THE ABSENT PEARLS

What vanished first— the pearls or the truth?

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To Mom and Dad,

for believing in me, supporting me, and never questioning why my imagination contains so many dead bodies.

I promise I'm normal.

Mostly.

Dear Reader,

Before you begin turning pages like a detective with trust issues, I feel it's only fair to confess a few things.

First, this book was written with love, caffeine, and an unhealthy amount of suspicion of everyone. If you find yourself doubting every character—including the one you initially liked—good. That was intentional. I don't trust them either.

Second, no characters were harmed emotionally without reason. Physically? That's a different conversation. This is a murder mystery, after all. If someone disappears, lies, or acts a little too innocent, please don't blame me—blame human nature. Or plot necessity. Mostly plot necessity.

This story is for anyone who laughs in tense moments, overthinks small details, and secretly believes they'd survive in a mystery novel (you wouldn't, but it's sweet that you think so).

Thank you for trusting me with your time, your curiosity, and your peace of mind. I promise twists, chaos, and just enough humor to keep you smiling… right before something terrible happens.

Warm regards
The Writer
(Who knows the truth and is enjoying this far too much)

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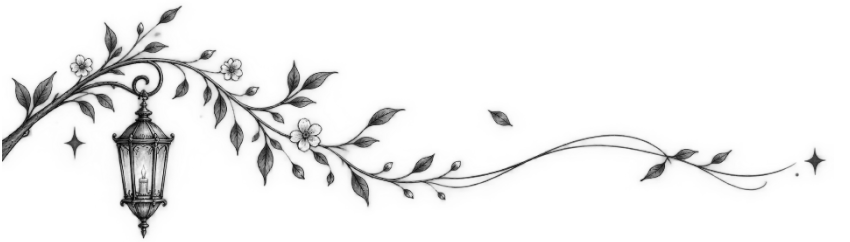


One

It's going to be one of those Saturdays.

At 7:30 a.m., I was jolted awake by my mother's voice slicing through the stillness of the morning: "Brinda beta, uth jaa!" Her sharp call broke the uneasy silence that had clung to me all night. I could already sense it, she was running late… again. Ayaan, my little brother, was probably still in his pajamas, scrambling for his school bag.

Groggily, I stumbled to my door and shouted back, "I'm going to take a shower!" before slamming it shut, desperate for a few extra minutes of peace. A quick splash of cold water, and I felt somewhat human again. I shuffled to the kitchen, brewed my black coffee—strong, no-nonsense, just like I needed to start the day—and grabbed the newspaper.

The headlines blurred in front of me for a few moments as I sipped my coffee, desperately trying to shake off the sleep-induced fog. It felt like my brain was running on dial-up internet—slow, glitchy, and full of static.

Thirty minutes later, hunger made its grand entrance, so I decided to whip up some scrambled eggs with cheese. Because nothing screams "I'm an adult " quite like overcooked eggs

with melted cheese—proof that adulthood is just a constant cycle of pretending you know what you're doing in the kitchen.

Finally, I grabbed my purse from the bedside table and snatched the car keys from the usual pile of junk by the door. I gave my mom a half-hearted hug (because, of course, she was already frantic about getting Ayaan to school) and rushed out to the car.

Oh, and I'd made a mental list of errands to run the night before—clothes, books, and whatever else I'd inevitably forget by the time I actually got to the store. But for now, I just had to survive the next couple of hours without losing my mind.

The traffic was more hectic than usual.

My frustration grew as the traffic dragged on, each minute feeling like an hour. Cars barely moved, and the constant honking only made my irritation worse. The thought of being late made the wait feel even more unbearable.

I let out a sigh, wishing for just a little bit of movement, but it felt like the world had come to a standstill.

In that moment, the traffic felt more like a trial than just a delay.

But then, out of nowhere, an off-season shower decided to crash the party. The off-season rains in Mumbai arrive like that one friend who shows up uninvited but somehow makes everything better. They're not as dramatic as the monsoon, but they bring a cool breeze that feels like Mother Nature's way of saying, "You're welcome!"

I couldn't help but fall in love with the Mumbai rains.

There's something almost magical about it; the way the first drops fall, and suddenly, Mumbai takes a deep breath and says, "Alright, everyone, chill for a bit." The rain brings that fresh, earthy smell, making you forget you're practically swimming

in your own sweat. The streets, usually a chaotic mess of honking cars and people dodging puddles, slow down. As the downpour picks up, traffic turns into a parking lot, with cars just saying, "Yeah, we're not going anywhere."

As I walked into the bookstore, the bookstore owner gave me a quick glance before turning her attention to another customer. ***Classic***.

I was in a hurry, so I waved the list of books I needed in front of her face, hoping she'd get the hint. Fortunately, she did, and after a brief moment of awkwardness, I grabbed the books I needed and dashed out.

Next stop—shopping. Clothes, essentials, the whole shebang. My to-do list was growing faster than my patience, but I had a reason for all the rushing. Tomorrow was going to be a big day. Huge, in fact. For everyone else in my family, it was a day to celebrate my *dream* of becoming a lawyer, the one they've all been proudly rooting for. But what they didn't know was that there was a second, much more personal reason for the significance of tomorrow. And I wasn't about to share that just yet.

Not yet.

I had to pick up my brother from school today. It was a big day for him—his football match, and he'd been super excited about it. I got there and picked him up, though, he seemed off. Even after winning the match, he wasn't his usual self. The reason? Some guy had started talking about something that still caused a lot of pain in our family, something we all tried to avoid.

Seeing how my brother, Ayaan, was lost in his thoughts, weighed down by everything on his mind, I knew he needed something to lift his spirits.

I decided to surprise him with his favorite treat. We grabbed coffee for me and crispy fries with a ham and cheeseburger for

him, because I knew it would bring back that smile I hadn't seen all day.

As we sat in the car, I handed him the bag with a grin, saying,

"Thought you might need this."

Ayaan looked at me, surprised, but then he started munching on the fries. Slowly, his frown began to fade, and I saw his little smile return as he took a bite of the burger. It wasn't anything fancy, but sometimes, a simple treat was all it took to remind him there was still some joy left in the day.

I dropped Ayaan back at home, still thinking about what that kid had said to him earlier. It was like a weight that wouldn't let go.

I turned to my mom and told her, "I'll be back soon," before heading back to the car. As I settled in, I took a deep breath, trying to shake off the tension. *"Take a deep breath, Brinda. Things always seem to get better when you're in your favorite place—the library."* I whispered to myself, knowing that once I was surrounded by books, everything would feel a little more manageable.

I have always found a special kind of peace in the library, where time seems to slow down and the world outside fades away, or maybe it's the best way to escape from reality. The scent of old books and the soft rustle of pages turning? Pure magic.

It's like a hug for the brain. Every corner of the library feels like a new adventure waiting to happen, though, let's be real, I'm probably just looking for a quiet spot to nap. The gentle hum of the place is oddly comforting, like the building is softly whispering, "Shh, go ahead, lose yourself for a few hours." It's a space where thoughts settle, focus miraculously happens, and you remember what it's like to actually think—without notifications interrupting every five seconds. The library is

more than just a room filled with books; it's a place where I can be myself and lose myself all at once.

After spending hours there, I looked at the clock and rushed to exit and head back home. I want to spend some time with my mom and Ayaan, as I had to leave for Pune tomorrow morning.

The best part of the day was when Dad would come home after work, and we'd all sit together for a gossip session during dinner. I find myself missing those little moments more than I ever thought I would. When Dad would come home after work, and we'd all gather around the table, it felt like the world slowed down for a while. We'd share stories, laugh, and just enjoy each other's company. Now, those moments are just a part of the past, and I can't help but feel a deep ache in my heart for the times spent with Dad and the laughter we all shared together. It's hard not to miss those family dinners and the comfort of having him around.

It's a different kind of comfort, but one I've come to appreciate. We sit around the table, much like we used to when Dad was here, and talk about everything—our day, random thoughts, and little things that make us laugh. Mom always has something interesting to say, and her stories never fail to put a smile on my face, and my brother has a way of making everything sound hilarious, making us all laugh at the silliest things.

Though it's not the same without Dad, these moments have become a new kind of special for us. It's like a little bit of the old warmth still lingers in our home, and for that, I'm grateful. Sometimes, it feels like a piece of the past is still with us, and those simple chats bring us closer in a way I never expected.

Once we had dinner, I quietly headed to my room and began packing my bags, knowing I had to leave for Pune the next day. It felt strange, the reality of it all settling in as I folded my

clothes, each item reminding me that things were about to change again.

As I packed, I couldn't help but feel a mix of agitation and nervousness. I carefully folded my clothes—jeans, t-shirts, and a few warm sweaters for the chilly Pune weather. I made sure to pack my study materials, including my law books and notebooks, already filled with notes and plans. A few personal items made their way into the bag—pictures of family, a small journal, and my favorite pen. I also packed a few things that would make the hostel room feel like home, like a cozy blanket and a photo frame.

With the hush of a whispered breath, I crept into my mother's room, my footsteps soft on the floor. The cupboard door creaked slightly as I eased it open, revealing the pile of documents that had once belonged to my father. Without a second thought, I gathered them, slipping them quietly into my bag. The entire act was a shadow—swift, unnoticed, and laden with secrets.

It felt as though, with every document I slipped into my bag, I was quietly carrying a piece of my father with me—like he was being drawn into the journey to Pune without ever leaving the silence of that room. Each page seemed to tether him to me, a quiet presence that would travel alongside me, unseen but palpable.

Once I finished packing, I set an alarm for 7:00 a.m., the soft click of my phone screen the only noise in the silent room, like my phone was trying to be as dramatic as possible.

But sleep? Yeah, that wasn't happening. My nerves were doing the cha-cha-cha in my chest, and let's just say it wasn't the fun kind of dance. So, I did what any sane person would do—I begged my mother to sleep beside me. To distract myself from the mental noise, I played a familiar Bollywood playlist, less

for relaxation and more to give my thoughts something else to argue with.

She agreed, though I could feel her silently judging my emotional breakdown.

As *Tum Ho Toh* played, she fell asleep instantly.

I, however, stayed awake.

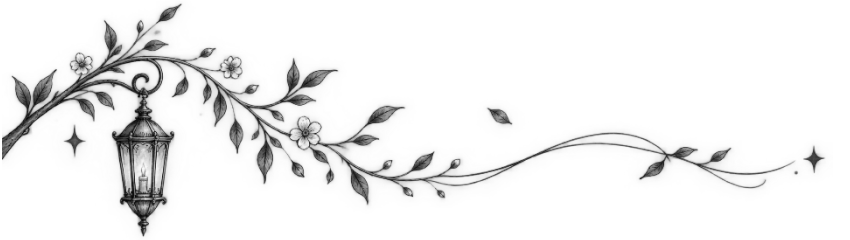
Staring at the ceiling.

Mentally listing everything I might have forgotten to pack. Then remembering it was too late to do anything about it.

At some point around 2 a.m., I accepted three things:

1. Sleep was optional.
2. Tomorrow was happening whether I was ready or not.
3. Adulthood is mostly pretending you're calm while panicking internally.

With that comforting realization, I closed my eyes—not because I was sleepy, but because worrying with your eyes shut feels slightly more productive.



Two

The alarm blared at 7:00 a.m., like it had something personal against me. I swatted it off, half tempted to throw it out the window, but instead dragged myself out of bed. Great. Today was the day. I was leaving Mumbai—my beloved chaotic city—for Pune. Law school, apparently, was a thing I had decided to do with my life. Fabulous decision, Brinda. I stretched, feeling the weight of my decision more than my tired limbs.

If that wasn't a life choice made by someone slightly insane, I didn't know what was.

I threw on some clothes and stumbled into the bathroom, hoping I looked at least somewhat presentable. Who needs sleep when you're about to enter the high-stakes world of law, right?

I stood in front of my closet, totally stuck on what to wear.

After some serious indecisiveness, I grabbed this pink and orange kurta that hit just below my knees. It was chill, comfy, and gave off those easy vibes I needed today.

I paired them with light blue jeans to keep things casual and threw on my white sneakers because, honestly, they're a vibe.

For my hair, I went with the effortless look—just left it loose and wavy, like I woke up this fabulous. Nothing too fancy, but it felt right for today.

As I packed the last of my things, a bittersweet ache settled in my chest. Mumbai had always been home—the city where I grew up, where every corner held a memory, especially of my dad.

The quiet mornings, his laugh echoing through the house, the little things we did together—now all slipping away.

Leaving this city felt like leaving pieces of him behind. And then, there was Pune. So far away, it might as well have been another planet. My heart was heavier than my suitcase.

But deep down, I knew he'd be with me every step of the way, probably shaking his head, thinking, "You really didn't pack enough snacks, did you?" even if I couldn't see him.

I had exactly an hour to get ready, pack, and pretend I was ready for this. I grabbed my bag, muttering about how I was totally ready for this next chapter. If by "ready" I meant "terrified but pretending otherwise," then, sure. I was **SO** ready.

The kitchen was filled with the warm, comforting scent of home, like the universe was trying to wrap me in a cozy blanket of nostalgia. Mom was busy making my favorite breakfast—the one I've eaten roughly 3,000 times—and Ayaan was already sitting at the table, grinning like he'd just won the lottery, which, honestly, he might have, considering how rare it was for me to show up on time. It felt so normal, so right, even though deep down, I knew things were changing… and that maybe I'd have to start doing my own laundry now. Ugh…

As we ate, I couldn't help but bring up the good old days—those chaotic, hilarious times we all spent together—laughing, fighting, and making memories that felt way too precious to let go of.

I remembered how Ayaan would try to stealthily steal the last piece of toast, like he was in a heist movie, while Mom just shook her head, smiling like she'd seen this a hundred times before.

Or when Dad would show up with random surprises, making us laugh so hard we almost choked on our food. It all felt like it happened a lifetime ago, and the thought of leaving… well, it hit me right in the feels, like a bad pun at family dinner.

"Promise me you'll come back soon," Ayaan said with a straight face, though his eyes were already scheming about how to raid my side of the closet.

Mom didn't say much, but her soft smile said it all. It was the kind of look that screamed, "You can leave, but we both know you're coming back for dinner at least." It was that comforting, unspoken reminder that no matter where life took me, I'd always have a home here, especially when there's food involved.

As I stood at the door, bag slung over my shoulder, it hit me—this was it. I was actually leaving home. Mom's soft hug and Ayaan's endless teasing were still fresh in my mind, but the reality of the train to Pune was already trying to drag me away like some overzealous personal trainer.

I waved goodbye, doing my best to hold back the tears, even though my eyes were probably giving away more than I'd like to admit.

