was coated in a thick, white crust of salt.

She lifted her camera, framing the skeletal remains of a Babul tree against the hazy, oppressive horizon. The Arabian Sea, once a distant neighbor, was now an aggressive landlord, pushing further inland every year, poisoning the freshwater aquifers and suffocating the soil.

"Ten years ago, you couldn't see the end of the green," a raspy voice said behind her.

Zubia lowered the camera and turned. Chacha Qasim, a man whose deep wrinkles mapped a lifetime of sun and salt, stood leaning on a wooden staff. He was wearing a faded Sindhi ajrak over his shoulder, his eyes milky but sharp.

"Now?" Qasim struck the ground with his staff. It made a hard, hollow sound. "Zameen banjar ho gayi hai. The land is completely barren. Now we grow salt. The sea ate the sweet water. The fish died in the lakes, and then the crops died in the dirt."

Zubia gestured to her cameraman, Ali, who was hanging back near their rented jeep, signaling him to keep rolling. She stepped closer to the old man.

"Sarmad told me to find a human-interest story," Zubia thought grimly. Her boss in Lahore wanted tears, not corporate indictments. But Zubia knew that tears were just the byproduct of a stolen future.

"Where is everyone, Chacha?" Zubia asked gently, looking around the largely abandoned settlement of mud-brick houses. "I see mostly elders. Where are the young men?"

Qasim let out a bitter, chest-deep cough. "Samundar ne zameen nigal li, aur shehar ne humaray bachay. The sea took the land, so the city took our sons. What is left for a young man here? He cannot fish. He cannot farm. He goes to Karachi." He goes to Machar Colony, or Orangi Town. He lives in the filth, working for daily wages, sending back enough rupees to buy the water we used to drink for free."

Zubia felt the familiar, cold click of a puzzle piece locking into place. "And do they stay in Karachi?"

Qasim looked out toward the dead horizon, his grip tightening on his staff. "Some do. But the city is a cruel master. It crushes them. They go looking for a future, but the contractors in the slums are waiting. They pay them pennies to break their backs on construction sites, building towers for the rich, while they sleep in the gutters."

He looked back at Zubia, his milky eyes suddenly fierce. "My youngest, Rehmat. He sold his mother's gold bangles just to secure a tin-roof shack in Machar Colony. He works fourteen hours a day in an

unregulated textile dying unit. His lungs are failing from the chemicals, and he owes the local water mafia more than he earns. He left this village a proud farmer, and the city turned him into a slave."

Zubia's breath caught. This was the real story. The silent pipeline.

The climate destroyed the rural economy. The displaced youth flooded the urban slums. Stripped of resources, land, and state protection, they became the perfect, desperate fodder for Karachi's unregulated industrial machine and land mafias. It was a perfectly closed loop of exploitation, triggered entirely by environmental collapse.

"How many families from this area, Chacha?" Zubia asked, pulling a small notebook from her jacket.

"Count the dead trees, beta," Qasim spat bitterly. "For every tree the salt killed, a family packed their bags for the slums."

An hour later, Zubia was sitting in the back of the jeep, the air conditioning struggling against the coastal humidity. As they bounced along the uneven, salt-degraded road back toward the highway, she opened her laptop.

She bypassed the network's servers, using a secure, encrypted connection. She began typing up her notes, organizing the raw data. Sarmad wanted a human-interest story? She was going to give him an undeniable indictment of state failure. She was going to map the exact demographic shift from the dying coast of Badin straight into the crushing, toxic poverty of Karachi's industrial zones.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket. It was a secure text from an unknown number.

Wapsi ka safar shuru karein, Ms. Qureshi. Start your journey back. There is nothing but dead dirt here. Stop looking for someone to blame.

Zubia stared at the glowing screen. A slow, defiant smile touched the corner of her mouth. The local feudals and district officials who had

been quietly pocketing the coastal rehabilitation funds were clearly getting nervous about a camera crew poking around their ruined districts. She took a screenshot. The threats meant she was finally walking on the right wire.

She dialed a number she hadn't called since the hospital in Saidu Sharif. It rang twice before he picked up.

"Shaayan," Zubia said, her eyes fixed on the dead landscape rolling past her window. "I found the real pipeline. The sea is destroying the farms, pushing them into the cities, and the urban slums are swallowing them whole. It's a massive, silent demographic collapse."

"I'm in Quetta," Shaayan's voice crackled through the spotty connection. "The policy makers here are just as blind, Zubia. They treat the symptoms, never the disease."

"Then we make them see," Zubia replied, closing her laptop with a snap. "You handle the policy in the mountains. I'm going to Karachi. I need to get inside Machar Colony and film the fallout."

Chapter - 5

THE RED TAPE AND THE GREEN TEA

Quetta, Balochistan.

The air in Quetta was a sharp, unforgiving contrast to the baked earth of Jhal Magsi. It carried the crisp, thin chill of altitude and the faint scent of roasted pine nuts.

Inside the Provincial Health Directorate, the office of Dr. Maira Kamal Baloch was an anomaly. In a building defined by peeling paint and stacked, decaying files, her workspace was fiercely organized and invitingly warm. A small gas heater purred in the corner, and the heavy velvet curtains shut out the noise of the Zarghoon Road traffic.

Shaayan Mallick sat on a slightly worn leather sofa, a steaming cup of cardamom green tea in his hands. Across from him sat Dr. Maira. She had the focused, unblinking gaze of a surgeon who was used to diagnosing problems before the patient even spoke. Beside her was Shahana Tabbasum, a woman whose brightly embroidered shawl contrasted with her intense, analytical demeanor. Shahana was the social engine to Maira's medical precision.

"Sirf chawal aur Panadol." Shaayan set his teacup down, breaking the quiet. "They sent rice and Panadol. A five-year drought, a complete

collapse of the local economy in Jhal Magsi, and the disaster relief kits had absolutely zero menstrual hygiene supplies. I watched a local teacher named Hani tear the District Coordinator apart over it."

Dr. Maira leaned back, resting her chin on her hand. She didn't look surprised; she looked tired. "Hani is right. The medical data backs her up entirely, Shaayan. When the supply chain fails and affordability hits zero, we see a massive spike in urogenital infections. Women are using contaminated rags, washing them in unsafe standing water, and hiding them in damp, dark places because of the cultural shame."

"Yeh ek khamosh tabahi hai. It's a silent ruin," Shahana interjected, leaning forward. "And the health crisis is only half of the tragedy. The other half is social. Without access to products and safe washrooms, the girls in these drought-hit areas simply drop out of school. It's the final nail in the coffin of their education. But try explaining that to a room full of male bureaucrats holding the budget strings."

"Which is why we stop trying to explain it to them," Shaayan said smoothly. The strategist in him was fully awake now. "You don't win a policy fight by banging on a locked door. You find a different door."

He pulled out his notebook, flipping to a fresh page. "I've been drafting a cross-sectoral resilience framework. Health, Climate, and Education. If we frame MHH solely as a 'women's health' issue, it gets buried in the provincial health budget—which is already bankrupt. But if we frame it as an 'Educational Retention and Climate Adaptation' metric..."

Dr. Maira's eyes lit up with sudden, sharp understanding. "You shift the financial burden. And you change the optics."

"Exactly," Shahana said, a slow smile spreading across her face. "And I know exactly who needs those optics right now. Saira Hameed."

Shaayan looked up from his notes. "The Education Minister."

"She's new, she's ambitious, and she is desperate for a legacy project,"

Shahana explained, tapping her finger on the coffee table. "Saira wants to be known as the minister who revolutionized girls' education in the province. But she's currently stuck building standard brick-and-mortar schools that girls are dropping out of anyway. She needs a big, progressive win. Something she can take to the international donors."

