

A woman in a police uniform stands in the center of the frame. She is wearing a dark green uniform with a matching cap that has a badge on it. Her expression is serious. The background is a dark, moody cityscape at night. To the left, there are tall, dark buildings. To the right, there are construction cranes and the skeletal remains of a building under construction. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somber.

NIKHIL BAJAJ

One Officer. One Dead Architect. Too Many Secrets.

THE CONCRETE BLOOM

Author's Note 4
Prologue 6
1: Dust and Silence..... 17

Author's Note

When I decided to write about environmental crimes and corporate corruption, I knew I needed a protagonist who embodied the kind of integrity that seems increasingly rare in our world. Someone who would choose principle over convenience, justice over safety, truth over silence.

I found that character in Sub-Inspector Saloni Talwar. But I also found her much closer to home.

This book is dedicated to my wife, **Saloni**—the real-life inspiration behind the fictional detective who bears her name.

Like her fictional counterpart, my Saloni possesses an unwavering moral compass and the courage to stand up for what's right, even when it's difficult. She's the one who encouraged me to write this story, who listened to my concerns about corporate environmental destruction, and who reminded me that individual voices matter in the fight against systemic corruption.

The Concrete Bloom explores the human cost of unchecked development, the price of progress built on exploitation, and the courage it takes to seek justice when powerful forces prefer silence. These aren't just abstract themes—they're realities that affect communities across India every day.

To my Saloni: Thank you for being my moral compass, my first reader, and the inspiration for a character who proves that individual integrity can still make a difference in a world that often seems to reward the opposite.

And to readers: May you find in these pages not just a crime story, but a reminder that the fight for justice requires all of us—one investigation, one truth, one courageous choice at a time.

Nikhil Bajaj

Tech Professional | Storyteller-in-Progress

Prologue

The cacophony of Old Delhi was Saloni Talwar's first language. It was a relentless symphony that had shaped her understanding of the world—a discordant yet strangely harmonious blend of bicycle bells clanging against the narrow stone walls of centuries-old lanes, street vendors hawking everything from glistening jalebis that caught the afternoon sun to iridescent plastic toys that would break within hours, the guttural calls of men pulling overloaded wooden carts through passages barely wide enough for two people to pass, the distant, melodic wail of azaan from the towering minarets of Jama Masjid echoing off the weathered sandstone of Mughal architecture, and underlying it all, the incessant, impatient honking of cycle-rickshaws and the occasional audacious scooter braving the serpentine arteries of Shahjahanabad.

Their small, two-room police quarters, perched precariously above a bustling wholesale spice market near Khari Baoli, vibrated with this energy day and night like a living organism. The building itself was a testament to Delhi's layered history—British-era construction grafted onto Mughal foundations, with modern electrical wiring snaking haphazardly along walls that had witnessed the rise and fall of empires. The air itself was thick and complex, a potent cocktail of fragrant cardamom and cloves from the market below that would seep into every fibre of clothing and every strand of hair, the sharp metallic tang of overloaded electrical transformers that sparked and hummed in the humid summers, the sweetness of frying parathas from the stall at the corner where Masterji had been serving the same recipe for thirty years, and underlying it all, the ancient, dusty breath of centuries-old stone and humanity packed so tight that privacy was a luxury few could afford.

This was the world that shaped Saloni Talwar, a world far removed from the manicured lawns and quiet bungalows of Lutyens' Delhi that often housed government officials of her father's rank. And at the heart of this vibrant, chaotic, beautiful mess was Inspector Surinder Talwar—a man whose integrity was as solid as the Red Fort's walls and whose understanding of human nature ran deeper than the Yamuna's murky waters.

Surinder Talwar wasn't a towering figure in the physical sense, nor did he possess the booming voice one might associate with a policeman navigating the unruly arteries of the walled city. He stood barely five-foot-eight, with a wiry strength that spoke of years spent walking these very lanes, climbing narrow staircases to investigate domestic disputes, and chasing pickpockets through markets where every vendor knew his name. His eyes, often weary from the weight of what he'd seen, held a sharp, observant quality that missed little—the nervous twitch of a suspect's hand, the way a witness's story changed with each telling, the subtle signs that separated truth from carefully constructed lies.