The city I grew up in, the faces I knew like the back of my hand, were soon to be behind me. But hey, no turning back

now. Pune was waiting, and so was my adulting adventure whether I was ready for it or not.

The train ride felt endless, like it was purposely trying to give me time to reconsider my life choices. But deep down, I knew this wasn't just any career move—it was a mission.

Every mile that took me further from home reminded me I wasn't just chasing a job; I was chasing a purpose.

Law wasn't just a degree; it was my ticket to looking important in meetings and pretending I knew what I was talking about.

With each passing station, the weight of what lay ahead felt as elusive as my motivation to hit the gym.

People in the community whispered behind closed doors, but not a single soul dared to speak openly, like we were all trapped in some sort of weird, unspoken conspiracy. It felt like the truth was buried under layers of uncertainty, fear, and possibly a few awkward silences.

And then there were the whispers—strange looks at the funeral, quiet murmurs in the family, and that persistent feeling of unease that just wouldn't let go. Something wasn't right, and I wasn't about to let it slide.

I couldn't just accept it. How could I, when it felt like something was being hidden? The grief of losing him was already too much to bear, but the unanswered questions weighed even heavier on me.

I felt a strange sense of urgency, a need to uncover the truth that lingered just out of reach. No matter how painful it might be, I had to know what really happened that night.

I couldn't let my father's death remain a mystery, swept away by the simplicity of a story that didn't add up.

The accident occurred just a few miles from Ravenswood Law College, where I was about to begin my own journey. It felt odd, almost too precise, as if the two events were intertwined in some way. Ravenswood, the place where I'd step into my future, was right there, and yet my father's life had ended so close to it.

It didn't sit right with me; this couldn't just be a coincidence.

I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something far larger was at play, something I couldn't quite grasp yet.

It was as though the two worlds—my father's unexpected death and the beginning of my new chapter—were colliding, creating a tension in the air that I couldn't escape, no matter how hard I tried to understand it.

I felt an overwhelming urge to call my mom, just to hear her voice before stepping into this new chapter of my life.

I dialed Mom's number, my fingers trembling slightly as I waited for her to pick up. When she answered, I couldn't help but smile.

"Mom, I made it. I'm in Pune, and I'm actually sitting in the admission office of Ravenswood Law College right now."

I could hear the relief in her voice, mixed with a hint of pride.

"I can't believe it's finally happening," "You are there, and this is the start of something big."

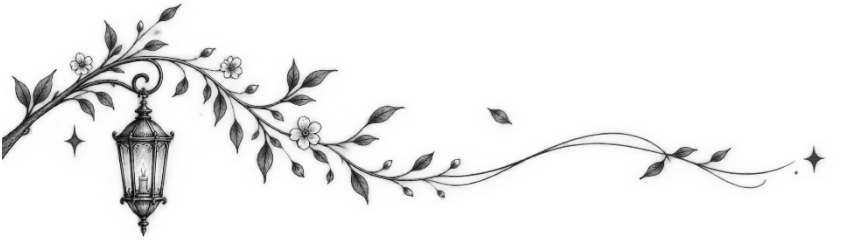
I could hear her breath catch on the other end of the line.

"I'm so proud of you," There was a pause, and I could almost feel the tears in her eyes.

"You've worked so hard for this, sweetheart," she continued, her words thick with emotion. I could tell she was trying to hold it together, but I knew those tears weren't just for me—

they were for all the years she had dreamed of this moment alongside me. Hearing her like that made everything feel so real, and I couldn't help but feel a lump rise in my own throat.

We were both silent for a moment, the weight of the years we had spent working towards this moment settling between us.



Three

When I reached the door, I hesitated for a moment before knocking softly. The door creaked open, and there she was—my roommate.

Here goes nothing—either I find my new best friend, or someone who'll judge me for hogging the blanket. She stood there with a smile, and I couldn't help but notice how different we looked from one another.

She was beautiful, effortlessly cool, with an easy confidence that radiated from her.

Her style was completely opposite to mine. She wore a pair of green cargo pants that gave her an adventurous vibe, paired with a black graphic tee that seemed to tell a story of its own. White sneakers completed the look, practical but trendy.

She looked up from the small pile of things she was organizing, her eyes meeting mine with a friendly, welcoming gaze.

"Hey! You must be my roommate," she said with a warm smile. "I'm Alya."

"Hi, Alya! Yeah, I'm your new roommate… Brinda Mishra," I replied, a mix of nerves and excitement bubbling inside me.

"Nice to meet you!" I extended my hand, hoping to make a good first impression.

She shook it with a firm, friendly grip. "Nice to meet you too! Come on in, make yourself at home,"

The room was a little messy but felt lived-in. Two single beds were positioned across from each other, each neatly made with a few personal touches—a stack of books on one, and a stuffed animal on one of the pillows. There was just enough space between the beds for privacy, but still a sense of coziness.

"It's a bit of a mess right now, but we can sort it out."

The beds were across from each other, with just enough space between them to ensure we wouldn't be tripping over each other's shoes. Hopefully.

On one side, there were two cupboards: one old with scuff marks, and the other newer and sturdier—like the wardrobe equivalent of an older sibling and a younger, fancier one.

Beside them, a study table sat against the wall, covered in a few scattered papers, a lamp, and pens that I was sure would disappear in about a week. It had a functional, "I'll do my best to study here, I promise" vibe.

But the real winner was the window. Big, framed with soft curtains that let in just the right amount of light, making the room feel like it belonged in a Pinterest post.

I could already picture myself sipping coffee by it or daydreaming about absolutely anything other than studying. The room was simple, but I could tell it would quickly become my own little haven, just as soon as I found my pens.

As I started settling in, I noticed Alya placing a photo frame on the bedside table.

It was a picture of her with a group of people, probably her family, considering the warm, cozy vibe of the photo.

"Is that your family?" I asked

"Yeah, that's them,"

"I have an older brother—two years older. He's actually on the same campus, just a few buildings over."

"That's cool!"

"Must be nice having him nearby."

"It is," she said, her eyes lighting up.

"We've always been close. He's kind of protective, but in a funny way."

"He drives me crazy, but I love him anyway."

I could tell she meant it—mostly.

"And where are you from?" I asked, curious to know more about her.

"I'm from Lonavala,"

"It's a hill station, about an hour from Mumbai. Quiet, beautiful, peaceful, kind of the perfect escape from the chaos of the city."

She smiled fondly, as if she missed it.

"I bet it's a great place to grow up."

"It really is," she nodded.

"What about you? Where are you from?"

"I'm from Mumbai,"

"Born and raised. So yeah, I'm pretty used to the chaos and noise."

She raised an eyebrow, grinning. "Mumbai, huh? Big city, fast life. You must have some stories."

I laughed. "Oh, definitely. You don't survive Mumbai without a few wild ones." I gave her a playful look. "I'll tell you some, but you might want to buckle up. It gets… interesting."

Alya laughed, shaking her head. "I'll hold you to that. Sounds like it could be entertaining."

As the conversation slowed, I decided it was time to unpack. I opened my suitcase and started sorting through the clothes, while Alya continued moving things around on her side of the room.

Settling into a new place was weird. Everything felt unfamiliar, but not in a bad way. I laid out my favorite dupatta on the bed, hoping it'd make the room feel a little more like home. Honestly, I wasn't sure if I was more nervous or excited, but at least the room was starting to look like mine.

Alya kept organizing her side, occasionally glancing over at me, probably trying to figure out if I was a "neat freak" or more of a "chaos is my middle name" type. We'd find out soon enough.

"You good?" Alya asked, smirking as I struggled to fold a shirt into some semblance of neatness.

"Yeah, just making sure I don't ruin the 'neat' vibe," I replied with a laugh.

She snorted. "No pressure. You'll get it together. I'm just trying to figure out where to put my plants."

I raised an eyebrow. "Plants? In a dorm room?"

"Yep," she said, pointing to a small potted plant by the window. "It's a vibe. Trust me."

"Well, you've got me convinced," I joked, tossing my last pair of shoes into the cupboard.

As I stood there chatting with Alya, I couldn't help but notice how effortlessly stunning she was.

Her brown eyes were like the kind you'd see in a movie, all deep and warm, framed by lashes that probably had their own fan club.

And her hair?

Oh my god, it was ridiculous—long, thick, and a dark brown that almost looked black. It hung down her back in these perfect natural waves that clearly took zero effort. I mean, who gets hair that perfect without even trying? She could've just rolled out of bed and still looked like she walked out of a shampoo commercial.

Honestly, I was lowkey jealous. Her hair was so heavy with volume, and I swear I could feel it in the air. It had that "I woke up like this" vibe—*so unfair*. I tried to act casual about it, but come on. You can't help but notice when someone has it that good.

As I finished unpacking, with only one bag left to go, I glanced over at Alya, still organizing her side of the room. At this rate, I was starting to wonder if she was also organizing the universe, one shelf at a time.

"So," I said, picking up my phone, "we should probably exchange numbers, you know, for survival purposes. Like, for when one of us is blasting music or having a mini existential crisis."

She laughed and pulled her phone out of her pocket. "Good idea," she said, tapping in my number. "This way, we can know exactly who to text when things get out of hand."

"Exactly," I replied, typing hers into my phone. "Like a survival guide for dorm life."

Once we exchanged numbers, I felt a little more at ease. It was one of those small things that made it feel less awkward, like we were already in sync.

"Cool, essentials covered," I said, slipping my phone into my pocket.

"Yep, all set. Welcome to the wild world of college," she said, grinning.

I laughed. "I think we'll survive."

As I continued unpacking, I pulled out a stack of papers—my father's notes and documents. I'd kept them hidden, knowing how important and personal they were. I glanced around to make sure no one was watching, then slid them into the drawer with the care of someone handling fragile treasure. It felt a bit like keeping a secret, but also oddly comforting, like a part of him was still with me.

Next, I grabbed a family photo from my bag—the one thing I could never leave behind. I placed it carefully on the bedside table, the image of Mom, Ayaan, Dad, and me frozen in happier times. It felt like a little piece of home, even though I was miles away.

For a moment, I just stared at the photo, remembering the laughter and warmth of the old days. I sighed softly, then turned back to finish unpacking. The photo was my anchor in this new, unfamiliar place.

As I finished unpacking, Alya glanced at the photo on my table and asked, "So, is that your family?"

"Yeah, that's us," I said.

"My mom, Ayaan, my dad, and me." I paused, feeling a lump in my throat.

"My dad… he had an accident about a year ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. That must've been tough."

I nodded. "Yeah, it still is."

She stared at the photo for a moment, then her eyes widened. "Wait… is that your dad in the suit?"

"Yeah, that's him. Raghav Mishra. He was a well-known businessman."

Alya's eyes lit up. "I knew it! He was huge in the business world. I've heard so many stories about him."

A small smile tugged at my lips. "Yeah, he was respected. It's just… tough without him."

She gave me a thoughtful look. "I can only imagine. He clearly made a big impact."

"Thanks," I said, appreciating her kindness. "That means a lot."

Placing my notebooks on the desk, I sighed dramatically, looking around the room.

"You know, Alya, I had this grand idea of what moving into a law school hostel would be like… like full of overachievers, endless debates, and the occasional midnight existential crisis about justice. But so far? It's eerily quiet. Like the calm before the storm… or the first five minutes of a thriller before everyone gets murdered."

Alya chuckled, tossing clothes into her wardrobe like she's done this a million times.

"It's day one, genius. People are still figuring out how not to burn the place down or accidentally sue themselves. You won't see any chaos until they stop pretending to be perfect and start crying into their textbooks. Trust me, in a few days, this place will be so stressed, it'll have its own gravitational pull."

I flop back onto my bed, letting out a groan that would've been more fitting in a soap opera.

"I hope you're right. I was expecting some excitement, but so far it's all silence and so much information. And we haven't even started classes yet! I'm already buried under a mountain of textbooks."

Alya sits next to me, smiling like someone who's seen it all.

"Yeah, welcome to law school. It's like being thrown into the deep end of a pool and hoping you don't drown. But don't worry, you'll figure it out. One terrifying step at a time."

"I'm trying," I say, dramatically clutching my forehead.

"But it's like everything's happening at once! My brain's already on vacation, and we haven't even seen the syllabus!"

Alya raises an eyebrow.

"That's because you're overthinking. You're like a law school hamster—spinning in circles and panicking over nothing. Slow down. Focus on today, not the apocalypse next semester. You'll survive, I promise."

I roll my eyes, but Alya just gives me that serene, 'I've survived this' smile.

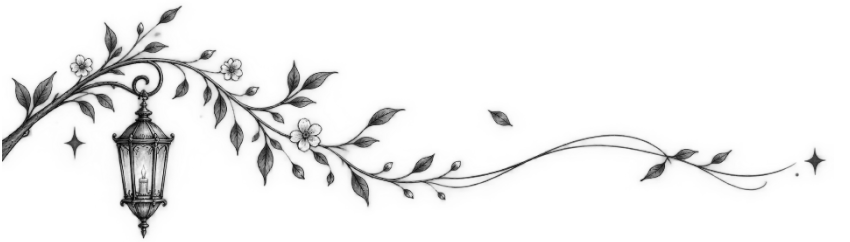
"I think you need a change of pace. How about the canteen? Stretch your legs, take a breath, and maybe—just maybe—you'll start to see the charm of the place."

I raise an eyebrow. "The canteen, huh? Will I get a side of existential dread with my lunch, or is that extra?"

"Only if you ask nicely. But seriously, let's finish unpacking, then we'll go. The canteen's like a social experiment. You might even meet someone who actually likes being here. Stranger things have happened."

I laugh, shoving a few things into my suitcase. "Alright, alright. I'm in. But if the food's a disaster, I'm totally blaming you. No pressure."

"Deal," she says with a grin. "But if the food's as bad as you think, you're on your own. Honestly, I wouldn't be shocked either way. It's like playing Russian roulette with cafeteria food. You'll survive… maybe."



Four

Alya slammed her suitcase shut with a dramatic huff, wiping sweat from her forehead.

"Finally."

"I swear, I'm not unpacking another thing until I can afford a personal organizer. Five pairs of shoes? Never again."

I, lounging on the bed with my phone in hand, shot Alya a teasing glance, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, because nothing screams 'law student' like bringing five pairs of shoes to a place where the most important thing is surviving on instant noodles."

"You have no idea how hard it is to be prepared for every possible mood. One day it's boots for walking through legal texts, the next it's sandals for walking through an existential crisis."

"You'd think I was packing for the Oscars instead of a hostel."

I raised an eyebrow. "And you call me dramatic?"