"If we pitch an MHH infrastructure and supply chain program as the key to keeping girls in school during climate stresses," Dr. Maira mused, her mind racing ahead, "it bypasses the taboo. It's no longer about menstruation. It's about 'Hygiene and Academic Retention'."

Shaayan nodded. "We integrate the supply chain directly into the education budget. Schools become the primary distribution hubs for sanitary products, completely bypassing the disaster relief bottlenecks."

"Saira will love the international appeal of it," Shahana said. "But she is politically cautious. If there is a backlash from the conservative elements—if they accuse her of bringing 'inappropriate' topics into the schools—she will drop us in a heartbeat."

"Then we make the plan bulletproof before we even walk into her office," Shaayan said. He looked at both women, feeling the solid, grounding reality of their expertise. This was the alliance he needed. The frontlines in Swat and Jhal Magsi were the diagnosis; this room in Quetta was the cure.

"Shahana, I need you to map the dropout rates against the drought zones," Shaayan instructed. "Dr. Maira, I need the clinical data on infection rates linked to poor MHH in those exact same districts. I will build the policy architecture that ties it all together into a pilot project Saira Hameed cannot refuse."

Shaayan picked up his green tea, feeling the warmth seep into his hands. "How soon can we get in the room with the Minister?"

The Policy Pitch

The office of Education Minister Saira Hameed was designed to intimidate, but Saira herself was aggressively modern. She sat behind a sprawling glass desk, a tablet in one hand and a stylus in the other, listening to the pitch with an unreadable expression.

She was in her early forties, highly educated, and keenly aware that her political survival depended on delivering visible results in a deeply patriarchal province.

Shaayan finished outlining the Climate-Adaptive Educational Retention Initiative, placing the two-page executive summary on her desk. "What we saw in the drought zones of Jhal Magsi is the extreme edge of a daily reality," Shaayan explained, keeping his voice measured. "Emergencies only expose the baseline failure. The real crisis is that basic menstrual hygiene is treated as a luxury good in this country. It is a crisis of everyday access, availability, and affordability for all women and girls."

Dr. Maira leaned forward, sliding a clinical data sheet across the desk. "When a family's purchasing power drops—whether due to a collapsed agricultural season or general inflation—the first thing cut from the grocery list is sanitary pads. The market prices are out of reach for the working class. The result is a province-wide spike in severe urogenital infections."

"And an educational hemorrhage," Shahana added seamlessly. "Girls without access to these products stay home. They miss a week a month, fall behind, and eventually drop out. You want to revolutionize girls' education, Minister? You don't just need better textbooks. You need to fix the biological logistics of attending school."

Saira tapped the stylus against the glass. Let us be direct about the political arithmetic here, Mr. Mallick. You are proposing a two-pronged strategy.

"Exactly," Shaayan said. "Track A is immediate provincial intervention. We want your ministry to authorize schools as primary distribution hubs for MHH products. We bypass the disaster management bottlenecks entirely. We empower female headmistresses to manage the inventory, framing it as 'Hygiene and Retention Kits' to keep the religious opposition off your back."

"I can do that," Saira said slowly, her eyes tracking the data. "I control the school infrastructure. It gives me a tangible, progressive pilot project. But what is Track B?"

"Track B is the grand scheme," Shaayan said, his tone sharpening. "Track B is the cure. We need a massive joint advocacy campaign for MHH Tax Reform. We need to abolish the import duties on the raw materials used to manufacture sanitary products, and we need to zero-rate the final goods. We need to bring the baseline cost down nationwide."

Saira leaned back, a wry smile touching her lips. "You know I don't control the federal tax code, Shaayan. The Ministry of Finance in Islamabad sets those tariffs."

"We know," Shahana said. "But you have a seat at the Council of Common Interests. You have the political weight of a provincial minister. If Balochistan formally passes a resolution demanding this tax exemption on the grounds of health and education, and you champion it on the national media, you give us the political armor we need to fight Islamabad."

Saira looked at the three of them. She saw the risk, but more importantly, she saw the sheer, undeniable logic of it. She could be the architect of a policy that didn't just build walls, but actually kept girls inside them.

"The federal finance boys will fight you tooth and nail," Saira warned. "They don't give up revenue streams voluntarily. They will claim the

national exchequer cannot afford the tax break."

"The exchequer cannot afford a crippled female workforce and a collapsed healthcare system," Dr. Maira fired back.

Saira held up a hand, conceding the point. "Alright. I will authorize the school distribution pilot across the three most vulnerable districts tomorrow. And I will draft the tax reform resolution for the provincial assembly. I will be your battering ram in the advocacy campaign." She leveled a hard look at Shaayan. "But I cannot force Islamabad to sign it. You are going to need leverage. You are going to have to back the federal government into a corner where saying 'no' to this tax reform becomes a public relations nightmare."

"Islamabad ko main dekhta hoon," Shaayan said. "Leave the capital to me."

Walking out of the Secretariat into the crisp Quetta afternoon, Shahana let out a long, shaky breath. "She said yes. We have the schools. We have a minister championing the tax reform."

Dr. Maira looked at Shaayan. "But Saira is right. A provincial resolution is just a piece of paper until the federal finance ministry folds. How do we corner them?"

Shaayan pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Zubia's number. It went straight to voicemail.

Shaayan frowned, a prickle of unease washing over him. "Zubia," he said to the recording. "The Quetta door is open. The tax advocacy is moving. But we need the hammer to drop on Islamabad. How close are you to the 'Gatekeeper'? Call me back."

Chapter - 6

THE BLOCKED ARTERIES

Quetta, Balochistan.

Stepping out of the Provincial Secretariat into the crisp Quetta afternoon, Shaayan felt a rare, cautious surge of optimism.

"She is actually going to do it," Shahana said, wrapping her embroidered shawl tighter against the wind. "Saira is going to push the tax resolution."

"She is sincere," Shaayan agreed, his mind already mapping the next ten moves. "Which is a terrifyingly rare commodity in our line of work. Saira understands that policy isn't just about optics; it's about the mechanics of survival."

Dr. Maira walked beside them, her expression thoughtful. "Balochistan pushing the resolution is one thing, Shaayan. But the Ministry of Finance in Islamabad has to actually sign the tax exemption. They are insulated. They don't see the bleeding down here."

"It's not malice," Shaayan said quietly, dodging a tea vendor on the crowded pavement. "It's just profound apathy. Islamabad is a bubble. The bureaucrats look at spreadsheets, not people. If it doesn't affect their bottom line, it doesn't exist."

"Then we activate the civil society networks," Shahana suggested. "Get the major NGOs to launch a federal lobbying campaign."

Shaayan let out a short, bitter laugh. "The NGOs won't touch it, Shahana. I've spent years in those circles. They are brilliant at writing grant proposals for localized awareness workshops, but the moment you ask them to challenge the federal tax code? They freeze. They don't have the stomach to agitate the government that approves their operating licenses. We are entirely on our own for the federal push."

He stopped by their rented Hilux, looking at the distant, jagged peaks of the Chiltan range.

"We can't go to war with Islamabad," Shaayan decided. "We don't have the leverage. Saira needs cover, and the Finance Ministry needs to feel like zero-rating these products is their moral victory. We need soft diplomatic advocacy. We need a national narrative that gently but firmly corners them into doing the right thing. And for that, I need the media."

He pulled out his phone and dialed Muhammad Anwar, a seasoned development veteran who had spent decades fighting civic and climate apathy. "The NGOs won't touch the federal tax code, Anwar sahab," Shaayan vented into the receiver.