But it was in his small, meticulously organized study—a curtained-off alcove in their main living space that served as office, library, and sanctuary—that Saloni found her true education. The study was barely large enough for a scarred teak desk, a revolving chair that groaned in protest, and two tall almirahs overflowing with case files and legal tomes. This cramped space was Saloni's sanctuary, where she learned to decipher the nuances of her father's work.

Here, amidst stacks of documents that told the stories of Delhi's hidden life, Saloni would sit for hours, ostensibly doing homework but actually absorbing the rhythm and methodology of detective work. She learned to read the subtle shift in her father's posture when a case was particularly

vexing, the way his pen would tap against the desk in rhythm with his thinking, the gesture of running his hand through thinning hair when a lead went cold.

Through her father's eyes, she learned to see the street not as a playground, but as a complex tapestry of human lives interwoven with commerce, community, desperation, and inevitably, crime. The petty thefts from Chandni Chowk shopkeepers weren't just statistics—they were stories of families struggling to survive. The disputes over property lines in ancient havelis weren't just legal matters—they were tales of family feuds stretching back decades.

Her mother, Sushma Talwar, was the quiet strength that anchored their family. A teacher at a small government girls' school near Fatehpuri Masjid, she brought home stories of giggling students and small triumphs—the counterpoint to Surinder's darker case files. She tried to steer Saloni toward lighter pursuits, filling their home with poetry books and sitar lessons, hoping to show her daughter that Delhi was not just a city of crime but also a place where art and culture flourished.

"Surinder," Sushma would often whisper in the quiet hours after Saloni was supposedly asleep, "she sees too much. She listens too closely. This isn't a life for a girl like her, so bright, so sensitive."

"She has a good head on her shoulders, Sushma," Surinder would reply, his voice tired but firm. "She understands more than you think. It's better she learns about the world as it really is, not as we wish it to be. Shielding her won't protect her forever."

Saloni remembered one sweltering afternoon when she was ten. A distraught woman had been brought to their home by a constable—her

small son had vanished while playing near the Yamuna ghats. Their tiny living room felt suffocating with the woman's raw grief, but Surinder didn't rush her to the impersonal police station. Instead, he sat with her at their small dining table, listening with focused attention that slowly chipped away at her hysteria.

His questions were gentle but precise: "What was he wearing? Did he have favourite hiding spots? Who did he usually play with?" He made careful notes in his pocket diary, building a complete picture that would guide the search. When the woman mentioned her son was afraid of deep water, Surinder made a special note—understanding that this detail might determine which areas to search first.

The boy was found two days later at Old Delhi Railway Station, disoriented but safe. Saloni never forgot the look on her father's face that night—not triumphant, but filled with deep, weary relief. It wasn't the successful case closure that mattered, she realized. It was the restoration—the small but crucial act of setting something right in a chaotic world.

Another incident during Diwali when she was twelve involved two brothers who owned a famous sweet shop. Their argument over business roles had drawn an angry crowd, and local constables arrived ready to impose order through intimidation. But Surinder appeared and drew the brothers away from the crowd, speaking quietly about their shared history, their father's legacy, the reputation they were responsible for preserving.

The anger dissipated, replaced by shamefaced apologies. Saloni learned that true authority didn't always come from uniform or force, but from understanding human nature and appealing to people's better instincts.

As Saloni grew older, her observations became more analytical. She began reading newspapers more critically, connecting sanitized crime reports with the troubled expressions on her father's face. She understood the pressures he faced—political nudges from superiors, lack of resources, overwhelming caseloads in a city that never slept. She saw the compromises, the frustrations, the times when justice seemed elusive.

Sushma enrolled Saloni in science classes, dreaming of her daughter in a doctor's white coat instead of a police uniform. Saloni excelled but found herself drawn to the unpredictable study of human behaviour rather than the elegant certainty of scientific formulas. Why did people lie when truth would serve them better? What drove someone to violence? These questions seemed more urgent than predictable chemical reactions.

When Saloni announced her decision to join the police force during her final year of college, Sushma wept—not with anger, but with heartbroken understanding. "I knew it," she whispered. "All these years, I saw it in your eyes. Just like your father."

The conversation that followed stretched late into the night, with Sushma recounting her fears about the dangers and compromises that police work would demand. She spoke of the wives she knew who had lost husbands to criminals' bullets, of families torn apart by the irregular hours and constant stress, of the way corruption crept into even the most honest hearts when survival demanded flexibility with principles.