"Look, a girl needs options," Alya said, shrugging. "Anyway, now that I'm done, I'm starving. Shall we take our talents to

the canteen, or do you need another five minutes to process your unpacking situation?"

"Oh, right. I'm clearly the one holding us up here."

Alya rolled her eyes and stood up, grabbing her jacket.

"Please, if I left you alone for five minutes, you'd end up writing a poem about your feelings toward the bed. Let's go get something to eat before you get existential on me."

"Fine, fine. Let's get food, but I'm just warning you, I'm probably going to do a full-on analysis of what that canteen represents in terms of life choices and priorities. You know, real deep stuff."

Alya shot me a side-eye.

"I swear, if you start doing that over a sandwich, I'm leaving you in the canteen alone with your *thought-provoking* food."

We stepped out of our room and made our way down the hallway.

The hostel, despite its size, had an eerie quietness to it. Students were still getting settled, and there was a strange, almost eerie stillness in the air.

The kind of quiet that was either setting the stage for a breakthrough or a breakdown.

I broke the silence, my voice more dramatic than necessary, because why not?

"I just hope the canteen is less… *dead* than this place. Like, where are all the overachieving students? The debates? The caffeine-fueled nightmares?"

Alya snorted. "Babe, it's day one!"

"So, what you're telling me is, this will actually be like a thriller movie.

Just… with more textbooks and fewer murders," I said.

Alya shot me a look.

"Only if you keep making those dramatic faces."

The canteen buzzed with the low hum of conversation, a strange mix of deep academic debates and people desperately trying to figure out how to open a juice box without launching it across the room.

The air was thick with the irresistible aroma of overcooked pasta and coffee that could probably be classified as a crime against humanity. Expected.

Fluorescent lights buzzed above, casting a harsh glow on mismatched tables and chairs that were clearly chosen for their ability to squeak at the most inconvenient times.

It was the kind of place where you could overhear someone passionately arguing about constitutional law… while someone else was trying to decide if "extra cheese" was really worth the extra 20 rupees.

I slumped into a chair, dramatically setting my tray down with a loud thud.

"So, this is the glamorous law school life, huh? Pasta that's surprisingly delicious (who knew simplicity could taste so good?), instant noodles that somehow hit the spot when nothing else will, and coffee that's as strong as my determination to make it through the day!"

Alya took a sip of her coffee, eyes lighting up. "Okay, this is what I'm talking about. Who knew the canteen could actually serve *good* food? This coffee? Perfectly brewed—no bitterness, just pure magic."

Alya grinned, taking another sip of her coffee. "If this is what the canteen's offering, I might start showing up just for the

food. Forget the lectures. I'll pretend to take notes while I devour this masterpiece."

I laughed.

"Yeah, who needs a degree when we could file a petition to make this place a five-star restaurant? I'm pretty sure 'legal food' just got a whole new meaning."

And suddenly, I thought, why not tease my brother a little *(because, honestly, I miss him)*? So, I sent him a picture of this delicious pasta with coffee—just to make him jealous!

Me: Look at this beauty. I mean, how can you not appreciate this level of food art?

Fart machine: *[sees the picture]*

(Fart Machine? I know, super lame… but hey, I saved it years ago when I got this phone. Guess some things just stick, right?)
Fart Machine: Uh, you know I'm still stuck eating cereal for dinner, right?

I couldn't help but laugh to myself—
Me: It's okay, Ayaan, not everyone can have gourmet meals like me. But, hey, you've got your cereal… so technically you're living your best life?
Fart Machine: Oh, right, because nothing screams "luxury" like soggy cornflakes.
Me: If you were here, I'd let you have a bite… but only after you send me a picture of your "gourmet" cereal. Let's see what you're working with.

Fart Machine: *[laughs and sends a picture of a bowl with half-milk, half-cereal]*
Fart Machine: Feast your eyes on this masterpiece. Behold, the finest combination of milk and… well, cereal.
Me: Oh, wow. Such a delicate balance of textures. A true culinary masterpiece. Gordon Ramsay would be proud.

Fart Machine: I know, I know. This is the kind of meal that changes lives. Michelin stars, here I come.

Me: Just make sure you don't spill any of that "Michelin-star" magic on your shirt. We don't want you to become too famous for your culinary skills.

Fart Machine: *[dramatically]*
Fart Machine: Well, I'd love to stay and chat, but my fans are waiting for the next cereal creation. Got to keep up the "chef" image.
Me: Meanwhile, I'm over here finishing *real* meals while you keep your fanbase fed with cereal. Enjoy your "chef life," Master Ayaan.
Fart Machine: I can't believe you just dissed my art like that. Don't worry, I'll get over it… eventually.

We were digging into our pasta when I froze mid-bite, my gaze fixed on someone entering the canteen.

Alya raised an eyebrow.

"Is that Professor Gaurav Bhatia?" Alya asked, leaning forward.

I followed her gaze, and for a second, the noise of the canteen softened.
"Yeah," I said. "Dad's best friend."

She waited. So I continued.

"He's the reason my college applications didn't end up forgotten in a drawer after my father passed. He handled everything—forms, deadlines, calls—without ever making it feel like a favor."

Alya tilted her head. "So… not just a professor."

"Not even close."

Watching him there brought back a memory so clear it almost hurt.

I was sixteen, sitting at the dining table with my head buried in my arms, convinced my life was over because I'd bombed a mock test. Dad was out of town. Mom was trying to be calm but clearly panicking on the inside.

Gaurav uncle had come over that evening, still in his office clothes. He didn't ask for tea. Didn't lecture.

He just pulled out a chair beside me and said,
"Alright. Tell me what scared you."

Not what happened.
What *scared* you.

I remember lifting my head, surprised, and blurting everything out—failure, disappointment, fear of not being good enough. He listened. Didn't interrupt. Didn't correct me.

When I was done, he smiled and said,
"You know why your father trusts you? Because you're allowed to stumble. You're not allowed to stop."

Then he stayed. Helped me redo the paper. Explained concepts like he had all the time in the world. When Dad called later, Gaurav uncle simply said,
"She's fine. She just needed someone to remind her who she is."

That was him. Always stepping in quietly. Always standing between us and the worst of things.

Alya exhaled slowly. "Okay. I like him already."

I stood up before emotion could fully ambush me and walked over.

"Brinda," Professor Bhatia said warmly. "Settling in?"

"I am," I said, smiling. "Mostly because I know you're around."

He chuckled. “Good. Then my job here is half done. Remember—my door is open.”

When I returned, Alya raised her coffee.
“To second fathers and people who show up.”

I laughed, picking up my fork. "Yep. If the lectures suck, I’ll just start calling in favors."

I leaned on the rusted railing just outside my room, phone in hand, thumb hovering over my contacts. I almost tapped on **‘Dad.’**

Yeah. It’s still saved.

Should I delete it? Probably.
Will I? Absolutely not.

I still half-expect a “How’s your first day, champ?” message. And that’s the worst part: half of me knows he’s gone. The other half keeps waiting.

It’s like my brain and heart have a glitchy connection. Logically, I get it—there was a funeral, condolences, legal paperwork, all that heavy stuff.

But emotionally? It’s like he’s just… late.

Now, everything feels dimmer.
Not broken, just stuck at 40% brightness.
Like someone accidentally sat on the remote and no one’s noticed.

A cool breeze snuck under my sleeves, the kind that makes you feel like the universe is whispering, “Hey, maybe wear a sweater next time, genius.”

I scrolled through my contacts.

Past *his* name.

Past the last message he ever sent:

"Don't forget to call after your mock trial. I want the whole story—no shortcuts, no drama edits. Give it to me like it happened, Miss Mishra. "

Of course I didn't call.

I was annoyed that day. Exams. Hormones. Or something truly important like spilling coffee on my white kurta and blaming the patriarchy.
I told myself I'd call tomorrow.

But tomorrow didn't bring time. Or space. Or a second chance.

I wish I'd just picked up the phone the moment I read his message. Just one call. One conversation. One more "Hey, Dad…"

Sometimes I just type: "I miss you." And then stare at the blinking cursor like it's going to type back.

It never does. Even my phone's like, "Yeah, sorry girl. This one's above my pay grade."

Behind me, the hostel windows glowed soft yellow, like sleepy eyes half-watching a sitcom.
Someone laughed upstairs, probably Alya in the middle of another noodle-based ethical debate.
Last week, she gave a full TED talk on why stealing the last Maggi packet without consent should be grounds for war crimes under international law.

I smiled. Just a little.

Because even in the middle of this—this fog of low-key grief—life keeps doing its thing.

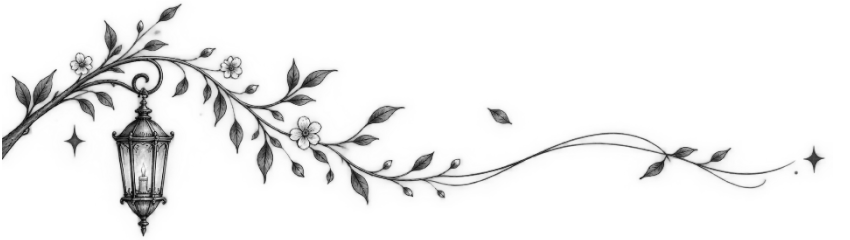
I locked my phone and shoved it into my pocket.

The wind picked up again, like it was auditioning for a rom-com.
A gust of melodrama that whispered, "Get on with it, drama queen."

So I did.

I turned toward the light and walked back inside.
Because maybe ***the bravest thing isn't moving on—it's just… moving.***
Even if you're doing it at a limp. Even if your heart's wearing Crocs.

Especially then.



Five

The next morning, I woke up to the blaring sound of my alarm, which could only be described as the universe's most obnoxious joke. Seriously, who decided the best way to start a new chapter of life was with a siren that could double as a fire drill?

I groaned and smacked my phone, temporarily silencing its judgment. The unfamiliar ceiling stared back at me as I lay there, blinking into the filtered morning light that spilled through the dusty curtains. It felt like waking up in someone else's life.

Spoiler alert: it didn't feel any more real than it had last night.

The sunlight made everything look deceptively calm, as if the universe had forgotten I was about to dive headfirst into law school—a place where sleep schedules went to die and caffeine addictions were born.

Dragging myself out of bed, I stumbled to the bathroom, brushing my teeth like a zombie in denial. I glanced at my reflection, half expecting to see the old me, the one who still lived in Mumbai and binge-watched courtroom dramas

thinking *I could totally do that.* Instead, I saw a frazzled girl with shampoo in her hair and fear in her eyes.

I quickly got dressed, trying not to overthink my outfit. My mind was already racing with questions—What would the first lecture be like? Would I understand anything? What if I accidentally insult a professor in front of everyone? What if I accidentally call the professor "Mom" because I'm still half-asleep? The possibilities for embarrassment were endless.

Alya, of course, was already up and sipping her coffee like a woman on a Vogue photoshoot. No stress. No bags under her eyes. Just flawless eyeliner and the air of someone who'd already skimmed the course syllabus for fun. I shot her a look as I walked out of the bathroom, still looking like I'd been hit by a truck.

"Ready to face the world of caffeine and textbooks?" she teased, clearly enjoying my disarray.

I gave her a half-hearted smile. "Oh, yeah. Who needs sleep when you've got gourmet cafeteria food and the existential crisis of law school, right?"

She laughed. "You'll be fine. Just nod like you understand everything."

I nodded sagely. "Ah, the law school survival guide. Pretend you know stuff until they stop asking questions."

We made our way to campus, the morning air fresh, probably because it was too early for stress to settle in. But as we neared the law building, I could feel the anxiety creeping in. Everyone around me looked so… put together, like they had law books for breakfast. Meanwhile, I was just trying to remember where I put my coffee.

I stepped into the lecture hall and froze. It was bigger than I'd expected, like a courtroom and a TED Talk stage had a baby.

I found a seat near the middle and sank into it, trying not to panic. I was officially a law student. No takebacks.

This was it—the start of my inevitable descent into madness. But hey, at least I had Alya to survive it with.

The lectures started and immediately went from zero to "what-is-happening" in five minutes. Constitutional theory, case precedents, legal Latin phrases I couldn't spell, let alone pronounce. My hand cramped halfway through my first page of notes. I nodded along, pretending I understood what *ratio decidendi* meant while my brain was Googling "Is it too late to switch to marine biology?"

After the lectures ended, I felt like my brain had been put through a blender. Law school had lived up to its hype—intense, overwhelming, and filled with enough jargon to make me question my life choices.

Alya and I stepped out of the lecture hall, and I immediately pulled out my phone, desperately searching for something to distract me from the fact that I had no idea what had just happened.

"Survived?" Alya asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Survived? I think I'm mentally half-dead. If I have to read one more case brief, I might just start crying."

Alya grinned.

"Welcome to the club. But hey, we made it through the first day without passing out. That's something, right?"

I groaned.

"Small victories, huh? I'll be celebrating when I make it through the week without Googling 'What did I get myself into?'"

She laughed and nudged me.

"Come on, let's grab lunch before we drown in textbooks. Don't worry, it gets easier."

"I'll believe it when I'm not dying inside," I muttered, but food was enough to get me moving.

We headed to the canteen, and as I sat down with surprisingly decent food, I couldn't help but chuckle. It was chaotic, confusing, and honestly terrifying, but I was still here. And that, somehow, felt like a win.

After lunch, we hung around in the canteen, half-heartedly picking at our food while pretending to discuss the lectures. Honestly, I couldn't remember half of what we'd learned, and all I really wanted was a nap.

Alya, of course, finished her food first. I sighed. "Plan? Pretend to study for a couple of hours, then cry in my dorm room."

She laughed. "You're being dramatic. You'll be fine."

I shrugged. "Escape plans are essential. You never know when you might need one."

We made our way back to the dorm, and as I plopped down on my bed, I couldn't help but laugh. Law school was chaos, but at least I had sarcasm to survive it. Oh, and food. Definitely food.

Later that evening, I sat at my desk, trying to force myself to study, but my mind kept drifting back to my father's death. The "accident" never sat right with me, and honestly, it felt like I was about to dive into the ultimate mystery novel, except this one was about my life, and I didn't exactly have the luxury of fiction.

I opened the drawer where his papers were kept, giving them the same judgmental look you give leftovers you've forgotten about for weeks.

I pulled out a few documents—contracts, work files, the usual boring adult stuff—and started skimming.

Most of it was the kind of business jargon that made my brain do backflips, but then I came across a memo about a partnership deal he'd been involved in. There it was, tucked between two mundane reports—something about "risks" and "changes in terms." I squinted at the words, hoping they were somehow going to reveal that the real crime was a bad business decision, but all I got was an inexplicable feeling of mild panic.