"Governance isn't changed by asking for permission, Shaayan," Anwar's gravelly voice replied, steady and absolute. "If the sector won't back you, bypass them. Find a wedge that makes the Finance Ministry look like heroes for surrendering, or villains for stalling. Activate the media."

Zubia was staring at her computer monitor, her finger hovering over the 'Delete' key.

Her feature on climate-induced internal migration—The Salt Migration—had aired to critical acclaim. It had brilliantly shown the tragedy of the dying coastlines and the swelling urban slums of Karachi.

But the second half of her overarching project, the investigation she had poured her soul into, was currently sitting in a locked, encrypted folder labeled *The Gatekeeper*.

Sarmad, her Director of News, had killed it that morning.

"You did incredible work highlighting the displaced boys in the Karachi slums, Zubia," Sarmad had said, looking genuinely apologetic but immovable behind his heavy teak desk. "But this second investigation? The 'Dunki' agents operating out of the Gujrat and Lalamusa belt? It relies on circumstantial WhatsApp logs and ghost bank accounts.

"Our legal department won't clear an exposé on a massive international smuggling ring without a verified financial trail. Humara channel band karwa dein ge. They will shut this entire network down through defamation lawsuits from their political backers." Zubia pushed herself away from the desk, running a hand through her hair in pure frustration.

She had the truth. She knew how the systemic rot was all connected—how the state ignored the climate refugees in the south, and how it simultaneously turned a blind eye to the human smugglers preying on desperate, unemployed youth in central Punjab. But she was gagged by the very institution that was supposed to broadcast it.

Her phone vibrated on the desk. She snatched it up. "Shaayan. Tell me you have good news, because I am ready to throw my laptop out a window."

"I have the provincial backing for the MHH policy," Shaayan's voice came through, steady and grounded. "Minister Saira Hameed is leading the charge for the tax reform. But I'm hitting a wall with the federal strategy. The NGOs are useless. I need your help to build a soft advocacy narrative. We need to frame this on national television in a way that the federal Finance Ministry feels compelled to act out of empathy, rather than defense."

Zubia let out a hollow, bitter laugh. "Galat darwaze par dastak di hai, Shaayan. You knocked on the wrong door. You called the wrong journalist. I can't even get my own network to air a story about our boys drowning in the Mediterranean because it might upset the corporate equilibrium."

There was a brief silence on the line. Shaayan's analytical mind was processing the roadblock.

"They blocked the hard exposé," Shaayan finally said, his tone shifting. "So we change the battlefield. I need national media pressure to corner the Finance Ministry; you need bulletproof leverage to force your network to air the Lalamusa story. We are both fighting the same culture of apathy. If we pool our intel, we might find a backdoor to bypass both."

Zubia looked at the locked folder on her screen. The newsroom suddenly felt incredibly small and suffocating. "I can't do this over the phone, Shaayan. The network IT is monitoring my edits. I can't breathe here."

"Phir wahan se niklo. Then get out of Lahore," Shaayan told her. "I'm flying back tonight. Meet me in Islamabad tomorrow. My turf. We sit down, map the overlapping networks, and figure out how to break your corporate gag order and my bureaucratic brick wall at the same time."

"Tomorrow," Zubia agreed, feeling a renewed, dangerous spark of adrenaline fighting through the frustration. "Have my favorite coffee ready."

Chapter - 7



THE TICKING CLOCKS

F-6 Markaz, Islamabad.

They met at a quiet, second-floor café in Super Market. It wasn't one of the flashy new spots in F-7 built for social media aesthetics; this place had scuffed wooden floors, warm lighting, and corners designed for people who needed to have conversations the rest of the city shouldn't hear. Outside the floor-to-ceiling windows, the Margalla Hills were turning a bruised, magnificent purple as the evening set in.

Shaayan took a sip of his black coffee, watching Zubia across the small table. She looked exhausted, running on sheer journalistic adrenaline.

"How were things in Balochistan?" she asked, wrapping her hands around a mug of green tea.

Shaayan let out a dry, cynical laugh. "Ajeeb tamasha hai. It is a strange spectacle. I heard about a consultant in the sector who rose from absolute, abject poverty. Lived entirely on charity. When he finally got on his feet and secured a major position, his entire strategy became public relations instead of policy. Now, his staff just drives around supplying lavish, imported gift hampers to bureaucrats, ministers, department heads, and donors. And would you believe it? With just that

one 'skill' of keeping the elites comfortable, he has become incredibly wealthy while the grassroots suffer."

Zubia didn't smile. She stared at him over her mug, her eyes hardening. "Sangeen masla hai, Shaayan. This is a matter of grave concern. That isn't funny. It's a profound betrayal. A man finds an opportunity and instantly becomes the architect of the very rot that kept him starving. And the state of our regulators? For God's sake, selling their authority for customized gift baskets... it tells you everything you need to know about how cheap our institutions are."

Shaayan nodded slowly, the brief, bitter humor vanishing from his face. "Exactly. Finding an upright bureaucrat who actually holds the line is rare. The rest are bought with shallow favors. Which is why we can't rely on their goodwill. We have to corner them."

He leaned in. "Saira Hameed is ready to push the MHH tax reform resolution from Balochistan," Shaayan said, keeping his voice pitched just above the low hum of the café. "But to force the federal Finance Ministry to actually drop the import duties, I need a national narrative. Saira can make noise in Quetta, but I need the media hammering the economic logic every night at prime time in Islamabad."

Zubia stared into her mug of green tea, tracing the rim with her index finger. "My network won't let me officially report on it, Shaayan. Sarmad thinks tax codes and menstrual hygiene kill the ratings."

She looked up, a sharp, tactical glint in her eye. "But I don't need to be the one to report it. Send me the aggregated provincial data. But numbers aren't enough; television needs faces. Give me the contacts for your team actively pursuing this agenda."

Shaayan raised an eyebrow. "Dr. Maira and Shahana?"

"All of them," Zubia said. "I want the local champion girl—the teacher who confronted the relief coordinator. I want Dr. Maira for the clinical

backing, Saira Hameed for the political weight, and Nehmat Saleh—that progressive politician you mentioned. I will leak the dossier to the top three morning show producers and line up your Quetta team for exclusive interviews. By Wednesday, the national media will have a human face, expert medical backing, and a provincial minister all cornering the federal Finance Minister on live television. They won't be able to escape the tax reform question."

Shaayan let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding. "A coordinated media ambush. Thank you. That's the wedge I need."

"Consider it done," Zubia said, leaning back. "But that is all the bandwidth I have to give you right now. I am fighting a two-front war, and my network is trying to tie my hands behind my back."

"The irregular migration story," Shaayan noted.

"The Lalamusa pipeline," Zubia confirmed, her jaw setting. "I'm heading to Central Punjab. The state is not doing enough to create regular, legal pathways for these skilled youth, so the Dunki agents are making billions sending them into meat grinders. It's a massive shadow economy, and I am going to rip it open."

She paused, her expression darkening. "But the piece I am truly terrified of dropping is the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa timber mafia. Shaayan, I've been reviewing the geographical data. People think deforestation just causes water floods. It doesn't. It causes stonefloods. Paharon ka sailab. The mountain itself washing away."

Shaayan nodded grimly. The terminology was technically a debris flow, but the locals knew it by its brutal, literal reality.

"The roots of those ancient pines are the only things holding the boulders and the topsoil to the hillside," Zubia explained, her hands animating the sheer mechanics of it. "When the timber cartels clear-cut the slopes, they remove the anchor. The next time heavy rains hit, it

won't just be water washing into the valleys. It will be the mountain itself. If we don't expose the cartels and force the Provincial Forestry Department to intervene now, the next catastrophe will bury entire towns."