"Beta," she said, holding Saloni's hands in hers, "I've watched your father carry the weight of this city's pain for twenty-five years. I've seen him come home with blood on his uniform and despair in his eyes. I've

watched him struggle with cases he couldn't solve and justice he couldn't deliver. Is this really the life you want?"

Saloni understood her mother's concerns, but she also understood something deeper—a calling that went beyond personal safety or comfort. "Mama, every day I see injustice in the world. I see powerful people taking advantage of the weak, and I see good people suffering because no one stands up for them. Papa taught me that someone has to stand in the gap, someone has to say 'this far and no further.' I want to be one of those people."

Surinder surprised her with his reaction. He remained silent for a long time, his eyes studying his daughter's face as if seeing her clearly for the first time. Then he walked to his study and returned with a small object wrapped in faded silk that had once been white but had yellowed with age and careful handling.

He unwrapped it carefully, revealing a tarnished silver locket shaped like a tiny shield. The metal showed the patina of decades, but the craftsmanship was still evident—delicate engravings around the edges that depicted the scales of justice balanced by a steady hand, and in the center, the simple inscription "Satyameva Jayate" in Devanagari script.

"This belonged to my father," he said, his voice thick with emotion that rarely surfaced. "Your grandfather, Constable Mohan Lal Talwar. He served in Punjab Police in Lahore before Partition changed everything we thought we knew about home and belonging."

Surinder opened the locket carefully, revealing a tiny photograph of a man in uniform who bore a strong resemblance to both father and daughter. Mohan Lal Talwar stood straight and proud, his hand resting

on the shoulder of a young boy who would grow up to become Saloni's father.

"He joined the police in 1925, when India was still under British rule and being a policeman meant serving masters who didn't always have India's best interests at heart. But he believed that law and order were necessary for society to function, and that someone had to maintain justice even in an unjust system."

Surinder's voice took on the cadence of someone recounting family legend, stories that had been passed down through generations and polished by repeated telling. "During the communal riots that preceded Partition, your grandfather saved dozens of lives—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, it didn't matter to him. He believed that every life had value, that every person deserved protection regardless of their religion or politics."

"What happened to him?" Saloni asked, though she suspected the answer would be painful.

"He was killed in 1947, during the mass migrations that followed Partition. A mob attacked a refugee convoy he was escorting, and he died protecting people he had never met, people who couldn't protect themselves. He was forty-three years old."

The weight of family history settled around Saloni like a mantle she was being asked to wear. Three generations of service, three generations of men who had chosen duty over safety, principle over pragmatism.

"He wore this locket every day of his career," Surinder continued, pressing it into her palm. "He said it reminded him why he had chosen to serve—not for the government that employed him, not for the salary that

fed his family, but for the ideal that justice was possible if good people were willing to fight for it."

The silver felt warm in her hand, as if it had absorbed the body heat of all the men who had worn it before her. "Papa, what if I'm not strong enough? What if I can't live up to his example, or yours?"

Surinder smiled for the first time that evening, and Saloni saw in his expression the same mixture of pride and concern that had characterized his approach to parenting throughout her childhood. "Beta, strength isn't about never being afraid or never making mistakes. Strength is about doing what's right even when you are afraid, even when you don't know if you'll succeed."

"The uniform will give you authority," he said, echoing words his own father had spoken decades earlier, "but it's what you do with that authority, the integrity you bring to it, that will define who you are as a person and as a police officer. The system will try to grind you down, to make you cynical, to convince you that corruption is just the way things work. Don't let it. Hold onto why you're doing this."

That night, Saloni fastened the silver locket around her neck for the first time, feeling the weight of three generations of service settling against her heart. She understood that she was not just choosing a career—she was accepting a legacy, taking on the responsibility of carrying forward principles that had been tested by violence, upheaval, and the countless small compromises that could erode even the strongest moral foundation.

The years that followed had tested that foundation repeatedly. Her first posting in South Delhi had introduced her to the casual corruption that characterized much of urban policing—small bribes that officers justified

as necessary supplements to inadequate salaries, wilful blindness to the crimes of well-connected individuals, the gradual erosion of idealism that came with exposure to a system that often rewarded the wrong people for the wrong reasons.