I dug deeper, flipping through more papers, half-expecting to find a treasure map or a hidden message from beyond the grave.

But no such luck. Just more unhelpful contracts and legal nonsense. I sighed dramatically, wondering if all of my father's secrets were hidden in this sea of paperwork, or if I just needed a magnifying glass and a lifetime subscription to "Business Jargon Weekly."

It wasn't much, but it was something. And hey, at least I wasn't completely wasting my time scrolling through social media. I wasn't done yet. Not by a long shot.

Alya's phone buzzed on the table, and the moment she saw the caller ID, her face lit up like a Christmas tree. Her eyes practically sparkled, and before I could even blink, she leapt out of her seat like she'd just won the lottery.

"It's Grandma!" she shouted, her voice reaching a decibel level that could probably be heard in the next city over.

Without a second thought, she snatched up the phone, practically sprinting out of the room like a track star, calling over her shoulder,

"She's about to interrogate me about my love life again! Pray for me!"

I just stared after her, wondering if I'd ever get that excited about anything that didn't involve a nap or a pizza delivery.

The door swung open seconds later.

"Alya, why are you—"

He stopped.

So did my brain.

He was tall—noticeably so—lean but solid, the kind of height that makes you subconsciously straighten your posture.

His hair was a mess in the most unfairly attractive way: thick, dark, slightly falling into his eyes like he'd either just run his hands through it or never bothered to tame it in the first place.

Sharp jawline. Relaxed shoulders. That irritatingly effortless confidence that suggested he knew exactly how good-looking he was and chose not to mention it out of politeness.

He blinked. I blinked.

"Oh—uh, sorry," he said quickly, ears turning red. "Wrong room."

He vanished just as fast.

I stared at the door, deeply offended by the interruption to my peace and my composure.

A knock followed almost immediately.

When I opened it, there he was again—this time looking slightly sheepish, one hand shoved into his pocket.

"Hey… this is Alya's room, right?"

"Yes," I said slowly. "And I'm her roommate."

He studied the room, eyebrows raised. "Since when does Alya share?"

Before I could respond, Alya burst in.

"Vihaan bhai!!!"

Everything clicked.

"Well," he said, grinning now, "that answers that. I'm Vihaan. Her brother."

Of course he was.

Alya folded her arms, raising an eyebrow. "You do realize knocking is a concept, right?"

Vihaan looked around the room thoughtfully. "I did knock. Mentally."

"That explains nothing," she said. "Why are you here?"

"To ensure my sister hasn't already traumatized her new roommate."

I leaned back on the chair. "Too late. She introduced me to law school."

Alya gasped. "Rude."

Vihaan turned to me, visibly impressed. "Ah. So you're the brave one."

"Or the foolish," I replied. "It's still early."

He nodded solemnly. "That checks out."

Alya jabbed a finger in his direction. "You can't just walk into my room and start conversations like you live here."

"I don't live here," he said calmly; "I visit," loudly.

She glanced at his empty hands. "You also arrive… empty-handed."

He looked offended. "Wow. Straight to the point."

Alya sighed dramatically. “You show up after disappearing for weeks, scare my roommate, and bring nothing?”

“I brought charm,” he said. “And emotional support.”

“Neither of which is edible,” Alya shot back.

He considered this. “Fair. But in my defense, I assumed hostel food had already crushed your expectations.”

I snorted before I could stop myself.

Vihaan noticed. “See? I’m contributing.”

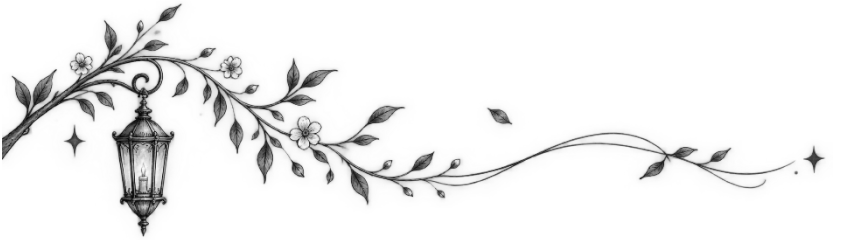
Alya pointed at the door. “Next time you visit, bring chocolate. Or don’t visit.”

He gave her a lazy salute. “Duly threatened.”

I watched them for a moment—effortless, loud, and strangely comforting—then leaned back, shaking my head.

Great.

Excellent start, universe.



Six

The past few weeks had been a blur of lectures, endless coffee refills, and case briefs that seemed to grow in number every time I blinked.

Each day felt like I was running a marathon, but instead of a finish line, there was just more legal jargon waiting to trip me up. Somehow, I was still managing to keep my head above water—barely.

If law school had a motto, it'd probably be something like, "*Keep swimming, and maybe you'll catch onto at least a fraction of what's happening.*"

In the midst of the chaos, we somehow managed to carve out a few moments of sanity. The library quickly became our second home, mostly because we were pretty sure we'd set a new record for the most hours spent in a single room. But we made a habit of escaping to the canteen for quick breaks, where we'd vent about case briefs and mock our professors' overly complicated explanations.

And then there were the new faces we were getting to know—Lena, who was basically a walking to-do list. If you ever needed a perfectly color-coded study plan, Lena was your go-to.

She had highlighters in more shades than I knew existed, and somehow each one had a *purpose*. Yellow was for lectures, green for revisions, pink for panic—sorry, exam prep.

Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if she had a hidden folder called *"How to Save the World in 10 Easy Steps."*

Beneath her terrifyingly organized exterior, Lena was basically the mom-friend of the group—armed with backup pens, an encyclopedic memory for birthdays, and a laugh that could make even midterm meltdowns feel like mild inconveniences.

And Bhav? If confidence were a subject, he'd be the professor and the top student. His vocabulary? So impressive, it could make a dictionary feel insecure. His intelligence? Even Google would ask him for answers. As for his fashion sense? He looked like he'd stepped out of a magazine—probably one titled *"How to Look Perfect While Saving the World… and Breaking Hearts."* And his flirting? He could charm the socks off anyone, leaving you wondering if he was serious or just practicing for the next season of *"How to Break Hearts Without Even Trying."*

Lately, I've been spending more time with Alya and Vihaan than I ever thought possible, mostly because they're experts at distracting me from my impending law school meltdown.

Between library breaks and random canteen visits, we'd laugh at our ridiculous legal debates and Vihaan's unexpected "surprise" visits, which were always more drama than I signed up for. But hey, at least I wasn't drowning alone in the turmoil.

After the final lecture ended, my brain felt like it had just run a marathon, but without the satisfaction of a medal. Everything I'd learned was a blur of case studies and jargon.

Instead of heading back to the dorm like usual, I decided to do something different.

Alya had plans, and I was definitely not in the mood for socializing. So, I grabbed my bag, muttered a "catch you later," and headed to the library.

I needed some quiet—and, honestly, to focus on something other than law.

Today wasn't about textbooks. Today was about my father's documents.

The library was nearly empty, just how I liked it. The faint hum of the lights and the smell of old paper felt oddly comforting. I found a quiet corner, perfect for my "important" mission. I pulled out my father's documents—the ones I'd been avoiding for days. As I spread them across the table, the silence seemed to make the task feel even more daunting. Great, just what I needed.

As I flipped through the papers, my eyes locked onto a list of names—dealers, investors—right around the time of my father's death. My heart skipped a beat. Was this just a coincidence, or was I looking at something much darker? Each name felt like a clue to a mystery I wasn't ready to unravel, but now I had no choice. Something wasn't adding up, and I was already too deep to turn back.

I stared at the names, trying to steady my racing thoughts. I could feel a knot tightening in my stomach, but I knew I had to find out more. I grabbed my phone, scrolling through the contacts, and hesitated for a moment. What if they thought I was crazy? What if they hung up on me before I even finished asking my question?

I quickly dialed the first two numbers. Both calls went straight to voicemail. Great, I thought, because that's exactly what I needed—more unanswered questions. The third person I

called didn't even bother to pick up. At this point, I was ready to throw the papers across the room. But then, I called the fourth and final number. To my surprise, it rang—and someone actually answered. My breath caught in my throat. Finally.

It rang a few times before someone finally picked up. "Hello?" a gravelly voice answered.

I almost stumbled over my words. "Uh, hi. This is Brinda… Raghav Mishra's daughter."

"Can I please get two minutes of your time?"

There was a pause on the other end, like he was weighing whether I was worth the effort. Finally, he grumbled, "Yeah, sure. What's this about?"

"I was wondering if you noticed anything… strange around the time of my father's death? Anything at all?"

The silence on the other end stretched on, making me wonder if I'd just made a huge mistake. Great, now I was probably on some sort of "avoid at all costs" list.

Then, his voice broke through, laced with suspicion. "Who gave you this number?"

I hesitated. There was no way I could tell him I was going through my dead father's old papers like some amateur detective. So, I kept it vague, "I'm just trying to figure some things out."

Another long pause. I waited, wondering if I was about to be hung up on. But then, finally, he spoke.

"Look, kid, I don't know what you're trying to get at, but I'll tell you this—your father did have a meeting with me that day. But right before, he called and asked me to postpone it. Said something urgent came up."

Something urgent?

My heart skipped a beat. "Do you remember what he said exactly? Or what the meeting was about?" I asked, my pulse quickening despite myself.

"Don't remember the exact words," he said.

"We were supposed to talk about some investment stuff. You know, market trends, opportunities—nothing out of the ordinary."

I exhaled, trying to hide my disappointment. Another half clue, but nothing solid to latch onto. The universe sure loved to keep me guessing.

"Thanks for the info," I muttered, already mentally sorting through the new tidbits. "You've been… helpful."

As I ended the call, a wave of questions crashed over me—what had my father gotten himself tangled up in? And what had been so urgent that he'd pushed everything aside?

The pieces of the puzzle were scattered, but at least now, I had a fresh lead. It was just a matter of time before the pieces started falling into place… or so I hoped.

The weight of everything was starting to feel like I was carrying a mountain on my shoulders, minus the scenic views. My brain was a tornado of questions, and I was pretty sure I was about to short-circuit from overthinking. Honestly, all I wanted was a hug—preferably one that didn't come with a side of awkwardness. Just a solid, comforting squeeze to remind me that, despite everything, I wasn't alone. And if it came with snacks? Even better.

I felt a little ridiculous, calling Alya for some comfort when she had no clue what I was really dealing with. But I needed a distraction, and I needed to hear a voice that wasn't filled with paperwork, theories, and questions.

I quickly dialed her number and waited for her to pick up. When she did, her voice was the usual upbeat melody that I could rely on to calm my nerves.

“Yes, babe.”

“Where are you? I’m still at the library.”

“Oh, I’m in the room already. Got back a while ago. Why? Everything okay?”

“Yeah… I just wanted to check in. I’ll be back in a bit,”

I hung up the phone, feeling a mix of exhaustion and relief. At least she was there, not too far away, ready to pull me out of my own head whenever I needed.

The moment I hung up, I quickly packed the documents into my bag and headed back to our room.

My mind was still racing, but I needed to get a hold of myself. Hopefully, Alya could distract me with something—anything—before I completely lost it.

The moment I entered the room, I went straight to the cupboard and tucked the stack of documents safely in the drawer, hoping they’d stay hidden for a little longer.

As I turned around, I started to speak, but before I could get a word out, Alya was already up from the bed, pulling me into a tight hug.

MUCH NEEDED!

"You look exhausted," she said, her voice soft but full of concern.

All I managed to say was, “I’m hungry.”

Alya raised an eyebrow. "Let me call Vihaan. He’ll bring us some snacks. Honestly, I haven’t seen or heard from him in two days, so he probably owes us a snack delivery at this point."

I couldn't help but laugh a little. "You think he even remembers that we exist?"

"Hopefully," Alya replied with a smirk.

I chuckled, feeling a little lighter. For now, I could let go of the weight of everything and just focus on food… and whatever drama Vihaan was about to bring along with his snack delivery.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door so dramatic it could've been the opening scene of a Netflix thriller. Then came Vihaan's voice, as if announcing his arrival at the Oscars.

"I come bearing gifts!" he boomed, like he was the Santa Claus of snacks.

Alya rolled her eyes but smiled.

"And by gifts, you mean snacks, right? Don't tell me you're giving us another one of those 'life lessons' you love so much."

"Of course not," Vihaan replied. "What else would a man of my caliber bring?"

I watched as Alya stood up to open the door, and there he was—Vihaan, looking as though he'd just stepped out of a high-fashion catalog, effortlessly carrying two oversized bags that were suspiciously bulging at the seams.

"Didn't realize you were moonlighting as a snack delivery service now, Vihaan," I quipped, unable to suppress my grin as he walked in, clearly proud of himself.

Vihaan shot me a smug look. "Ah, well, I'm versatile. Snacks, style, unsolicited life advice—what else do you need?"

"For the record, I only picked the finest snacks that money can buy, meaning I went to the corner store and grabbed everything that looked vaguely edible."

Alya and I exchanged a look before diving into the bags. There were chips, candy bars, fruit snacks, and a few "healthier" options—like granola bars and mixed nuts—though the ratio of junk food to actual food was questionable at best.

Vihaan flopped down on the bed like he'd just won the snack lottery. "Alright, let's get real. How's life treating you two? Still surviving law school, or are we deep into the 'slow descent into madness' phase?"

I grabbed a chip and flopped into the chair.

"I wouldn't call it madness," I said, popping the chip into my mouth.

"It's more like slowly drowning in legal jargon while trying to remember which way is up."

Alya laughed. "Yeah, 'keeping your head above water' is more of a guideline than an actual rule."

Vihaan stretched out on the bed like a very dramatic cat.

"I feel you. But hey, you know what they say, what doesn't kill you… probably just wants you to pay for more textbooks. So, silver lining."

Alya snorted. "I don't know if I want to be that strong. Not if it means I have to keep reading these never-ending textbooks."

Vihaan's eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Don't worry. If you ever need help with a case brief or figuring out how to survive an all-nighter without questioning every life choice you've ever made, you know who to call. Procrastination? I'm basically a pro."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said dryly.

For a second, I let myself relax—no textbooks, no cases, just snacks and friends. But then, as I reached for another bag of

chips, I noticed Vihaan staring at me in a way that made me pause. It was like he'd switched gears, suddenly serious.

Alya caught the shift too. "What's going on with you, Vihaan? You've got this 'I'm about to drop some deep wisdom' look."

Vihaan leaned back, looking far too philosophical for someone who'd just come from a corner store.

"I'm just saying… you two look like you're carrying the weight of the world. If it gets too much, you can always offload it to me. I'll take the emotional baggage, and you can focus on the snacks."