Shaayan looked down at his coffee. Zubia's warning resonated deeply, tapping into a permanent, cold dread he carried with him every time he looked toward the northern peaks.

"You're right to be terrified of the slopes failing," Shaayan said quietly. "Because the rain isn't the only trigger. I've been looking at the structural integrity reports for Ashq Abad lake."

Zubia stopped. "The lake in the north? The one formed by the landslide?"

"Exactly," Shaayan said, leaning forward, the strategist in him entirely replaced by a man looking at a ticking bomb. "It's not a glacial lake; it's a massive body of water held back by a fragile dam of loose rubble and mountain debris. And the local authorities are treating it like a permanent tourist resort. They are allowing the land mafias to build heavy, multi-story concrete hotels right on the unstable slopes above the water, and directly in the spillway paths."

He rubbed his eyes, the frustration evident. "Combine that sheer weight of concrete with the deforestation happening on those slopes. When the next heavy rain hits, the slope will fail. A stoneflood will crash into the lake, creating a massive displacement wave—a tsunami that will breach the rubble dam. When that happens, the water and the concrete hotels will wash down the valley like shrapnel."

Shaayan's voice dropped. "The valley directly underneath the lake... it's a death trap. Especially the main settlement. Haiderpur."

Zubia watched him carefully. Shaayan Mallick dealt in macro-policies and national statistics. He rarely zeroed in on a single village unless the stakes were personal. "You know someone in Haiderpur."

Shaayan looked out the window at the darkening hills. "Parisa," he said softly.

"Who is she?"

"A doctor," Shaayan replied, a profound respect bleeding into his voice. "She was the only young woman from that entire valley to secure a medical degree. She could be sitting in a lucrative private clinic in some urban town. She could have easily moved to a big city, or even gone abroad. But she didn't. She went back to Haiderpur. She built a community clinic. She serves her people because she knows no one else will. Koi aur nahi aayega. No one else is coming."

He turned his gaze back to Zubia. "She is the exact kind of person this country needs to survive. And she is sitting directly in the crosshairs of a disaster that the government is actively engineering through sheer negligence."

The silence between them stretched, heavy with the weight of the broken systems they were trying to fix.

Zubia picked up her tote bag. "Send me the MHH data and the Quetta contacts tonight. I will build your echo chamber in the media. Then, I am going to Lalamusa to find the Dunki agents."

Shaayan stood up, dropping a few notes on the table. "And I am going to corner the Finance Ministry. And then..." He looked north. "I need to figure out how to get the people of Haiderpur to listen to the mountain before it falls on them."

"Stay safe, Shaayan," Zubia said softly.

"You too," Shaayan replied. "The mafias don't like being hunted."

Chapter - 8

THE ANATOMY OF A DISASTER

The Karakoram Highway.

The Karakoram Highway does not forgive arrogance. It is a ribbon of asphalt carved into the collision zone of the world's highest mountain ranges, where the earth is still actively folding, fracturing, and falling apart.

Inside the cabin of the rented Land Cruiser, the hum of the tires over the rough tarmac was the only constant sound. Up front, their local driver, a seasoned local named Javed, expertly navigated the blind curves with one hand lightly resting on the wheel.

Shaayan Mallick sat in the back seat, staring out the window at the roaring grey waters of the Indus River below. Beside him sat Floris Evers. Floris was a senior researcher for a Hague-based International NGO, tasked with auditing climate adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) strategies across South Asia. Unlike the parachute-consultants Shaayan usually despised, Floris was pragmatic and sharply observant, preferring to see the bleeding edge of a crisis rather than reading about it in a Serena Hotel conference room.

"The global models," Floris said, breaking the silence, his accented

English loud over the hum of the engine. "They map this region entirely in red. The European agencies see the data—glacial retreat, seismic volatility. But looking at the spreadsheets in The Hague doesn't quite prepare you for the vertical scale of it."

"Spreadsheets assume stability," Shaayan replied, turning away from the window. "They assume a baseline that you can build upon. Pakistan doesn't have a climate baseline anymore, Floris. We don't get time to rebuild before the next disaster hits. We are in a state of perpetual, compounding shock, and it's not just happening up here in the mountains"

Floris pulled out a small notebook, pen ready. "The data focuses heavily on the glacial melt."

"Because ice makes for dramatic photography," Shaayan said bluntly. "But the collapse is everywhere. Down south, the timber cartels are clear-cutting the mangroves on the Sindh coast. They are stripping our only natural defense against cyclones, destroying the marine life, and directly fueling the lethal heatwaves in Karachi. In the heartland, the political elite own unregulated sugar mills and industrial units that pump raw, untreated effluent directly into the freshwater canals. Nobody enforces environmental standards because the polluters sit in the parliament."

Floris stopped writing, his brow furrowing. "And the agricultural sector?"

"It's suffocating," Shaayan explained, his voice tightening with frustration. "We have desert belts in Balochistan and Southern parts of Punjab dying of five-year droughts, while just a few hundred miles away, riverine farmers lose their entire livelihoods to perennial flooding. And even where the water is stable, the wet season has become entirely erratic. The rains come weeks late, or they dump a year's worth of water in three days. The entire agricultural calendar is collapsing. We are

fighting a five-front war, Floris, and your European models are only tracking the snow."

Floris nodded slowly. "Which is exactly why my board is frustrated. We pour millions of euros into DRR grants and 'resilience capacity building' in Islamabad. But every time there is a shock, the system completely resets to zero."

"Because you are funding the echo chamber," Shaayan countered.

Floris shot him a glance. "Explain."

Shaayan pointed to a cluster of small, precarious mud-and-stone houses clinging to the slope across the river. "The international money flows into the mega-NGOs and think tanks headquartered in Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi. They spend it on grand symposiums. They print glossy brochures about 'community-led adaptation' and take a few photos handing out blankets after a flash flood. It's a poverty franchise. It's climate tourism. It's a lucrative industry built on disaster."

"And the real adaptation?"

"There is no real, localized adaptation from the top down," Shaayan said. "Real DRR means telling the timber mafia they can't cut the pines that hold these hills together to prevent stonefloods. It means building decentralized grain silos and medical dispensaries in villages that get cut off by landslides. But the big NGOs don't want to fight the cartels or the local politicians. So, they hold another workshop."

They pulled over an hour later at a roadside dhaba near Besham. The air was thick with the smell of diesel and roasting meat. They sat on woven charpoyos under a frayed canvas awning while Javed the driver grabbed a quick meal. A young boy brought them two chipped mugs of strong, cardamom-laced chai.

"In my previous audits in Sub-Saharan Africa," Floris noted, blowing on his tea, "the climate shocks almost immediately trigger a gender crisis.

Does that pattern hold here?"

"It magnifies here," Shaayan said, wrapping his hands around the hot mug. "When a disaster hits—a stoneflood in these mountains or a drought in the south—the men leave. They migrate to the cities to find daily-wage labor. The women, the girls, and the children are left behind in the ruins."

He looked at Floris, ensuring the researcher understood the gravity of the blind spot. "The INGOs drop boxes of rice and call it relief. But they ignore the biological reality of the women left in those disaster zones. When the cameras leave, they are completely abandoned. There are no menstrual hygiene products. Girls drop out of whatever makeshift schools survive because they cannot manage their periods in a ruin. Pregnant women walk miles over broken roads to find a clinic. The climate doesn't just destroy their homes, Floris. It strips them of their dignity and their health."