But the silver locket had remained her anchor, a daily reminder of the principles that had guided her grandfather through the chaos of Partition and her father through the complexities of modern urban crime. When colleagues suggested that "everyone does it" to justify taking money from grateful citizens, when superiors hinted that certain investigations should be conducted with appropriate discretion, when the weight of bureaucracy and political pressure threatened to overwhelm her commitment to justice, the locket reminded her why she had chosen this path.

Now, twenty years into her career, she had developed a reputation as one of the few officers in Gurugram who couldn't be bought, intimidated, or diverted from pursuing the truth. It was a reputation that had cost her promotions, comfortable assignments, and the kind of financial security that came with flexible ethics. But it was also a reputation that had allowed her to sleep at night, to look at herself in the mirror each morning, and to honour the memory of the men who had worn the silver locket before her.

Now, at forty-two, Sub-Inspector Saloni Talwar stood in her Sector 45 apartment, the tarnished silver locket cool against her skin. The city around her had changed dramatically from her childhood—narrow lanes replaced by wide highways, intimate communities by anonymous complexes, petty crimes by complex corporate conspiracies. But the core principles remained unchanged, as solid as the locket connecting her to her grandfather's legacy.

Her phone buzzed insistently. Inspector Bhalla's name flashed on the screen, and Saloni knew that whatever awaited her would test everything her father had taught her about justice, integrity, and the pursuit of truth.

"Talwar," she answered, her voice steady despite being pulled from restless sleep.

"Get to Aravalli Vista construction site, Sector 79. We have a body." Bhalla's tone was clipped, business-like. "Architect named Kabir Sharma. The one who's been in the papers about sustainable development."

Saloni was instantly alert. She knew the name—the young idealist trying to bring conscience to Gurugram's concrete jungle. His Aravalli Vista project had been controversial, displacing an entire village while promising green spaces and community integration.

"Accident?" she asked, though something in Bhalla's voice suggested otherwise.

"That's what we need to determine. But Saloni..." he paused. "This one's going to be complicated. Lot of important people have money in that project."

Twenty minutes later, Saloni was navigating the early morning traffic toward Sector 79, where the city's relentless expansion pressed against the ancient Aravalli hills. The silver locket warmed against her skin—her grandfather's reminder that some battles were worth fighting, regardless of the odds.

She had no idea that this case would force her to confront not just a killer, but the very system she'd sworn to serve. In the distance, the skeletal towers of Aravalli Vista reached toward the sky like grasping fingers, and somewhere in their shadows lay the truth about Kabir Sharma's death.

The concrete bloom of Gurugram was about to reveal its darkest secret.

1: Dust and Silence

The pre-dawn chill of late February still clung to Gurugram like a reluctant guest, a raw, damp cold that seeped through the gaps in corrugated iron sheets fencing off the sprawling construction site. The silence was peculiar to these liminal hours in a city that never truly slept—the distant growl of trucks on NH-8 was a mere whisper, the frenetic energy of corporate India held in temporary abeyance. Here, amidst skeletal towers of concrete and steel reaching toward a starless sky, the silence felt heavier, more absolute.

Sub-Inspector Saloni Talwar's jeep crunched over the gravel approach to Aravalli Vista, her headlights cutting through the gloom to illuminate a scene that would be seared into her memory. The construction site sprawled before her like an open wound in the earth, a testament to Gurugram's relentless appetite for transformation. Even in its unfinished state, the project dominated the landscape of Sector 79—fifteen skeletal concrete towers clawing at the grey sky, their shadows falling across the remnants of what had once been Kumharipur village.

The irony wasn't lost on her. Where families had cultivated wheat and mustard for generations, where children had played in courtyards shaded by ancient neem trees, now stood monuments to modern ambition. The village had been "relocated" six months ago—a euphemism that couldn't disguise the reality of displacement, the severing of roots that ran deeper than the foundations of these towers.

As Saloni stepped out of her vehicle, the morning air carried a complex bouquet of scents: the acrid smell of cement dust that coated everything in a fine grey patina, the metallic tang of exposed rebar, the diesel fumes

from generators that powered the site's security lights, and underneath it all, something more disturbing—the unmistakable metallic sweetness of spilled blood.

Police vehicles clustered near the site entrance like predators drawn to carrion, their flashing lights painting the grey concrete in harsh reds and blues that seemed almost violent against the monochrome landscape. An ambulance sat waiting, its crew smoking cigarettes and checking their phones with the practiced patience of those who knew their services wouldn't be needed for anything more than body removal.