I swallowed a chip too quickly, choking a little. "Thanks, but I think I'm good. Just trying to avoid overthinking for the next five minutes."

Is it that obvious on my face that I'm struggling? Should I just open up and tell them what's going on, or keep pretending everything's fine? And then there's Vihaan—how does he always seem to know exactly what I'm about to say?

How does he get me so well after only a few weeks? And the biggest question—should I go through this alone, or is it time to finally open up and tell him everything that's been weighing on me?

"Look, seriously, you don't have to go through it alone, alright? Whatever's weighing you down, just remember, I'm here. Friends are for the weird, messy, snack-filled moments."

WHAT THE HELL… *How does he know exactly what I'm thinking? Honestly, that's kind of creepy!*

"Let's save the heavy stuff for later," Alya said quickly. "Vihaan, how about you tell us one of your ridiculous stories? You know, the ones where you convinced an entire lecture hall you were the professor?"

"Ah, yes! I've got just the story. You won't believe the time I convinced a professor I was an undercover student researcher… mostly because I had a really good parking pass."

"Wait, you didn't?"

"Oh, I did,"

"He believed it until I casually mentioned something about 'researching obscure parking lot policies.' Then I lost him."

I laughed so hard, I almost spit out my drink. "Honestly, you're a menace, but I think I need to hear more."

And just like that, the tension melted away. For a moment, I forgot about my endless to-do list and the mystery gnawing at me. I was just surrounded by snacks, laughter, and Vihaan's chaos—and Alya's ability to roll her eyes at every one of his ridiculous stories.

As the laughter died down, the weight of everything I had been carrying settled back into my chest. The mystery of my father's death, the documents, the phone calls, it all pressed down on me again, and I knew that sooner or later, I'd have to tell Alya and Vihaan what was really going on. I couldn't keep this secret forever, not when it felt like it was slowly consuming me.

I took a deep breath, steeling myself for the moment. This was it. I was finally going to open up. They were my friends; the only ones I trusted enough to unload this mess on. They deserved to know, right? I mean, who else could I rely on when my life felt like a bad detective novel, full of mysteries, shady characters, and too many unanswered questions?

I opened my mouth to speak, but just as I did, Vihaan's phone rang, cutting through the moment like a loud honking horn. He gave me an apologetic glance, fumbled to answer it, and walked out of the room.

"Hold that thought," he said with a small smile.

I sank back into the chair, the air feeling a little heavier now. This was the perfect moment—until it wasn't. I glanced at Alya, who raised an eyebrow and gave me a knowing look.

"You were about to spill, huh?" she asked, her voice teasing but with just the right amount of knowing.

"I could practically see the 'dramatic reveal' building up. Like, 'I'm going to tell you everything,' and bam, Vihaan's phone rings. Classic."

I sighed dramatically, but at least I didn't feel completely frustrated.

Minutes passed, and soon enough, the door opened again, and Vihaan stepped back into the room, his phone now back in his pocket. His usual confident swagger was slightly subdued, and there was something in his expression—something that didn't quite match his usual carefree attitude.

"Sorry about that," he said, plopping down onto the bed. He glanced at me, then Alya, looking like he was about to say more, but he didn't.

Alya smirked. "Everything okay?"

Vihaan nodded, but it was a little too quick, a little too rehearsed.

"Yeah, just some stuff I gotta take care of. Friends are waiting for me. Looks like I'm needed elsewhere." He gave a sheepish smile, already standing up. "You know how it is."

I glanced between them, unsure of how to feel. He usually stuck around, often a bit too long, making sure no one was left alone with their thoughts. But today, it seemed like he was in a hurry.

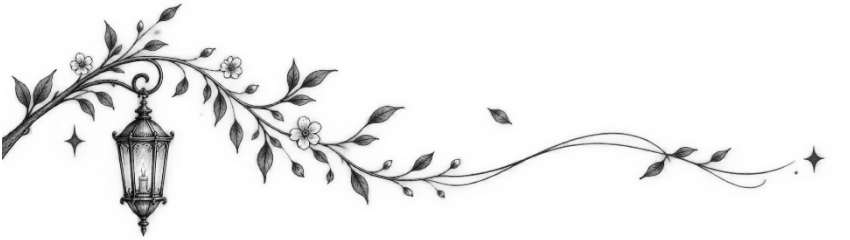
I tried to mask my confusion with a smile. "Yeah, sure. No problem."

He paused by the door, giving me a lingering look, his smile growing a little more playful.

"I'll catch you both later," he said, his voice dropping just a touch, "but don't have too much fun without me, okay?"

I raised an eyebrow, about to reply, but before I could, he winked and slipped out of the room, his casual swagger leaving me with a flutter I couldn't quite shake.

Such an idiot.



Seven

It was the kind of day that floated somewhere between a daydream and a really convincing distraction. The weather outside was that perfect shade of gray that made you want to crawl into a blanket cocoon and pretend like deadlines were just some cruel jokes.

Meanwhile, the pile of law textbooks in the corner loomed like a judgmental, silent observer, its very existence a reminder that we hadn't touched a single case brief in days. I could almost hear them whispering, "Nice try, future lawyers."

We had been avoiding the pile all morning. It wasn't that we didn't want to study; it was more that we just couldn't muster the energy for it. Not today.

But eventually, we both knew it had to happen. So, with a shared look of resignation, we headed to the library.

The library greeted us with silence and the faint smell of old paper—completely indifferent to our glittery eyeliner and heeled boots.
Alya sank into a chair. "This place has the energy of a tax seminar."

I smiled, setting down my bag. “Perfect. Let’s ruin it with our charm.”

She smirked. “Plot twist: we actually study.”

“Shocking,” I said. “Let’s ruin the curve and look hot doing it.”

In the far corner, a group of girls were huddled together, giggling behind a book like it held national secrets. Alya squinted. “What’s the deal? Did someone finally write a legal thriller that’s actually fun?”

I leaned over and smirked. “That’s Elle Kennedy.”

By the way, she's my favorite author.

“Should I know her? Sounds like a luxury candle brand."

“She’s basically the queen of plot twists and pure drama,” I whispered. “Drama, plot twists, hockey hunks, and—” I leaned in— “enough steam to fog up my glasses.” Alya raised an eyebrow. “So they're not just fans… they’re survivors.”

“Yep, that’s when the friendly teasing turns into… well, let’s just say it’s definitely not PG anymore.”
Alya smirked.

“Ah, so it’s not just a book. It’s an emotional rollercoaster.” “Exactly. The kind that leaves you questioning your life choices—real therapy, but with more plot twists.” She chuckled. “Perfect. I’ll make sure to add it to my reading list after finals. For personal growth, obviously.”

We exchanged a look and promptly burst out laughing, the kind you try to hold in at the library and fail miserably.

Out of nowhere, it just clicked. Maybe it was the fact that I'd spent the last five minutes pretending to be super focused on my textbook—which, let's be honest, was probably written in a language I didn’t understand. Or maybe it was just the fact

that Alya was, as always, attempting to break the sound barrier with her laughter. Either way, I couldn't keep it inside anymore. The truth? It had to come out, and if I had to channel my inner Elle Kennedy heroine for a dramatic reveal, then so be it. It's time

Already typing.

Me: Where are you, Mr. Mysterious? We need to talk, and it's important. I'll make sure I look absolutely flawless while doing it, though.

The reply came faster than I expected.

Vihaan: Oof. Dangerous combo. I'm in class trying to look interested in Torts. You're not helping.

Me: Torts will betray you. I won't.

Vihaan: Now you're speaking my love language. What's going on? Everything okay?

Me: I've got something to tell you. And it's not about footnotes or Sharma's emotional support Crocs.

Vihaan: Now you have my full attention. You're not usually this cryptic. Should I be worried… or turned on?

Me: Both. It's something real. The kind of secret that doesn't belong in group projects or WhatsApp forwards.

Vihaan: Damn. Should I light a candle? Pour a drink? Or strictly intellectual?

Me: *Try smart and slightly sinful. It suits you.*

Vihaan: Stop. I'll blush in the middle of class, and the girl next to me already thinks I'm emotionally unstable.

Me: Well, you are. Anyway, Alya's in too. I want to tell you both. You'll want in.

Vihaan: Class ends in two hours. After that, I'm yours. Mind, time, popcorn, smolder—all of it.

Me: Careful. That sounded like commitment. Are we flirting or planning a revolution?

Vihaan: With you? Always both. See you in two, danger girl. Try not to look too good, unless you want me to forget what we're meeting for.

Me: Who says I don't?

Calm down, Sherlocks—just premium-grade teasing between two unreasonably good-looking friends.

"I'm telling Vihaan and you. Today," I said, almost more to myself than to Alya, who blinked mid-page-turn.

"You sure?" She asked gently.

I nodded.

"He's coming?"

"In two hours."

"And we're telling him everything?"

"Everything."

She reached over, linked her pinky with mine, and said, "Then let's make it count."

For once, the weight didn't feel so heavy. Not with them. Not anymore.

Two hours felt like twenty. Alya and I had cleaned the room, messed it up again while looking for snacks, changed into comfy clothes, and debated whether Vihaan would even remember to show up.

"He's probably flirting with some first-year and forgot," Alya said.

I rolled my eyes, half-laughing. "He's not *that* bad."

"You're right. He flirts, but he's punctual about it."

Just then, the door creaked open, and there he was Vihaan, wearing a black hoodie that made him look like trouble disguised as comfort.

His hair was slightly messy, like he'd run a hand through it too many times, and there was that trademark smirk tugging at his lips.

"Ladies," he greeted, dropping his bag like he owned the place. "Did you miss me, or were you too busy plotting my dramatic entrance?"

"We were betting on whether you'd ghost us. Congrats. You're only slightly late and unnecessarily hot."

Vihaan gave a mock bow. "It's a burden I carry with grace."

But I was too wound up for jokes. My fingers kept twisting in my lap, and Alya must've sensed it, because she nudged me with her foot. "Brin. Go for it."

I took a breath. Then another.

The kind of breath that makes your ribs ache like they're not sure if they're supposed to hold it all in or let it all out.

"I need to tell you something," I said, my voice steadier than I felt.

His smirk faded, replaced by something softer. He leaned in just a little. "Okay."

Alya gave me a tiny nod.

"It's about my dad," I said.

"You know how I always said he died suddenly? Accident. Business trip. All that polite, packaged grief?"

Vihaan didn't speak. Just nodded, slowly.

"I lied. Not to hurt anyone; I think I was just trying to… survive it."

"There was nothing sudden about it. Nothing clean. My dad didn't just die. He was… found. And it didn't add up. None of it did. The timeline, the location, his state of mind. He wasn't the kind of man who made sloppy mistakes. But the police closed it in a week like it was a lost wallet."

His brows furrowed, and I could see the shift in his posture, he then leaned forward with a silent *"I'm listening, don't stop."*

"I applied to Ravenswood not just for the law degree or the break from Mumbai… I came here to find out what really happened. Something's off. And I'm done pretending it's not."

Silence wrapped the room for a moment. Not heavy. Just… real.

Just then, Alya's phone buzzed against the windowsill.

She glanced at it casually, then did a double take.

Alya reached over, squeezed my wrist like a secret handshake.

Vihaan finally spoke, voice low and sure. "Okay. Then we're in this with you."

I looked at him. "You sure?"

He tilted his head. "Brinda Mishra, you just handed me a real-life mystery, academic emotional stakes, and the promise of late-night chai interrogations. Of course I'm in."

Alya grinned. "Also, imagine the group chat titles. Operation Dad Files? The Case of the Disappearing Truth? Sherlock and Sass?"

I laughed, watery and loud. "You guys are the worst. And the best."

Vihaan lifted his chai. "To secrets, smart girls, and a little bit of chaos."

We clinked mugs. Mine shook a little in my hand.

But inside, something settled. Like the truth had finally exhaled.

After Vihaan had left, the weight of the conversation lifted, and the room settled into a much lighter atmosphere.

Alya kicked her feet up on the bed, sprawling like she owned the place. "Honestly, I'm still mad about that debate," she muttered, clearly still irritated. "I don't care if he's got a silver spoon up his ass, Rahul should not have been allowed to talk over everyone like that."

I rolled my eyes, remembering the heated discussion in class three days ago. "Right? That guy has the nerve to act like he knows everything just because his dad probably funds half the department."

"I can't stand how he speaks like he's the authority on every topic," Alya went on.

"'Oh, I have extensive experience with international law,'" she mimicked in a posh tone. "Yeah, sure, you've read three articles and googled one obscure case. Really credible."

I chuckled, remembering how Rahul had basically hijacked the conversation during the debate, his smug smile never leaving his face. "He's like a walking, talking point. If I have to hear him talk about how 'global economics are so intertwined with legal principles' one more time, I might throw something."

Alya grinned. "I swear he uses that line to sound impressive, but I'm pretty sure it's just a recycled TED Talk quote."

"It's his inability to shut up, or how everyone just *nods* like they're hanging on to every word. I half expected him to start charging people for his opinions."

"Seriously. I saw Sanya scribbling down notes like she was getting the next big breakthrough in law," I added, laughing. "Like, girl, please. He's just recycling his dad's book recommendations."

"Ugh, don't even get me started on Sanya. She's practically his personal PR agent. I swear, the minute Rahul starts speaking, she's in the front row, nodding like she's so enlightened."

"Like, girl, are you trying to get on his good side for a study group or what?" I raised my eyebrows dramatically.

Alya snorted. "Exactly. But hey, who am I to judge? I mean, I'd do it for the notes too if I didn't already have better sources."

"True, true," I agreed, grinning. "And don't get me started on Rohan's smug face when he *thought* he had a winning argument. Like, okay, Rohan, we all heard you, but did anyone understand you?"

"Honestly, if I hadn't been so caught up in wanting to roll my eyes at Rahul, I would've *definitely* been giving Rohan the side-eye."

"Don't forget Neha—she was trying to pull off the whole 'diplomatic silence' act, but we all knew she was just waiting for the moment to pounce on someone," Alya added, her lips curling in a teasing grin. "I mean, she's basically the courtroom version of a silent ninja."

I laughed, remembering the way Neha had sat there, arms crossed, giving everyone the coldest side-eye before swooping in with her own killer comment. "Yeah, she was just waiting

for the perfect moment to drop that one line that would make her look like a genius."

"Classic move," Alya said, nodding approvingly. "Honestly, though, I'm just glad I didn't have to be the one on stage trying to act like I knew what was going on."