Floris looked at the roaring river, the stark reality of Shaayan's words settling over him. "We fund infrastructure," Floris murmured. "We don't fund survival."

"You fund concrete," Shaayan corrected gently. "But resilience isn't concrete. It's the teacher in Balochistan fighting for sanitary pads. It's the local doctor setting up a clinic right in the crosshairs of a disaster because the state abandoned the valley."

"Like the doctor in Haiderpur," Floris noted. Shaayan had briefed him on their ultimate destination. "Dr. Parisa."

"Exactly like Parisa," Shaayan nodded, a tight knot forming in his chest.

They finished their tea and got back on the road. As they drove deeper into the Karakoram, the landscape became increasingly severe. By late afternoon, the road began a steep, winding ascent. The temperature plummeted.

Javed brought the Land Cruiser to a slow halt on the shoulder of the highway, cutting the engine.

Below them lay Ashq Abad lake. It was a breathtaking, unnatural shade of turquoise, stretching for miles between the jagged peaks. But the beauty was a deception.

Shaayan got out of the car, walking to the edge of the guardrail. Floris followed him, holding a pair of binoculars.

"My god," Floris breathed, looking at the far end of the lake.

He wasn't looking at the water. He was looking at the dam—a massive, chaotic plug of loose mountain debris, boulders, and pulverized rock that had choked the river years ago after a massive landslide. And clinging to the steep, unstable slopes directly above the lake were five distinct, multi-story concrete hotel complexes, their foundations cut into the fault lines.

"The land mafia," Shaayan said, his voice barely a whisper over the wind. "They bought the permits and built on a fault line. They advertise it as luxury tourism."

"If that slope fails..." Floris started, doing the math in his head.

"If that slope fails," Shaayan finished for him, his eyes tracing the path of the water, "thousands of tons of concrete and rock will crash into the lake. It will create a displacement wave. The tsunami will overtop that rubble dam and blow it wide open. It's a catastrophe triggered by human greed."

Shaayan turned, pointing down into the narrow, plunging valley immediately below the rubble dam. Snaking along the riverbed, entirely defenseless against the impending wall of water, was a dense settlement of stone and wood houses.

"That is Haiderpur," Shaayan said, the dread finally breaking through his professional armor. "And we are running out of time."

Chapter - 9

THE GHOSTS OF BAKU

Gilgit-Baltistan.

Floris Evers left the following morning. They parted ways at the Gilgit transport hub, the Dutchman securing a ride south toward the plains of Rahim Yar Khan to inspect the drought-stricken agricultural belts.

"You were right, Shaayan," Floris had said, shaking his hand firmly before climbing into his jeep. "The spreadsheets are blind. I'll send my preliminary report to The Hague tonight. I'm recommending an immediate halt to all funding for those concrete 'resilience' centers until the local governments enforce zoning laws."

"Make it loud, Floris," Shaayan had replied. "Safe travels."

With Floris gone, the professional, analytical detachment Shaayan usually wore vanished completely. The ticking clock in his head grew deafening. He hired a local driver and turned back toward the shadow of the mountain, descending into the narrow, plunging valley of Haiderpur.

The village was breathtaking. Terraced fields of apricot and cherry trees cascaded down the steep slopes, framing houses built of river stone and ancient timber. It was a place of profound, quiet endurance. But as

Shaayan looked up, tracing the trajectory of the valley walls, he saw only the executioner's blade. The rubble dam of Ashq Abad lake loomed high above them, groaning under the weight of the water and the sheer, greedy mass of the concrete hotels cut into the unstable fault lines above it.

Shaayan had the driver stop at the edge of the village bazaar. He walked the rest of the way to the small, whitewashed building at the end of the dirt road. A hand-painted sign in Urdu and English read: Haiderpur Community Health Clinic.

He stepped inside. The waiting area was crowded with elderly men clutching coughing chests and mothers holding feverish children. And at the center of the organized chaos, moving with a calm, commanding grace, was Dr. Parisa.

She was wearing a white coat over a simple, dark green shalwar kameez. As she turned to hand a prescription to an anxious mother, she caught sight of Shaayan standing in the doorway. She smiled, the exhaustion around her eyes lifting momentarily.

"She turned to hand a prescription to an anxious mother, she caught sight of Shaayan standing in the doorway. She smiled, the exhaustion around her eyes lifting momentarily. "Shaayan," she called out, stepping away from the counter. "Aap wapas aa gaye. You're back."

Every time he saw her, it felt like taking a physical blow to the chest.

Shaayan's compassion was boundless—it was the engine of his entire career—and he wanted every single soul in this doomed valley to evacuate. But his desperation for Parisa was entirely, agonizingly personal.

It was a secret he kept buried so deep it barely saw the light of his own conscious thoughts. Looking at Dr. Parisa was like looking through a tear in the fabric of time. The uncanny resemblance was terrifying. The shape of her jaw, the dark, fierce intelligence in her eyes, even the

cadence of her laugh—she was the living, breathing echo of another Parisa.

Baku, Azerbaijan. Twenty years ago. The memory washed over him, vivid and sudden. The smell of the Caspian Sea in the winter. The biting wind whipping through the cobblestone streets of the Old City. He had been young, unburdened, and entirely consumed by a woman named Parisa. She had been a storm of a person—brilliant, unpredictable, and fiercely independent. They had shared a few brief, incandescent months that permanently altered the architecture of his heart. Then, the chaotic currents of life had pulled them apart. He had returned to Pakistan; she had gone westward. He never saw her again.

He knew, with absolute clarity, that the young doctor standing before him was not his lost love. She was simply a cosmic coincidence, a younger reflection sharing the same name and the same face. Shaayan harbored no romantic illusions, no hidden desires to bridge the gap between his past and her present. His connection to this young doctor was purely protective. He just wanted her safe. He wanted to know that somewhere in the world, a Parisa with those eyes and that spirit was living a long, happy life.

"Yes, I'm back," Shaayan said, forcing a smile, pushing the ghosts of Baku back into the dark.

He waited until the clinic closed its doors for the afternoon. They sat on a wooden bench behind the building, looking out over the rushing river. Parisa handed him a cup of tea, her hands smelling faintly of antiseptic soap.

"Khairiyat? Is everything alright?" Parisa said gently. "You have that look, Shaayan. The one where you are carrying the weight of the mountain."

"I am worried about the mountain," Shaayan admitted, taking the tea but not drinking it. He turned to her, his voice entirely devoid of its

usual diplomatic polish. "Parisa, you need to leave Haiderpur. You need to pack your things, take your family, and move to Gilgit. Or Islamabad. Anywhere but here."

Parisa's smile faded. "Shaayan, we've talked about this. The clinic just got a new solar incubator. I have three women due to deliver next month who—"

"The lake is going to breach," Shaayan cut her off, the urgency finally bleeding through. "I was just up there with a European DRR specialist. The heatwave is melting the glaciers feeding it, and the water level is critical. But that isn't even the real threat. The land mafia has built five concrete hotels on the landslide fault above the spillway. When the heavy rains come, the slope is going to fail. Thousands of tons of concrete and rock will hit the lake, and the displacement wave will annihilate that rubble dam."

He pointed toward the roaring river at their feet. "That water won't stay in the banks. It will carry the concrete down this valley like shrapnel. It will wipe Haiderpur off the map. You have to evacuate."

Parisa looked at the river, then up at the distant, looming shadow of the rubble dam. She didn't argue the science. She was a woman of logic; she knew the mountain was unstable.

"I believe you," Parisa said softly.

"Then let me help you move," Shaayan pleaded. "I have contacts in Islamabad. I can get you a placement in a top hospital. You are brilliant, Parisa. You can save lives anywhere."