Head Constable Ramphal Yadav approached as Saloni adjusted her uniform jacket against the morning chill. At fifty-five, Yadav was a veteran of Gurugram's transformation from sleepy agricultural town to corporate hub, and his usually confident demeanour had been replaced by nervous energy that spoke of a case already spiralling beyond routine expectations.

"Madam, the body is near Tower C," he reported, his breath visible in the cold air. "Night watchman found him around 5:30 AM during his final rounds. Name is Jagdish Lal, been working security here for eight months. Seems reliable—no history of drinking or sleeping on duty."

"Any other witnesses?" Saloni asked, her experienced eyes already scanning the scene for inconsistencies, for the details that might contradict the obvious narrative.

"None that we've found, madam. Site supervisor arrived about an hour ago—man named Deepak Rathi. He's saying it looks like an accident, claims Sharma sahib must have fallen from one of the upper floors. Says

the architect was always taking risks, climbing around the site even at night."

Saloni nodded, filing away the information while noting the subtle emphasis Yadav placed on "claims" and "says." A good constable learned to maintain healthy scepticism, especially when dealing with deaths that involved significant money and powerful interests.

She followed Yadav through the maze of construction equipment toward Tower C, the tallest of the planned structures. Cement mixers sat idle like sleeping beasts, their drums still bearing the residue of yesterday's work. Stacks of steel reinforcement bars created geometric patterns that would have been artistic if they weren't part of such a grim tableau. The building rose fifteen stories above them, its upper floors still open to the elements, lacking safety railings or protective barriers that would be installed in later phases of construction.

"The forensics team?" Saloni asked as they navigated around a pile of sand that had been covered with plastic sheeting against the morning dew.

"On their way from Sector 51, madam. Should be here within twenty minutes. I've secured the immediate area as you instructed, but..." Yadav hesitated.

"But?"

"The site supervisor is getting pressure from his company. Millennium City Builders. They're saying every day of delay costs them lakhs in penalties and interest payments. There's already been talk of bringing political pressure to expedite the investigation."

Saloni felt the familiar tightening in her chest that came with cases where money and power intersected with justice. In her twenty years of police work, she'd learned that the wealthy and influential had their own gravitational pull, bending the normal course of investigations toward outcomes that served their interests rather than the truth.

The body lay at the base of Tower C, covered by a white sheet that couldn't quite hide the unnatural angles beneath. The scene had been cordoned off with yellow tape that fluttered in the slight breeze, creating a small island of official attention in the vast construction site. Jagdish Lal, the night watchman who had made the discovery, sat on a stack of cement bags about twenty meters away, his weathered face pale with shock and his hands wrapped around a glass of tea that had long since gone cold.

Saloni approached the old man with the gentle manner she'd learned from watching her father interview traumatized witnesses. "Jagdish ji, I'm Sub-Inspector Saloni Talwar. I know this has been difficult for you, but I need you to tell me exactly what you saw this morning."

Jagdish looked up at her with eyes that held the particular exhaustion of someone who had witnessed something that would haunt his dreams. At sixty-two, he had the lean build of a man who had worked physical jobs his entire life, and his uniform—a khaki shirt and dark pants provided by the security company—was clean and pressed, suggesting someone who took pride in his work despite its modest nature.

"Madam," he began, his voice hoarse with emotion, "I've been doing this job for eight months. Every night, same routine. I know every sound this place makes—the way the metal sheets creak in the wind, how the

generators change pitch when they're running low on fuel, even the different footsteps of the stray dogs that come looking for food scraps."

He paused, taking a shaky sip of his tea. "Last night was quiet, normal. I did my rounds every two hours as required. At 3:30 AM, everything was fine. At 5:30, I was doing my final round before the day shift arrived, and that's when I saw..." He gestured toward the covered body with a trembling hand.

"Tell me about the position," Saloni said gently. "Exactly how was he lying when you found him?"

"On his back, madam, but twisted. His head was..." Jagdish swallowed hard. "There was so much blood. At first, I thought maybe it was just rags, or construction waste. But then I saw his shoes—expensive leather shoes, not the kind a labourer would wear. I knew immediately it was Kabir sahib."

"You knew Mr. Sharma personally?"

"Not personally, madam, but I knew who he was. He came to the site often, even at night. Not like other architects who just review plans in air-conditioned offices. He would climb the towers, check on the work, talk to the laborers about their concerns. A good man, everyone said. Always asking about our families, our villages."