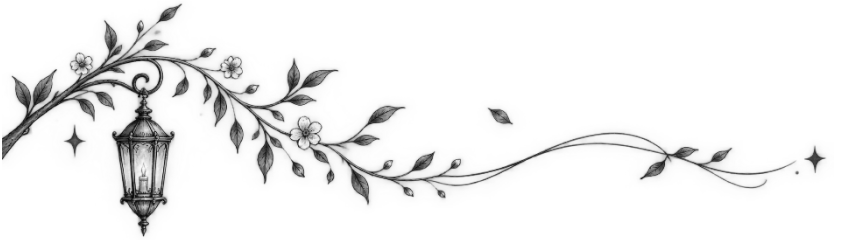
"Same," I agreed. "I swear, I'm not ready to argue international law in front of a crowd of people who are *this* dramatic."

Alya stretched out and sighed dramatically. "Honestly, I think we all know who the real winner was. Me. I didn't have to say a single word and still managed to make it through the whole thing without losing my cool."

"Exactly. You were like the silent queen of the debate. Let them tear each other apart, and you're just chilling, letting your wisdom marinate in the background." I winked at her.

Alya grinned. "Exactly. Let them think they've won. Meanwhile, I'll be over here, not looking like a stressed-out mess."

With that, we both settled back into the cushions, letting the comfortable silence settle in, content to just unwind from the chaos—both in class and in life.



Eight

Alya had just left for the shower when her phone buzzed on the bed. I didn't mean to look.

Okay, maybe I did. Just a glance.

Just to check if it was Vihaan, because curiosity is a disease and I am terminal.

But then I saw the name light up on the screen: **Brinda's Mystery Man**.

Excuse me—*my* mystery man?
That alone stopped me mid-breath. But it was the message preview that hit harder than a midterm results email.

Vihaan: *"So when are u coming?"*
Alya: *"I'll meet u guys at lunch maybe."*

I blinked.

"Guys?"

She'd messaged him while sitting *right next to me?*

No mention. No nudge. Just a casual secret text thread?

I know, I *know*. It's not a big deal. Probably. Friends talk. Plans happen. But something in the way the messages sat there, just waiting to be opened, made my thumb move faster than my brain.

And then I saw it.

Vihaan: *"I've talked to dad about it. Don't worry. He's ready to help."*
Alya: *"So should we tell this to Brinda today?"*
Vihaan: *"We'll talk to her together tomorrow. I'm busy today."*

So they weren't keeping it from me—not forever. They were just… waiting.

My breath caught in my throat, sharp, like it had barbs. I just stared at the screen like it might explain itself if I looked long enough.

His dad?

Ready to help?

Tell me what?

And Alya—my person, my gajra-smuggling, jhumka-flashing ride-or-die—she'd been sitting next to me, twirling a pencil and helping me annotate torts, knowing something I didn't.

I locked the phone and set it down like it had burned me.

In the background, the shower was still running. The world felt weirdly quiet. Like the walls were holding their breath too.

I paced.

I paced and I spiraled.

Did they know something I didn't? Were they planning something behind my back? Or worse, were they trying to protect me from something too big, too painful?

And then, like a record scratch in my brain, I remembered the date on the text.

Last night.

It wasn't some long-standing conspiracy. It wasn't even twelve hours old.

And today, Vihaan had just replied: *"I'll meet you guys at lunch maybe."*

They weren't in it without me. They were trying to bring me in.

Trying to help.

I sat down, suddenly exhausted.

Maybe I should wait. Hear them out. Maybe this wasn't betrayal, maybe it was kindness wearing awkward shoes.

Still… the silence in the room felt loud.

By the time we reached the canteen, I had imagined at least 36 different outcomes.

In five of them, Vihaan was a secret agent. In seven, Alya was a double agent. In one particularly dramatic one, they both handed me a sealed envelope and said, *"Brinda… it's time."*

None of those things happened. Obviously.

What did happen was Vihaan waving at us from a sunlit corner table, one leg slung over the other like he belonged on a magazine cover about *"Crimes, Clues, and Cheekbones: A Guide."*

Alya smiled like she wasn't holding secrets.

"Hey," Vihaan said, sliding a steel tumbler of chaas toward me like it was a peace offering. "Tiring morning?"

"Hmm," I hummed. Noncommittal.

Alya cleared her throat. "So… um. There's something we've been meaning to talk to you about."

Here it comes.

"It's nothing bad," he said quickly. "Just—just something that might help. With… everything."

I raised an eyebrow, my fork hovering mid-air like a sniper ready to fire. "With everything," I repeated. "So vague. So comforting. This feels like a conversation I'm supposed to have after signing an NDA."

Vihaan winced and ran a hand through his hair. "My dad… he's a senior police officer in Mumbai. Alya and I were talking last night, and we thought—well, we thought maybe we could ask him to look into your dad's case."

I could almost hear dramatic music playing in the background.

I blinked.

"My dad's case?"

Alya nodded, her expression soft and entirely too innocent. "Brin, you've been carrying this alone for so long. We thought maybe if someone with actual reach looked into the file, pulled a few strings…"

"Wait, so, I've been living my life in a giant, tragic soap opera, and you two were playing the secret agents behind the scenes?"

Vihaan frowned. "I didn't want to go behind your back," he said quickly. "That's why we planned to talk to you today. I just had to confirm with my dad first."

"Confirmed with your dad?" I stared at him. "So, not only are you both in on this… but your dad's apparently the one who can solve crimes like it's a side gig?"

"I told you it wasn't bad! It's just… you've been carrying this alone. We thought it would help."

I pressed my hand to my forehead dramatically. "You mean, you guys *didn't* think it would help to tell me this *before* I ate my body weight in pasta and spiraled into existential dread?"

"I didn't tell him everything. Just that we had a friend whose father's case might've been… mishandled. He said he'd be discreet. If you want him to check into it, that is."

"And if I don't?"

"Then we won't," Alya said, firm. "This is your story, Brin. We're just here for support."

My throat felt dry. The edges of my vision prickled a little. I stared down at the untouched rice on my plate. Then I looked up at them, still waiting.

"Okay," I said finally, voice low, as if I was considering whether or not to commit to a hair color change. "Let's do it."

Vihaan let out a long breath like he'd been holding it for five years. Alya reached over and squeezed my hand under the table, as though we were some kind of *found family* in an overly dramatic teen drama.

Later that night, our room looked like a crime scene if the criminal was an accountant with hoarding tendencies.

Alya flopped onto her bed dramatically, wearing an oversized T-shirt that said, *"Law & Disorder,"* and towel-drying her hair like she was auditioning for a shampoo commercial in slow motion.

I was on the floor, cross-legged in the center of a paper explosion—old files, scribbled notes, dusty envelopes, and

mysterious government stamps that made me suspicious on principle.

Alya peeked over the edge of the bed. "Um. Brinda? Did you rob a filing cabinet on your way here?"

"This is everything I have from my dad's office. His documents. Emails I printed. Contracts. And whatever this weird receipt is from something called 'Mango Consortium Pvt. Ltd.'"

Alya picked it up with two fingers, like it might bite. "Either that's a shell company or a very aggressive fruit startup."

I shrugged. "Could go either way."

She slid off the bed and sat next to me, picking up a stapled bunch of papers with the reverence of someone defusing a bomb. "Have you read all of this?"

"Twice. Once as a daughter. Once as a confused paralegal with a highlighter addiction."

"Brin, you're one serious storm of secrets."

"I'm like a mystery novel written by a tax auditor."

She snorted, then got up and rummaged through her drawer. After some dramatic clanking, muttered, "Where did I put that stupid thing," she came back with a tiny piece of paper.

Her handwriting was chaos. It looked like a squirrel had tried calligraphy.

"My dad's number," she said, handing it to me. "He knows a little—enough to be helpful. If you ever need backup and I'm not here to scream at people on your behalf, just call him."

"So you're just casually handing me the hotline to Papa Police?"

"You're basically family now. Plus, if you keep staring at these documents like that, you're two spreadsheets away from building a murder board."

"I was going to use yarn and everything," I muttered.

She ignored me. "Seriously, he's good. And he's quiet. But if you call him, please start by saying, 'This is Brinda, Alya's roommate,' or he might think you're a scammer and hang up."

"Noted. Should I avoid calling at 3 a.m. too, or is that when he's most powerful?"

"Brinda."

"Fine."

I tucked the note behind a doodle in my notebook—some sad attempt at drawing a courtroom, and a crow in a wig saying *'Objection!'* I don't want to talk about it.

Alya leaned against my shoulder. "You're not alone in this, okay?"

I didn't say anything. She just let my head rest against hers.

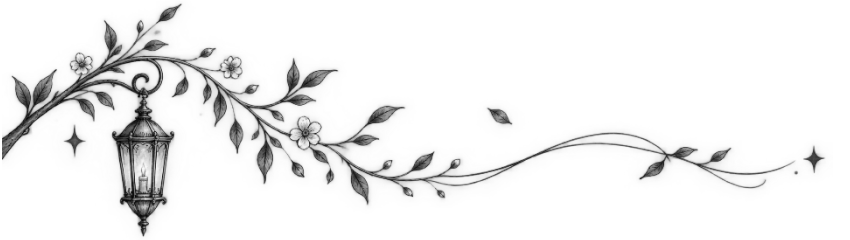
Outside, the corridor was alive with someone's terrible speaker playing *'Sheila Ki Jawani'* and the faint sound of someone arguing over stolen shampoo.

Inside, it was just us.

And for the first time in a while, I felt like maybe I didn't have to solve a mystery all by myself.

Maybe I had backup.

Even if one of them wore T-shirts with bad puns and the other responded to existential texts with "lol same."



Nine

There are two kinds of people who willingly spend a Friday night sifting through dusty documents:

1. Law students with no social life.
2. Daughters trying to solve their father's *maybe*-murder.

Guess which one I was?

Alya was out at a late-night library session (her words, not mine. I suspect the library was named "Bhav").

So it was just me, a precarious tower of paperwork, and a bowl of overly enthusiastic Maggi.

I wasn't expecting anything new. I'd gone through most of these files before—company memos, contracts, and receipts from cafés that apparently thought espresso should cost more than my soul.

But then, tucked between two maintenance bills from our old apartment, I found it.

A photo.

More accurately, half a photo.

My dad stood in it, smiling like he wasn't carrying a hundred secrets. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, his tie slightly askew. He looked… young. Not in years, but in ease. But it wasn't just him.

There was another person in the picture. Or there had been.

The entire right half was torn, jagged and old at the edges. All I could see was a man's hand resting on my dad's shoulder—barely visible, but there was a watch.

The wrist wore a watch, old-school, with a leather strap. No rings. No tattoos. Nothing distinct.

I stared at it for what felt like minutes, heart thudding against my ribcage like it was trying to Morse code a warning.

This wasn't a photo I'd seen before. Not in albums. Not in drawers. Not in my mental map of Dad's history.

And there was something about the hand. Familiar? Maybe. But mostly unsettling. A weird, gnawing feeling, like I was staring at a ghost that had cropped itself out.

I flipped through every file again, searching. Desk drawers. Folders. Even the backs of invoices, hoping the other half had decided to casually attach itself to a budget proposal.

Nothing.

Just that one hand. One clue.

When Alya finally walked in, she looked like she'd fought a war with her eyeliner and lost.

"I brought caffeine and scandal. You're welcome." she announced.

I just held up the photo.

She squinted. "Whoa. Vintage Brinda Dad. But… uh, where's the rest?"

"That's what I'd like to know." I passed it to her. "Recognize the hand?"

"Are you asking me to do forensic hand analysis?"

"Obviously. You're the only person I trust who also owns six shades of nail polish remover. You're basically a lab."

"Hmm. No rings. Clean nails. That's either a businessman or a serial killer."

"Comforting."

She sat beside me on the bed, pulling out her phone.

My phone buzzed.

Alya: Dad's number. Just in case. He said you could call him if you ever needed help—directly. You don't have to go through me or Vihaan.

I looked at her. Really looked at her. Behind the sass and the sarcasm, she was steady. My person.

"Thanks,"

"Just don't tell him I let you eat Maggi on top of legal documents. He might rescind your rights."

I stared at the number on my phone like it might bite me.

Calling Alya's dad—a literal senior police officer—wasn't exactly on my bingo card for the semester. I'd imagined dramatic group presentations, maybe a library romance if fate was feeling spicy. But this? Asking for help to dig into my dead dad's call records?

Yeah. Law school was wild.

I took a deep breath, hovered over the contact: **ACP Rajan Singh** (saved under: *Alya's Dad – Very scary but helpful™*)

And hit call.

It rang once.
Twice.

Thrice.

"Hello?"

His voice was deep, calm. The kind of voice that probably made criminals immediately confess and law interns drop their coffee.

"Hi, sir. This is Brinda Mishra. Alya's—uh—roommate? Friend? Tort survivor?"

"Yes, Brinda. I've heard a lot about you."

"Good things, I hope."

"Mostly. How can I help you?"

Okay. Showtime.

"I found something strange in my father's files—a torn photograph. And… it just made me realize I might be missing pieces. Important ones. I was wondering if it's possible to access… um… his old call records?"

There. Said it. Out loud. No backing out now.

He was quiet for a moment.

Then, "What timeframe are we looking at?"

"The last three months before he… passed," I said, voice soft. "I know it's a big ask, and maybe it's not even possible. I just—there's something off, and I can't explain it, but I need to know who he was talking to. Maybe someone he shouldn't have been."

Another pause. But this one felt thoughtful, not reluctant.

"I'll see what I can do," he said finally. "It's not simple, but I have some contacts in cyber and telecom. If there's a way to get it discreetly, I'll find it."

"Thank you. Really. I know I sound like a paranoid Netflix heroine—"

"You sound like someone asking the right questions," he interrupted, firm but kind. "Sometimes that's all it takes."

Wow. Okay. Alya really undersold her dad.

"Also," he added, with the smallest smile in his voice, "please stop writing your study notes on the back of restaurant bills. Alya sends pictures. I'm judging silently."

"Sir, in my defense, they have a nice font."

"I'll be in touch in a few days. And Brinda?"

"Yes?"

"Keep digging. You're on to something."

Click.

I stared at my phone, heart thudding like I'd just passed both a moral threshold and a surprise viva.

The photo was still on my bed, half-smile, half-shadow. The call was made. The gears were turning.

Somewhere, something had shifted.

It was getting late, and the quiet hum of the campus had shifted into a soft stillness. Alya had gone to bed, the only light in the room coming from my desk lamp and the soft glow of my phone screen.

I stared at the phone, my thumb hovering over the call button. This was a conversation I wasn't ready for. But Mom… well, she was inevitable.

I pressed the call button.

And then I heard that overly cheerful voice on the other end.

"Brinda! You're still alive! How's my girl? How's law school? Getting all A's, I hope?"

I almost smiled. Almost.