She turned to look at him, her dark eyes filled with a sad, immovable resolve. It was the exact same look the Parisa in Baku had given him the day they parted.

"I can save lives anywhere," Parisa agreed. "But these people have no one else. The government doesn't send doctors here. The big NGOs only come for photo ops after a tragedy. If a child spikes a fever in the

middle of the night, or a farmer slices his leg open with a scythe, I am the only thing standing between them and the grave."

"You can't treat them if you are buried under thirty feet of water and concrete," Shaayan argued, his voice cracking.

"Agar yeh log yahan hain, toh main bhi yahan hoon. If they stay, I stay," Parisa said, her tone gentle but made of iron. "This is my home, Shaayan. These are my people. These are my people. I know the mountain is angry, but I cannot abandon them to it."

Shaayan stared at her, the terrible realization washing over him. He couldn't save her by pulling her out of the valley. Her compassion was just as fatal as his own. She was tethered to this soil, to these people.

If he wanted to save the ghost of his past, he was going to have to save the entire village.

He stood up, looking at the looming, deadly crest of the dam high above. The government in Islamabad refused to see the danger. The provincial authorities were paid off by the hotel mafias. There was no official cavalry coming.

"If you won't leave," Shaayan said, his voice dropping to a dangerous, resolute whisper, "then I have to figure out how to drain that lake before the mountain falls."

Chapter - 10

THE BREAKING POINT

Islamabad. The Newsroom of Channel 24/7.

The television screens suspended above the newsroom floor were all tuned to the state broadcaster. At the podium stood the Federal Minister for Overseas Pakistanis, flanked by delegates from the European Union. Zubia leaned against her desk, watching the live feed with her arms crossed and a rare, genuine smile on her face.

"...which is why today, the government is launching the National Skilled Migration Initiative," the Minister was saying, the camera flashes illuminating his face. "We are shifting our paradigm. Instead of reacting to irregular migration, we are building institutional bridges. We are opening three new advanced vocational training centers in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, specifically aligned with the labor deficits in EU countries. We are equipping our youth with the exact certifications they need to migrate safely, through regular pathways, and with dignity. It is a win-win for our economy, migrants, and our host countries..."

The coastal crisis—the farmers washing up in the slums of Karachi—remained an agonizing, unsolved failure. But for the boys in central Punjab and KP, the state had finally opened a legal door. The

"Lalamusa Pipeline" investigation hadn't aired as a scandalous exposé, but her relentless back-channel pressure and targeted reporting on the economic logic had moved the needle.

"Don't look so smug," a voice said.

Zubia turned to see Sarmad handing her a printout. It was a transcript from Zain's prime-time political talk show from the night before.

"I'm not smug, Sarmad. I'm just appreciating the rare sight of the government actually doing its job," she said, taking the paper.

"They did it because it brings in foreign remittances," Sarmad replied pragmatically. "But don't think you're winning everywhere. Read Zain's transcript. The timber cartel is pushing back hard."

Zubia scanned the paper. Zain had spent twenty minutes interviewing a "development consultant" who was aggressively labeling the Swat deforestation reports as an "anti-development conspiracy funded by foreign NGOs." The timber mafia had deployed their touts across the media landscape, buying prime-time airwaves to block any provincial action against them.

"They are dug in deep, Zubia," Sarmad warned. "They are threatening to pull advertising from three major networks if the Forestry Department initiates an audit. You poked a bear, and now the bear is buying the forest."

Zubia crushed the printout in her hand. "They can buy the touts, Sarmad, but they can't bribe gravity. The slopes will eventually fail."

Before Sarmad could reply, Zubia's mobile phone erupted. It was Dr. Maira calling from Quetta.

Zubia answered, stepping away from the noise of the newsroom. "Dr. Maira. Tell me you are watching the migration press conference."

"Forget the press conference," Maira's voice was electric with

excitement. "Turn to channel four. Right now."

Zubia grabbed a remote from a nearby desk and switched one of the monitors to a rival news network.

A breaking news ticker in bright red flashed across the bottom of the screen: FINANCE MINISTRY ANNOUNCES RELIEF PACKAGE: MHH PRODUCTS EXEMPT FROM IMPORT DUTIES.

"The Finance Minister just folded," Maira said, practically shouting over the phone. "We made them acknowledged! Your media ambush worked, Zubia.. "Your media ambush worked, Zubia. The morning shows dragged him through the mud all week, using our data. He just called a press briefing to announce a supplementary finance bill. They are zero-rating the raw materials and abolishing the luxury tax entirely. It's a massive, nationwide victory."

Zubia felt a rush of pure adrenaline. They had done it. They had actually hacked the federal bureaucracy. "Maira, that's incredible. The schools in Balochistan—"

"Saira Hameed is already authorizing the procurement for the provincial schools as we speak," Maira confirmed. "We just saved a generation of girls from dropping out, Zubia. But where is Shaayan? I've been trying to call him for two hours. He's the architect of this whole strategy. He should be taking a victory lap."

"I'll find him," Zubia promised, a massive grin on her face. "I'll make sure he calls you."

She hung up and immediately dialed Shaayan's number. It was time to celebrate. He had been right—the coordinated strike had backed the system into a corner.

The phone didn't even ring. It went straight to a dead, automated voice. "The number you are calling is currently out of the coverage area."

Zubia frowned. She pulled up WhatsApp. She had sent him a message

that morning. One grey tick. "Where are you, Shaayan?" she muttered to herself. She knew he had headed north with the Dutch researcher, but Gilgit usually had decent cell reception near the highway.

She went back to work, drafting the evening news bulletin, her mind buzzing with the dual victories of the day. But as the hours ticked by and the sun set over the Margalla Hills, a cold, creeping unease began to settle in her stomach. Shaayan never went dark when a policy was on the table. By 8:00 PM, she had called him seven times. All dead ends.

At 8:45 PM, she was walking to her car in the network's basement parking lot when her phone vibrated in her hand.

She answered instantly. "Shaayan?"

"...Zubia..." The voice was barely recognizable. It was Shaayan, but the audio was clipped and distorted, drowned out by a terrifying, concussive roar in the background. It sounded like a jet engine, or a mountain tearing itself apart.

"Shaayan, I can barely hear you! Where are you?" she shouted, pressing the phone hard against her ear. "The MHH tax reform passed! You did it!"

"...listen to me..." Shaayan's voice broke through the static, urgent and breathless. "Ashq Abad... the slope failed. The lake... the rubble dam is breaching..."

The blood drained from Zubia's face. The stoneflood.

"Shaayan, get to high ground! Are you safe?"

"...official evacuation... too slow... panic in the valley..." Another burst of static, followed by the sickening sound of snapping timber somewhere in the background. "I'm in Haiderpur... helping Parisa... the clinic... trapped..."

"Shaayan, leave the clinic!" Zubia screamed into the phone, the horror

of his geography hitting her. Haiderpur was directly in the spillway.

"...need aviation... NDMA doesn't know the scale... tell them..." His voice dropped, suddenly sounding terribly far away. "Tell them we are out of time, Zubia..."

The line went dead.

Zubia stood frozen in the concrete parking garage, staring at the screen. The call had lasted eighteen seconds.

The policy victories, the tax reforms, the migration pathways—it all vanished, eclipsed by the brutal, physical reality of the climate collapsing on the man who had fought so hard to fix it. Shaayan was trapped in the crosshairs of a glacial tsunami, and the state's slow, bureaucratic evacuation was going to let him die.

Zubia didn't get into her car. She turned around and sprinted back toward the elevators.