Saloni made mental notes, building a picture of the victim that differed significantly from the "reckless intellectual" portrait the site supervisor had painted. "Did you move anything at the scene? Touch the body?"

"No, madam. My son is a constable in Faridabad—he taught me about crime scenes. I called the site supervisor first, then the police. I stayed nearby to make sure no one disturbed anything, but I didn't touch."

"Good man," Saloni said, meaning it. "Was there anything unusual about last night? Any sounds you didn't recognize, any vehicles that shouldn't have been here?"

Jagdish considered the question carefully. "There was a car around 11 PM, madam. Expensive one—sounded like a diesel engine, maybe a Fortuner or Innova. It stayed for about an hour, then left. But that wasn't unusual—contractors and supervisors sometimes come for night inspections."

"Did you see who was driving?"

"Too dark, madam, and it was parked near the site office, not close to my patrol route. I assumed it was legitimate business."

Before Saloni could ask more questions, she heard the approach of heavy footsteps crunching across the gravel. She turned to see a burly man in an expensive leather jacket approaching, his gold watch catching the strengthening morning light as he extended a meaty hand in greeting.

"Deepak Rathi, site supervisor," he announced in a voice that carried the authority of someone accustomed to being the most important person in any room. "Terrible tragedy, madam. Absolutely terrible. Kabir sahib was brilliant, truly brilliant, but reckless. Always taking unnecessary risks, climbing around the site even at night. I warned him many times about safety protocols."

Saloni studied Rathi's face as he spoke, noting how his words came too quickly, his explanations too polished, as if he'd been rehearsing this conversation. At forty-five, Rathi had the soft physique of desk work overlaid with the aggressive confidence of someone who had climbed the corporate ladder through a combination of competence and willingness to do whatever was necessary to achieve results.

"What time did you last see Mr. Sharma yesterday?" Saloni asked, her tone neutral but her eyes sharp.

"Around 7 PM, madam. He was in his site office reviewing some blueprints, making notes about modifications he wanted to implement. Always concerned about preserving green spaces, creating community areas." Rathi's voice carried a hint of disdain that he probably didn't realize was audible. "Very idealistic, you understand. Sometimes these intellectual types don't grasp the practical realities of construction deadlines and profit margins."

"His site office—I'll need to examine it."

Rathi's professional smile faltered slightly. "Of course, madam, of course. Though I'm sure you'll find this was simply a tragic accident. These architect types, they get so focused on their vision that they forget about basic safety. Probably went up to check on something and lost his footing in the dark."

Saloni walked closer to the covered body, her trained eyes taking in details that the casual observer might miss. She lifted the sheet carefully, revealing Kabir Sharma's remains with the clinical detachment that twenty years of police work had taught her.

The victim had been a handsome man in his early thirties, with the lean build of someone who spent more time walking construction sites than sitting in boardrooms. His clothes—dark jeans, a button-down shirt, and a light jacket—were expensive but practical, the kind of attire that could transition from client meetings to site inspections. His leather shoes, while costly, showed signs of regular wear on construction sites rather than just office corridors.

But it was the head wound that made Saloni pause. The injury was severe, certainly fatal, but something about its location and pattern troubled her. If Kabir had fallen from the upper floors of Tower C, she would expect to see multiple impact injuries, broken bones, trauma consistent with a body hitting concrete after a fall of ten or twelve stories. Instead, the damage seemed more localized, more... targeted.

"Mr. Rathi," she called, not looking away from the body. "If someone fell from the upper floors, where would you expect them to land?"

Rathi approached reluctantly, clearly uncomfortable with the sight of death. "Well, madam, it would depend on the wind, the angle of the fall... but probably somewhere in this general area, yes."

Saloni looked up at Tower C's imposing height, calculating angles and trajectories with the mathematical precision her father had taught her to apply to crime scenes. If Kabir had fallen from the upper floors, the impact pattern seemed wrong. The body was positioned too close to the building's base, and there was no scatter pattern of debris or personal effects that she would expect from such a fall.

Moreover, the blood spatter on the ground suggested that the fatal blow had come from ground level, not from the crushing impact of a body

falling from a great height. The stain was localized, pooled rather than splattered, indicating that Kabir had bled out while lying in this position rather than being moved here after injury.