"Yeah, Mom. It's good. Just… the usual. You know, piles of case studies and caffeine."

"Oh, darling, please tell me you're eating something other than coffee and stress. You'll end up a lawyer who survives on 'arguments and raw ambition.'"

"Totally. I've had… an entire packet of Maggi tonight. So, nutrition's on point."

"Maggi?! What's next? Writing assignments on pizza boxes?"

"…I may or may not have written notes on restaurant receipts once. But we're not talking about that."

"Brinda Mishra!" she gasped dramatically. "You're in law school! Have some dignity."

I snorted. "Don't worry, Mom. Law school seems like a crime scene."

"Just promise me you'll go outside once in a while, okay? You're not supposed to live in that room forever."

"Outside? Risky. That's so last season."

"Only if you don't wear sunscreen. If I don't see a picture of you in sunlight soon, I'm flying over there to drag you out myself."

"Fine, fine. Maybe I'll post a pic with my coffee cup. #LivingTheDream."

She laughed. "Just don't get too dramatic on me, alright?"

“Drama? Me? Never.”

"By the way, if you need anything, you know you can call me, right?"

I paused. “Yeah, I promise.”

“Good. Just… please stop writing on bills, okay?”

“I’ll think about it. Thanks, Mom.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too,” I said, hanging up with a smile that didn’t quite reach my eyes.

I was about to put the phone down when it buzzed again. Vihaan was calling.

My heart skipped. “Vihaan?!”

Honestly, I don’t know why, but I found myself smiling when I saw his name pop up. And then it hit me, it’s pretty late.

"Who?!" Mom’s voice suddenly went sharp. “Who’s Vihaan?”

I froze.

“Uh, Mom, I’ll tell you tomorrow, okay? It’s nothing.”

“Brinda, it’s past midnight! Why is Vihaan calling you at this hour?”

“It’s really nothing, Mom. Just… school stuff.”

“School stuff, huh? You sure he’s not trying to ‘study’ in the middle of the night?” she teased. “You better not be hiding some late-night study partner situation from me! Don’t make me call him myself.”

“Mom!”

“I swear, I’ll tell you everything tomorrow. Just let me breathe for five seconds!”

"Fine, fine! But if he's cute, I expect pictures. And I'm going to need him to call me; it's my mom duty. Plus, you know, I'll have 99% of my questions ready, mostly about your love life."

"Love life? Mom, can we not have *that* conversation now? You're going to ask me a hundred questions and 99% of them will be about my love life."

"Well, that's what moms do! Love life, friends, coffee habits—I'm keeping track of everything."

"Goodnight, sweetheart! And if Vihaan's calling you this late, you better not be hiding any *my*sterious late-night conversations from me!"

"Goodnight, Mom!" I hung up before the interrogation began.

Vihaan: Hey, can we talk tomorrow?

I raised a brow. Vihaan wasn't usually the "let's schedule a chat" type.

Me: Sure. What's up?

Vihaan: Avoiding study mode. Late-night chat?
Typical Vihaan.

Me: So, I'm your procrastination partner now? Feels like the start of a Netflix-and-snacks crime spree.

Vihaan: Nah, it's self-care. Balance, obviously.

Me: Like calling ice cream dinner. Questionable, but comforting.

Vihaan: Exactly. You're my emotional support law student.
Me: Do I get a certificate for that? Or just dark circles and sarcasm?

Vihaan: Both. Framed in glitter.

Me: Hang it next to your "Most Likely to Argue with Faculty" plaque.

Vihaan: That professor had a tone, okay?

Me: He asked you to submit on time.

Vihaan: Semantics. Anyway, coffee tomorrow? My treat. Real stuff.

Me: Trying to woo me with caffeine? Bold.

Vihaan: It's not bribery if muffins are involved. That's just snack-based goodwill.

Me: My preferred form of communication.

Vihaan: Cool. 9 a.m. Coffee included. Pants… negotiable.

Me: Let's not get too ambitious.

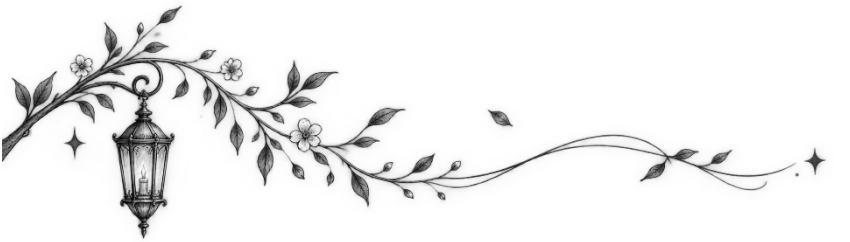
Vihaan: What can I say? You're a bad influence, Counsel.

Me: Get some sleep, Drama King.

Vihaan: Only if you promise to dream about me.

Me: No promises. But I'll try not to sue you in my sleep.

Vihaan: Sweet dreams, Future Lawyer. Don't let the statutes bite… unless you're into that.



Ten

Two days flew by in a haze of weird texts, awkward convos, and playing detective with my dad's old files—basically avoiding law school and pretending I didn't see my mom's call.

Alya had vanished off the map, probably in the middle of one of her "library sessions" (a.k.a. a rendezvous with Bhav), and I had lost myself in the depths of my father's strange files.

It was a Friday afternoon, and I was doing my best to avoid yet another soul-crushing meeting with my textbooks when my phone buzzed, snapping me out of my semi-conscious state.

The name on the screen made my heart do a weird jump that probably shouldn't be a thing.

ACP Rajan Singh.

I blinked, rubbing my eyes like I'd just woken up from a nap. Had it really been two days? Maybe he had forgotten about me. Or maybe he was too busy, you know, actually solving crimes instead of investigating my dad's cryptic call history.

But nope. There it was, his name flashing on my phone, which definitely meant things were about to get… interesting.

I cleared my throat. “Hello?”

"Brinda, I’ve got the details you asked for."

"Wait, really? You got them?”

"Yes, it took some digging, but I have the call records from the three months before your father’s death. You were right to ask. There’s a lot of activity here that’s… worth noting."

"Okay, send them over. I—I don’t know what I’m looking for, but I’ll figure it out."

"I’ll text you the details. There’s a lot to go through. And… Brinda? Be careful. Some of these calls don’t match up with the official timeline of your father’s life."

"What do you mean by that?"

“I’ll let the details speak for themselves. Just… stay alert."

The call ended, leaving me sitting there, staring at my phone like it might suddenly explode.

A few seconds later, my phone buzzed again.

New message from ACP Rajan Singh.

There it was. A list of numbers, times, and names that meant nothing to me…

There were a few familiar numbers—his colleagues, my mom—but most of them were strange. Calls made to numbers with no identifying information, some late at night, others at strange hours of the morning.

But the one that stood out to me the most was the last call listed. It was from the night before his death, one that had been placed at 3:42 a.m. A name I didn’t recognize.

I stared at it for a long time, the hair on the back of my neck standing up.

I texted Alya immediately: **Alya, I need to talk to you. I think I found something.**

Alya didn't reply immediately. Of course not. She was probably buried in her "library time," analyzing Bhav's jawline like it was constitutional law.

I stared at the name again. *Naveen.* No photo. No saved contact. Just a ghost with a timestamp and a whole lot of questions.

I opened my laptop and typed it in. Naveen, Mumbai. Nothing useful. Naveen, Business. Still nothing. I even tried *"Naveen mysterious 3 a.m. calls linked to sketchy businessmen who die tragically in car accidents."* Google politely suggested therapy.

I flopped back onto my bed and groaned into my pillow. "Seriously, Dad? Couldn't you have just left a diary titled *If I Get Murdered, Read This*?"

My phone buzzed again.

Alya: On my way. Try not to uncover a conspiracy or have a meltdown before I get there.

I smiled. She knew me too well.

Ten minutes later, she barged into the room, slightly breathless and with that determined look she reserved for gossip, drama, or both.

"Okay," she said, dropping onto the bed like it owed her money. "Spill."

I turned the laptop screen toward her and pointed. "This. Last call he made. 3:42 a.m., the night before he died. No idea who it was."

"That's… late. Who calls someone at that hour unless there's something they're hiding?"

I swallowed, my throat tightening. "Exactly. And now I'm wondering what I don't know. What was he mixed up in that I never saw?"

She glanced at me, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Want me to call Bhav's cousin? He's got connections, some legal, some… not so much."

"That sounds suspiciously like a crime in the making."

"Welcome to law school, babe. We're practically living in a crime novel."

I hesitated. I had no idea what we were about to uncover, or if we even wanted to.

But that name—the random, late-night call—gnawed at me. It felt like a thread, just waiting to unravel something bigger.

"Fine," I said, leaning forward, a sense of urgency settling in. "Let's find out who he really is."

"Operation Ghost Call? Officially live."

Alya pulled out her phone and started typing with the kind of focus you'd expect from someone plotting an international heist.

"Give me a sec, I'll get this moving."

She muttered something about how "Bhav's cousin" was always hanging out in places that weren't exactly listed on Google Maps, probably collecting favors like they were Pokémon.

I leaned back, staring at the call logs still blinking at me. "You think this guy can really help?" I asked, a tiny voice of doubt creeping in.

"Oh, Bhav's cousin? He's great at getting info. Though… you might wanna stock up on weird favors. Could range from

helping him organize his… let's call it 'vintage' collection of stuff, to getting him an unlimited supply of pizza for a month."

"Pizza for a month? That's his price?"

Alya shrugged. "Hey, everyone has their thing."

I shook my head, still processing the fact that we were on the verge of uncovering whatever tangled mess my father had been caught up in.

"You don't get to pick the timing for the truth, Brinda. Sometimes, it just comes for you. We're not doing this to make everything perfect. We're doing this to figure out what really happened to your dad. And if it helps you, then it'll be worth whatever mess we find."

I stared at her for a moment, surprised by how serious she sounded.

Before I could respond, she added, "And there we go. My favorite criminal informant just responded. Looks like we're in business."

"So, what now? We just sit here and wait for him to drop some truth bomb?"

"Oh please. No waiting around. I'll meet him later, but you need to stay sharp. We can't afford to miss anything, especially when we're messing with people who probably have zero interest in playing nice."

"Alright. Just… keep me updated, okay?"

"You got it," she said with a grin. "I'll make sure Bhav's cousin doesn't charge us for something ridiculous, like karaoke."

"Karaoke?"

"Long story. Don't ask." She winked. "Trust me on this."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding, watching her leave the room with that confident stride of hers.

Honestly, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I wasn't sure I wanted to.

The hours after Alya left dragged on. I kept checking my phone, waiting for something—anything—but the screen stayed silent.

I opened the file again, staring at the list. Naveen. The late-night call. Nothing connected it, just a name.

40 minutes later.

I slammed the laptop shut, frustration building. Was I chasing ghosts? Was my dad really involved in something that deep? Or was I just imagining things, trying to turn every little detail into a puzzle piece?

My phone buzzed again, snapping me out of my spiraling thoughts.

Alya: *He's on his way. You ready for this?*

I exhaled sharply, dropping my phone onto the bed. *Ready?* For what? I had no idea what this "Bhav's cousin" was going to pull out of his bag of tricks. But we were in it now, for better or worse.

I stood up, pacing the room as I thought about everything that had led up to this. My father's death. The mystery surrounding it. His last phone call. All the pieces were scattered, and I couldn't stop putting them together.

A knock at the door pulled me from my thoughts.

"You guys are quick," I muttered under my breath, going to answer.

Alya stood there, her grin hiding something—anticipation, maybe even a bit of unease. Behind her was a tall guy with

messy, dark hair and an easy smile that didn't quite fit the mood. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets and gave me a half-wave.

"Brinda," Alya said, her tone casual, "this is Bhav's cousin, Arjun. He's got the connections… and a selective memory. But if anyone can help, it's him."

"Nice to meet you," he said, offering a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Alya's mentioned you."

"Right. Let's get to it."

"I have a rough idea. Something about a late-night call?"

"Yeah. The night before my father died, he got a call at 3:42 a.m. from someone named Naveen. No contact, no details. I can't find anything on him."

"Alright, I'll look into this Naveen guy. But be ready—the truth can be messier than you expect."

My stomach tightened. I had no idea how right he was.

"Okay," I said, standing up. "Let's do this."

Arjun gave a small, calculating smile. "I'll be in touch."

Alya followed him, pausing at the door. "Trust me, we're doing the right thing."

I nodded, forcing a smile. "I'm trusting you."

They left, and I was alone, the weight of everything sinking in.

I opened my search history for the tenth time, scanning the name "Naveen" again. Still nothing. I couldn't help but wonder how deep this went. How involved was my father? Who was he hiding things from? And why?

A knock on the door startled me.

I looked up to find Alya standing there, a look of determination in her eyes. "You good?"

"Just… thinking. And waiting."

"I know this is hard."

"I just keep wondering if I'm missing something."

She reached over, tapping the stack of files in front of me. "The truth is in there. You're getting closer, Brinda. Just stay focused."

"Look, Brinda," Alya finally said. "I know this isn't easy. But remember, you're getting closer. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but you're making progress."

"But how do you know that? How do I know that? Every time I think I'm on the verge of something, I'm left with more questions."

"Because you're digging where other people would've stopped. That's how you know you're getting closer."

"I just feel like I'm about to find something I'm not ready for. You know?"

"Well, then you'd better get ready. You're not backing out now. Not after all this."

My phone buzzed again, cutting through the silence. I reached for it without thinking, but as soon as I saw the name on the screen, Arjun, it felt like everything stopped.

"Hello?"

"Brinda, I've got something. We need to meet. It's… bigger than I thought."

"What do you mean, bigger?"

“There’s more to this than just your father’s death. A lot more. You need to be prepared, though. This isn’t a simple case anymore.”

"Where are we meeting?"

“Same place as before, 9 PM tonight. Don’t bring anyone.”

The line went dead before I could respond.

What did he mean by bigger? And why did he sound so… cautious? There was something about the way he spoke that made it feel like this was a point of no return.

I turned to Alya, who was watching me closely. “Arjun just texted. He wants to meet tonight. He says it’s bigger than we thought.”

"Bigger? That’s not good. Okay. Just… be careful. Whatever happens tonight, don’t do anything rash."

She stood up, glancing at the clock. "I’ll be here when you get back. Don’t do anything stupid. And if things go south, call me. Got it?"

“Got it.”

I grabbed my jacket, quickly slipping it on and checking myself in the mirror.

I reached the café by 7:55 PM, my nerves crawling beneath my skin. I stepped inside, looking for him. There he was, sitting in the same corner, his usual cool demeanor in place, but something in his eyes flickered when he saw me.