She didn't need to write a story. She needed to hijack a television network, mobilize a helicopter, and force the government to look at the mountain before it buried her friend and an entire valley alive

Chapter - 11

THE STONEFLOOD

Haiderpur, Gilgit-Baltistan.

The mountain did not roar all at once. It began as a deep, subsonic vibration that rattled the glass vials in Dr. Parisa's medicine cabinets. It was the sound of a billion tons of rock and soil losing their grip on the earth.

"Shaayan, grab the other side of the stretcher!" Parisa shouted, her voice cutting through the rising panic in the clinic.

Shaayan lunged forward, grabbing the aluminum handles. On the canvas lay an elderly man, his breathing labored. Together, they hoisted him up, pushing through the double doors of the clinic and out into the chaotic, terrifying night.

The valley of Haiderpur was a scene of desperate, uncoordinated flight. The "official evacuation" had arrived barely an hour ago in the form of a single, panicked police jeep blaring a megaphone. It was too late. The narrow dirt roads leading out of the valley were already choked with stalled tractors, panicked livestock, and people carrying whatever they could strap to their backs.

"To the high terraces!" Shaayan yelled over the din, pointing toward the

steep agricultural steps carved into the valley wall, far above the riverbed. "Upar bhago! Run higher! We can't outrun it on the road! We have to climb!"

They navigated the uneven, rocky path upward, their muscles burning under the weight of the stretcher.

As Shaayan's boots slipped on the loose gravel, his mind, fractured by adrenaline, involuntarily pulled him backward. The sheer, preventable stupidity of this moment felt like a physical weight crushing his chest.

He had seen this exact night play out a dozen times in his head, and he had tried to show it to the men in power.

Flashback. Six months ago. A hyper-air-conditioned boardroom in the Federal Secretariat in Islamabad. Shaayan had thrown the geological surveys of the Ashq Abad rubble dam onto the polished mahogany table. He had pointed directly to the red fault lines beneath the newly constructed luxury hotels. "The slope is mathematically incapable of supporting that concrete," he had warned the provincial planning committee. "If we get a heatwave or a heavy monsoon, the mountain will shear off. It will trigger a displacement wave that will wipe out Haiderpur." A deputy secretary had smiled—a condescending, bureaucratic smirk. "Mr. Shaayan, those hotels represent a billion rupees in foreign tourism investment. You development guys are always so alarmist. The mountain has stood for a million years."

Shaayan gritted his teeth, his grip tightening on the stretcher as they cleared the first terrace. He had been ignored. Just like he had been ignored when he warned the Forestry Department about the Swat timber cartels clearing the pines that anchored the soil. Just like he had been ignored when he told the disaster management agencies that the coastal sea intrusion in Sindh would displace a million farmers.

The state only recognized a crisis when it had a body count. They demanded data, but they governed by autopsies. Today wasn't an anomaly.

The destruction of Haiderpur was just the latest bloody receipt in a long, unbroken ledger of systemic apathy.

"Keep moving!" Parisa screamed, snapping him back to the terrifying present.

Above them, the sky was completely dark, but the acoustic signature of the valley suddenly changed. The low vibration spiked into a deafening, catastrophic crack.

Shaayan looked up toward the lake. He couldn't see it in the dark, but he knew exactly the physics of what had just happened. The slope above Ashq Abad had failed. Thousands of tons of earth, rock, and the heavy concrete foundations of the luxury hotels had just plummeted into the trapped water.

Three seconds later, the displacement wave hit the rubble dam.

The sound was apocalyptic. It wasn't the roar of water; it was the sound of geology being ripped apart. The fragile dam of mountain debris held for a fraction of a second before the sheer kinetic energy of the tsunami blew it wide open.

"Down! Get down!" Shaayan roared.

They hauled the stretcher onto a wide, flat ledge of a cherry orchard, a hundred feet above the valley floor. Shaayan tackled Parisa to the ground, shielding her with his body as a concussive blast of displaced air rushed down the canyon, carrying a thick, choking cloud of pulverized rock.

Then came the water.

It didn't look like a river. It looked like a moving wall of black asphalt. It was a liquid bulldozer composed of mud, boulders the size of cars, shattered pine trees, and the twisted, jagged rebar of the five luxury hotels that the state had sworn were perfectly safe.

Shaayan and Parisa lay on the high terrace, coughing through the dust, and watched the valley of Haiderpur simply cease to exist.

The stoneflood hit the village at forty miles an hour. The concrete shrapnel from the hotels acted as battering rams, pulverizing the stone and timber houses instantly. Shaayan watched the whitewashed roof of Parisa's community clinic... shatter like a porcelain teacup under a sledgehammer, vanishing completely beneath the churning, black mass. The destruction was absolute. The riverbed was scoured clean of human history in less than sixty seconds.

Parisa knelt at the edge of the terrace, her hands gripping the dirt. She didn't scream. She didn't cry. She just stared at the violent, empty void where her life's work had been, her face illuminated by the pale moonlight cutting through the dust cloud.

Shaayan moved beside her, his heart breaking for her, and for the country. He placed a steadying hand on her shoulder. The ghost of Baku had survived, but she had lost her world.

"The clinic," Parisa whispered, her voice hollow. "All the records. The solar incubators. The medicines. Gone."

"You got the people out," Shaayan said fiercely, pointing to the higher terraces where hundreds of villagers were huddled in the dark, traumatized but alive. "You saved them, Parisa. The building is just rock. You saved the heartbeat."

She looked at him, her dark eyes reflecting a profound, exhausted grief. "Hum yahan la-waris hain. We are orphans here. What happens now, Shaayan? The road is gone. We have no food, no clean water, and I have fifty wounded people on this mountain. The government didn't listen to you before. Why would they come for us now?"

Shaayan pulled his phone from his pocket. The screen was cracked, and the signal bar was completely dead. But he remembered the last eighteen seconds of connectivity he had before the towers washed away. He

remembered Zubia's voice.

"Because I didn't warn a bureaucrat this time," Shaayan said, looking up at the sky, praying to hear the distant, rhythmic thumping of a chopper rotors. "I warned a journalist. And she is going to make sure the whole country is watching."

Before The Valley Drowns

Chapter - 10

THE VOID AND THE ECHO

The Karakoram Airspace.

The nation did not wake up to a political talk show that morning. They woke up to a live, unblinking satellite feed of a mountain tearing itself apart.

Sitting in the vibrating belly of a rescue Puma helicopter, Zubia Qureshi looked down at the dark, jagged spine of the Karakoram. She had bypassed Sarmad, bypassed the corporate board, and directly leaked the Ashq Abad telemetry data to every major news anchor and foreign correspondent in her contact list.

She hadn't done it alone. Muhammad Anwar. Sitting back in F-7/4, Islamabad, had leveraged his decades of governance contacts, feeding her the direct, unlisted mobile numbers of the aviation wing commanders. "Hit them all with the telemetry data simultaneously,"

Anwar had instructed her over a secure line, his voice a calm anchor in the chaos. "Make the political cost of ignoring you higher than the cost of scrambling the choppers. Give them no room to debate." Armed with his backing, she had turned Shaayan's desperate, eighteen-second phone call into an unavoidable national emergency. She had turned

Shaayan's desperate, eighteen-second phone call into a screaming, unavoidable national emergency.

The sheer public outrage had forced the Prime Minister's office to scramble the aviation wing before dawn. Now, she was flying into the throat of the disaster, the heavy headset pressing over her ears, listening to the frantic radio chatter of the pilots.

"Visual on the Haiderpur sector," the pilot's voice crackled, stripping away all professional stoicism. "Ya Allah... the dam is completely gone. The valley is erased."