"Yadav," she called to the Head Constable. "I want the entire site sealed. No one enters or leaves without my direct permission. And get me a complete list of everyone who was authorized to be here last night—security guards, supervisors, contractors, anyone with legitimate access."

"Madam, surely that's not necessary," Rathi protested, his voice taking on an edge of desperation. "Millennium City Builders has important deadlines to meet. We have investors, bank payments, regulatory approvals that depend on staying on schedule. Every day of delay costs us lakhs in penalties and interest payments."

Saloni's gaze hardened as she turned to face the site supervisor. "Mr. Rathi, a man is dead. A young man who, by all accounts, was trying to make this city a better place. Your deadlines and profit margins can wait until we understand exactly what happened here."

The forensics team arrived as she spoke, their white van navigating carefully through the construction site's temporary roads. Dr. Meera Sharma, the forensic pathologist Saloni had worked with on several previous cases, emerged from the vehicle with her characteristic brisk efficiency.

"What do we have, Saloni?" Dr. Sharma asked, pulling on latex gloves as she approached the scene.

"Thirty-two-year-old architect, found dead at the base of a fifteen-story construction project. Site supervisor claims accidental fall, but the evidence doesn't support that theory."

Dr. Sharma knelt beside the body, her experienced hands beginning their preliminary examination. "Head trauma, certainly fatal. But you're right to be suspicious—this doesn't look like fall injuries. The wound pattern suggests blunt force trauma from a localized impact, not the multiple injuries you'd see from a high fall."

As the forensics team began their methodical documentation of the scene, Saloni walked the perimeter of Tower C, her trained eyes searching for clues that might contradict the obvious narrative. The morning sun was beginning to burn off the February chill, and the sounds of Gurugram waking up—traffic on the nearby highways, construction work at other sites, the distant hum of corporate activity—created a backdrop that emphasized the isolation of this particular patch of ground.

She found herself thinking about her uncle Vinod, her mother's brother who had been a small farmer before Gurugram's expansion consumed his land. The compensation had been inadequate, the promises of alternative livelihood unfulfilled, and the shame of losing ancestral land had driven him to a despair that ended in suicide. Standing here among the concrete towers that had risen from similar displacements, Saloni felt a personal connection to this case that went beyond professional duty.

"Madam," Yadav called from near the site office. "I've found something you should see."

Saloni made her way across the uneven ground to where Yadav stood beside a small portable building that served as the on-site administrative

office. The structure was basic but functional, with electricity, air conditioning, and the communications equipment necessary to coordinate a project of this magnitude.

"The door was unlocked when I checked it," Yadav reported. "But look at this."

He pointed to scratches around the lock mechanism that were fresh, the metal bright against the weathered surface of the door. Someone had forced entry recently, using tools that had left distinctive marks.

"Get the forensics team to photograph this," Saloni instructed. "And I want to examine Kabir Sharma's office space before anyone else enters."

As she stood in the doorway of the site office, looking out at the vast construction project that would soon house thousands of families and workers, Saloni felt the familiar stirring of instincts honed by two decades of police work. This wasn't an accident. Someone had wanted Kabir Sharma dead, and they had been willing to kill him on his own construction site to achieve that goal.

The concrete bloom of Gurugram had claimed another life, but this time, Sub-Inspector Saloni Talwar was determined to ensure it wouldn't claim justice as well. In the distance, the Aravalli hills stood as silent witnesses, their ancient stones holding secrets that modern India preferred to forget. But secrets, Saloni knew from her father's teachings, had a way of revealing themselves to those patient enough to look for them.

The street was quiet, too quiet for that hour. Only the buzzing of a faulty streetlight kept her company as she walked, notebook pressed tightly against her chest.

She paused.

Across the road, in the shadow of a half-crumbled wall, someone was standing. Watching.

At first, she thought it was just another late commuter, until the figure shifted, and the dim light caught the edge of something glinting in their hand.

Not a phone. Not a key. Something heavier.

Her breath hitched, and she took a step back, but the silence of the alley swallowed even that sound. The figure didn't move closer. Didn't speak. Just waited.

Her instincts screamed at her that this was no chance encounter.

And in that moment, she knew the city was about to show her its darkest secret.

The investigation was just beginning.

You've just read the opening chapter of *The Concrete Bloom*.
The city has many faces. Some of them never forget.
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