Down in the valley, the world had been reduced to a deafening, mechanical roar.

Shaayan stood knee-deep in freezing, churning mud, his arms screaming in agony as he hoisted a terrified young boy onto the higher terrace. Around him, the people of Haiderpur were shedding the weight of their lives. Men dropped heavy wooden trunks containing generations of heirlooms; women abandoned the silver dowries they had tied to their waists.

You could not bribe the stoneflood. You could only outrun it.

The water was rising with terrifying speed, black and thick with pulverized concrete from the ruined hotels above.

"Oopar chalo! Jaldi!" Shaayan screamed, his voice raw, pulling an elderly man up the muddy embankment. "Keep moving up! Do not look back!"

A few yards away, Parisa was moving like a ghost through the chaos, her white coat stained brown, binding a woman's bleeding leg with torn fabric. She was the epicenter of calm in a collapsing world. But as the water crested the lower orchards, swallowing the centuries-old cherry trees whole, the physical space on the high terraces began to vanish.

Then, cutting through the apocalyptic roar of the water, came the rhythmic, heavy thumping of rotors.

Three rescue helicopters crested the ridge, their massive searchlights cutting through the thick dust cloud like divine spears. The downdraft was a weapon itself, whipping the trees into a frenzy and blinding the survivors with flying grit. The first chopper hovered just above the widest, highest terrace, unable to land on the uneven slope but dropping its winch and lowering a rescue basket.

A commando leaned out the side door, his voice booming through a megaphone. "Women, children, and the injured! Move!"

The evacuation was brutal and frantic. Shaayan and the local men formed a human chain, passing the children forward, shielding them from the blinding dust and the freezing spray of the rising water.

Shaayan grabbed Parisa by the arm as the basket came down for its fourth run. "Go! Get in!"

Parisa planted her feet, the wind whipping her hair wildly across her face. She looked at the basket, then at the hundreds of people still stranded, and finally at Shaayan. Her eyes were wide with a sudden, paralyzing terror. She knew the mathematics of the helicopters. There wasn't enough room, and there wasn't enough time.

Parisa shouted over the rotors, grabbing his jacket. "I am not leaving you here! You came back for me! You are trapped because of me!"

"I am here because it was my job to be here," Shaayan fired back, his hands gripping her shoulders tightly. He looked at her—seeing the ghost of Baku, but mostly seeing the brilliant, stubborn doctor who had given everything to this valley. "Your people need you alive, Parisa. They need you to rebuild."

"Shaayan, please—"

"Don't be stubborn!" he roared, his voice breaking. He offered her a fiercely warm smile, projecting an absolute certainty he did not feel. "I always find a way out. Now go."

Before she could fight him, Shaayan physically lifted her, pushing her into the arms of the waiting commando in the basket. As the winch pulled her up into the belly of the helicopter, Parisa reached a hand down toward him, her face a mask of anguish.

Shaayan stepped back, giving her a sharp, final salute.

The water surged again—a massive, violent swell that tore away the terrace directly beneath them.

"Shaayan! The bridge!" one of the village elders yelled.

The remaining men—about a dozen of them—had been pushed back to the absolute highest point in the valley: an old, stone-and-steel suspension bridge built high across the gorge. It was the only ground left.

Shaayan scrambled up the embankment, pulling the last man onto the wooden planks just as the water obliterated the earth they had been standing on. They were stranded on the span, suspended over a violent, churning black ocean. The bridge groaned, the ancient steel cables screaming under the immense, unnatural pressure of the wind and the rising water.

High above, Zubia's helicopter broke through the dust cloud.

Zubia leaned out the open side door, secured by her harness, the freezing wind biting her face. She scanned the apocalyptic ruin below. The clinic was gone. The bazaar was gone. There was only the roaring water.

And then, illuminated in the sweep of the chopper's searchlight, she saw it.

The suspension bridge. A handful of men clinging to the steel cables. And standing at the center, looking up at the light, was Shaayan.

"There! On the bridge! Drop the lines!" Zubia screamed into her

headset, pointing frantically.

The pilot banked hard, fighting the violent updrafts caused by the displaced air of the flood. "Too much turbulence! I can't hold a hover that low! The cables will clip the rotors!"

"Neeche le kar jao! You have to try!" Zubia pleaded, her heart hammering against her ribs. She looked down, her eyes locking onto Shaayan's silhouette.

Shaayan looked up at the massive machine fighting the wind above him. He couldn't see who was inside, but he knew she was there. He knew the media had come. He knew the country was watching. He had forced the state to finally look at the mountain, even if it cost him everything.

Then, the stoneflood delivered its final blow.

A massive chunk of the ruined concrete hotels, carried miles down the valley by the dark water, slammed directly into the primary stone pillar of the suspension bridge. The impact was not cinematic; it was brutally, mechanically fast. The sound was like a cannon shot. The main steel cable snapped, whipping through the air like a dying snake.

From the helicopter, Zubia let out a scream that was swallowed instantly by the roar of the rotors.

She watched the bridge buckle. The wooden planks shattered in a cascading wave. In the blinding beam of the searchlight, the figures on the bridge seemed to hang in the air for a fraction of a second—defiant silhouettes against the total collapse of their world.

Shaayan did not brace for impact. He kept his eyes on the light above him, his face calm, his life's work echoing in the deafening roar of the water. Then, the mist rose up, thick and impenetrable, as the bridge collapsed entirely into the churning black void.

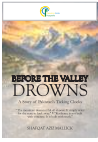
The helicopter circled the gorge for an hour, its searchlight sweeping desperately over the violent, empty surface of the floodwater. But there

was no bridge. There was no shore. There was only the water, moving relentlessly southward, carrying the heavy, unspoken costs of a changing world with it.

Whether the mountain had claimed him, or whether he had found one last, impossible way out in the dark, the river did not say.

It only roared on, leaving nothing behind but the echo of his name, and the fierce, unbreakable resolve of the women he had left behind to fight the next battle.

About the Book



Before the Valley Drowns is a powerful exploration of Pakistan's intersecting crises, where systemic neglect meets environmental collapse. Following policy expert Shaayan Mallick and investigative journalist Zubia Qureshi, the narrative unmaskes the "ticking clocks" threatening the nation's future. From the violent "stonefloods" of Swat—fueled by a ruthless timber mafia—to the silent desperation of illegal migration routes in Punjab and drought in Jhal Magsi, the novel exposes the human cost of bureaucratic indifference. It is a vital call to action, honoring the unbreakable resolve of those fighting for survival.

About Freedom Gate Prosperity



Freedom Gate Prosperity (FGP) is a nationally recognized non-profit organization registered under Section 42 of the Companies Act, 2017, in Pakistan. Headquartered in Islamabad, FGP works across the country to empower youth, women, and marginalized communities through inclusive development, climate action, and civic engagement. The organization promotes green livelihoods, entrepreneurship, and democratic participation through research, training, and community-based initiatives. By bridging policy and practice, FGP delivers practical solutions that create lasting social and economic impact. Guided by the values of dignity, opportunity, and sustainability, FGP is committed to building a resilient, equitable, and prosperous Pakistan.

About the Author



Shafqat Aziz Mallick is a Senior Advisor in Policy Development and Strategic Narratives, based in Islamabad, currently serving as Strategic Policy Advisor at Freedom Gate Prosperity (FGP). With extensive experience in the development sector, policy reform, and climate change resilience, his work has focused on translating complex systemic vulnerabilities into actionable advocacy. Before the Valley Drowns draws on his deep, on-the-ground expertise in navigating Pakistan's political, environmental, and bureaucratic landscapes.

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