“Thanks for coming. I’ve got a lot to show you, but first, don’t trust everyone. Not even the people closest to you.”

I froze. The words hit like a punch to the gut.

“Arjun, what are you talking about?”

"Your father's involvement with certain people goes deeper than you think. There's a trail of connections I didn't expect. And Naveen, he's just the tip of the iceberg."

I opened the folder, my eyes scanning the first few pages. My heart sank as I read, the reality of my father's hidden life slowly sinking in.

My father wasn't just caught up in some shady business deals. He was tangled in something far darker. Something dangerous.

And now, I was right in the middle of it.

I leaned forward, my fingers trembling as I flipped through the pages Arjun had handed me. Each document, each photo, each piece of information seemed to weigh more heavily on me than the last.

The first few pages contained details about my father's last few months, but it wasn't just the calls from Naveen that stood out. There were meetings he'd had, often late at night, with people I didn't recognize. Business transactions that looked perfectly innocent on paper, until you dug deeper and saw the names of people with questionable backgrounds. And then, there was something that made my stomach drop: a list of names that didn't seem to belong with the others. People my father had been in contact with, but whose identities were buried in layers of secrecy.

"Naveen is just the start. The people he was talking to? They're not who they appear to be. Your father was involved in something much bigger than you realize. And I don't think he even knew how deep it went."

I had thought my father's death was just some tragic, random incident, the result of a mistake or an unfortunate accident. But now? Now it felt like a carefully crafted lie.

"You're saying my dad was mixed up in all this?"

"I don't know if he knew the full extent. But the more I look into this, the more it feels like he got caught up in something that was way out of his league."

"What am I supposed to do with all of this, Arjun? I'm not a detective. I'm just a girl trying to figure out what happened to her dad."

"You've got two choices: you keep digging and risk everything to find the truth, or you walk away and pretend like none of this ever happened."

"What do we do next?"

"We need to find out who Naveen is. You're right, he's the key. But there's something else you need to know. Whoever he is, they're watching you. Someone's already noticed you've been digging around. The fact that you're asking questions means you're too close to the truth."

"What do you mean, watching me?"

"It means you're not safe, Brinda. If you keep going down this road, there's no telling what might happen next."

"So, what do we do?"

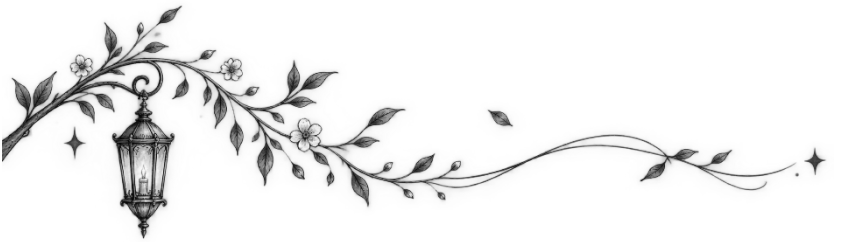
"We keep moving forward. We track down Naveen, and we see where this rabbit hole leads. But you need to be careful. People like Naveen don't just disappear; they leave behind a trail, and if we're lucky, that trail will lead us to the truth."

Arjun stood up, pulling his jacket tighter around him. "I'll get in touch with some people. You lay low for now. Don't attract any more attention."

I followed him out of the café, the weight of everything pressing down on me. There was no turning back now.

The air felt thicker, heavier, as though someone had been here. My phone buzzed, pulling me from my thoughts. It was a text from Alya.

Alya: *Are you okay?*



Eleven

"Happened. But if you choose the second one, Brinda—this doesn't go away. It'll keep coming back. In pieces, in whispers, in ways you won't see coming."

I didn't respond right away.

My throat felt dry, and my mind was trying to thread itself around the mess in front of me. The papers on the table blurred a little at the edges—meeting logs, invoices, a few printouts smudged from overuse. Somewhere in chaos, a photo slipped loose.

Grainy. Faded.

My father stood beside a man I didn't recognize at first. Clean-cut, dressed like someone who did TED Talks about quarterly profits and work-life balance. But there was something wrong with his face—not the smile, not the posture. His eyes. Cold. Calculated.

I held the photo toward Arjun.

"Who is this?"

"That's where it gets messy," he said. "His name's Parth Mehra. Founder of a consultancy firm, at least officially. But

he's been tied to two corporate fraud cases. One was the subject of a sealed CBI investigation from five years ago. All of it swept under the rug."

I stared at the photo again, harder this time, as if squinting would unlock some hidden memory.

"My mom never mentioned him."

"She might not have known," Arjun said gently. "Or maybe she did. And didn't want you to."

The words landed like a sucker punch to the chest.

Not my mother.

She'd already buried her husband. Carried me through the wreckage of that year like she was made of steel, even when she was breaking inside. The idea that she could've hidden this—this entire shadow world behind my father's name—it didn't sit right. But it clung anyway. Quiet. Unshakeable.

Don't trust everyone, Arjun had said.

Not even the people closest to you.

"So what now?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "We follow the trail?"

Arjun nodded. "Carefully. Quietly. I'll get you names, patterns, everything I can. But Brinda, this is bigger than your father now. He got too close to something. Something no one wanted him to find."

He stood, slipping his hands into his jacket, the weight of what he wasn't saying hanging in the air between us.

"I'll be in touch. No paper trails. No sudden moves. And if anything feels wrong, you call me. Promise me."

I nodded. I wasn't sure if he saw.

When he left, I sat there, the folder still in front of me like a live wire. Static in the air. The kind you feel in your bones.

A network. A secret. A truth I had never asked for, but somehow had always sensed—lurking at the edges of my memories, behind the silence, between the lines in every story I'd been told about my father.

I wasn't just chasing my father's ghost anymore.

I was hunting the truth. And it was hunting me back.

I didn't know how long I sat there after Arjun left. It could've been minutes, or hours—time seemed to lose its meaning. The room was so still, the only sound being the occasional hum of the fridge in the corner. But in my mind, everything was moving too fast.

I kept thinking about my father, trying to picture him in those last days—before the accident, before everything was turned upside down.

Was he really chasing something dangerous? Was this what had led him to the moment where he'd collided with whatever it was that had taken his life?

I wasn't sure if it was denial, or if it was just too hard to accept the truth. But I kept coming back to the same question: How much did my mother really know?

I picked up the photo again, my fingers brushing over the edges of the faded paper. Parth Mehra. The man who had been at the heart of everything. He looked so calm, so controlled. But there was something in his eyes that unsettled me. A kind of knowing.

A soft knock at the door made me jump. I quickly shoved the photo back into the pile of papers and wiped my face with the back of my hand, trying to regain my composure.

"Brinda?" It was Alya.

"You okay in there?"

I stood up quickly and opened the door.

Her hair was messy, like she'd just rolled out of bed, but her eyes were wide, alert—she could tell something was wrong.

"Yeah, just… thinking. What's up?"

"Don't try to tell me you're fine. What happened?"

I sighed, sinking back into the chair at the table.

"I found something," I said quietly, motioning to the pile of papers. "Something about my dad. Something… he was involved in."

"What kind of involvement?"

I hesitated, then pushed the photo across the table toward her. "This man. Parth Mehra. My dad was connected to him. He's tied to some pretty dangerous stuff. Corporate fraud. A sealed CBI investigation. I don't know how deep my dad was into it, but it's not just business. It's… something worse."

Alya picked up the photo, her fingers tracing the outline of the image, her expression unreadable. I watched her closely, waiting for some reaction—disbelief, confusion, maybe even anger. But she just stared at the photo for a long time, her face calm.

"This is dangerous, Brinda. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"But you're going to do it anyway."

"Yeah."

Alya didn't ask questions. She didn't judge. She just stood beside me.

And for the first time since my father's death, I felt like I might actually be able to find the answers I was looking for.

We had no idea what we were walking into.

But I wasn't afraid.

Not anymore.

It had been almost a week since I last spoke to Vihaan. And by "speak," I mean I'd texted him multiple times, got one cryptic reply, and then proceeded to act like I was too busy to care.

The truth? I hadn't wanted to involve him in this mess. He was already too caught up in his own world—his usual cocktail of charm, good looks, and mysteriousness. The last thing I wanted to do was drag him into the chaos of corporate fraud, shady businessmen, and a father's suspicious death.

But I couldn't help myself. I needed to hear his voice, to ground myself in something familiar, something that felt safe.

I couldn't shake the feeling that hearing Vihaan's voice would somehow make everything feel less… messy. Maybe it was the fact that he had this weird, calming effect on me—probably because he was a walking contradiction. But as I was about to tap his contact, the phone decided to betray me.

The screen flashed, then nothing. It went dead.

I stared at the black screen like it was personally attacking me. Seriously? Right now?

"Great,"

The battery was completely drained. Of course, it was. Why wouldn't it be? My phone had been acting like this for weeks, but now? Now it chose to shut down the second I needed it the most.

I looked over at Alya, who was flipping through some law textbook with the same level of enthusiasm as if she was

reading a cereal box. She didn't even notice my minor freakout. Typical.

"Hey," I said, trying to sound casual as I slipped my dead phone into my back pocket, "I'm borrowing your phone for a minute. Need to make a quick call."

Alya didn't even glance up. "Sure, whatever."

I didn't wait for a second invitation. I crossed the small room, the door clicking shut behind me as I stepped into the hallway.

The screen lit up, and there it was—Vihaan's contact.

(a.k.a Brinda's Mystery Man.)

I stared at the name for a full ten seconds, just blinking like a confused owl. Somewhere in my head, a tiny version of Alya was slow-clapping dramatically. Of course she knew. Of course, they both knew.

Was I flattered? Mortified? Slightly intrigued?

All of the above.

"This boy," I muttered under my breath.

I hovered over the call button, because—let's be honest—I had committed to this call. I wasn't backing down just because the name made me feel like I was starring in my own mystery-themed romcom.

The phone rang. Once. Twice. A third time.

And then—his voice, groggy, low, and unmistakably Vihaan.

"Hello?"

For a second, I forgot how to speak. Which was ridiculous because I'd been rehearsing this call in my head for *days*. But hearing him—really hearing him—did something strange to my insides.

"Vihaan. It's me."

A beat of silence.

"…You mean *Brinda Brinda*? The one who ghosted me for a week and then stole Alya's phone like she's in a spy movie?"

"Wow. Didn't even try to hide the sarcasm. Bold choice."

"Oh, I'm just getting started. Should I alert Interpol? Tell them the Mystery Woman has resurfaced?"

"You're ridiculous."

"And yet, here you are, calling *me*. Coincidence? I think not."

"Desperation," I said. "My phone died. You were my last resort."
"Oh please," he scoffed. "You'd never let me be your last resort. I'm at least top three."

I grinned, leaning against the wall. "That's generous of you."
"You're welcome. I'm a giver."

There was a rustle on the other end—probably him shifting around in bed. I imagined him in that stupid grey T-shirt he always wore, hair a mess, smirking like he knew I was imagining it.

"You know," he said, "I had a whole dramatic speech planned for when you came crawling back."

"Oh yeah? Let's hear it."
"Ahem." He cleared his throat.

"Brinda Mishra, heartbreaker of the western suburbs, wielder of sharp sarcasm and slightly burnt toast—"
"I do *not* burn my toast."

"Lies. Your toaster fears you. Anyway, where was I—right. How dare you vanish for a week and leave me with nothing

but your energy echoing in my brain?"
"Tragic."
"I know. I almost started journaling."
"God forbid."
"Exactly. You saved me just in time."
"You're welcome. Again. I'm a giver."

"Also," he said, his voice softer now, "I kinda missed your voice."
I blinked. "What?"
"Don't make it weird. I said *kinda*. Like, in a very casual, completely non-obsessed way."
I let that hang in the silence for a second too long.
"…You there?"
"Yeah," I said, trying not to smile like a lunatic.

"Just waiting to hear if the world ended. Because Vihaan Kapoor just admitted he missed someone."
"You should frame this call. Historic moment."
"I would, but your contact's name in Alya's phone is 'Brinda's Mystery Man.' Might ruin the mystery."
He groaned. "She promised she'd change that."

"I think she knew it was accurate."
"You're lucky I find you mildly charming."

I smirked. "Mildly?"
"Okay, fine. Above average. Occasionally dazzling."
"That's more like it."

A pause. Something quiet, like a shared breath through the line.

"Hey, Brinda?"
"Yeah?"
"Don't disappear like that again."

The quiet hum of the night filled the room as I sat on the edge of the bed, the soft glow of the desk lamp casting shadows on the walls.

Pretty.

Alya was already half asleep on her side of the room, buried under a mountain of blankets like she always was.

I sat on the bed, my mind racing, and absentmindedly reached for my pearl bracelet.

It was a habit by now. Every night before bed, I took it off, carefully placed it in the little velvet box I kept on my nightstand, and locked it in the drawer. It was like a ritual, something I couldn't bring myself to skip, even though it was silly.

But tonight, as I pulled the bracelet from my wrist, Alya stirred and blinked up at me, her voice thick with sleep.

"Brinda, what are you doing?"

"I'm putting it away," I said, holding up the bracelet like it was some ancient artifact. "You know, the usual. Keeping my pearls safe."

"You've been doing this every night since we got here. What's the deal with this bracelet? It's like it's made of gold or something."

"It's not gold. It's… pearls," I said, like that clarified everything.

"Why do you wear it all the time? And why treat it like it's a treasure? Are you secretly a pirate, Brinda?"

Exactly like Alya!

I smirked, "A pirate, huh? Guess my hoodie and sweatpants do give off that vibe."

"Yeah, totally. But seriously, why the bracelet? You never go anywhere without it, and you're always so careful with it."

I flopped back onto the bed, my mind racing. Alya's question wasn't the kind I could dodge with a snarky remark or an eye roll.

"Okay, fine. Here's the deal." I leaned in, lowering my voice like I was about to tell her the biggest secret in the world.

"When I was twelve, I saved up all my pocket money for months. And when I finally had enough, I went to this little shop in Mumbai and bought two matching white pearl bracelets."

Alya raised an eyebrow. "Pearls, huh? Sounds fancy."

"It's not as fancy as it sounds," I said, waving a hand dismissively. "I thought they were elegant, you know? So I bought them, and I gave one to my dad. Everyone thought I was crazy. Like, 'What kind of business tycoon wears pearls, Brinda?' Like pearls weren't tough enough for a guy who had to wear expensive suits every day."

"Wait, what? You gave your dad pearls? I'm dying to know how that went down."

"They told me it was girly. That it wouldn't look right on him, that a businessman should wear something more… macho, I guess. But he didn't care. He wore that bracelet every single day, no matter what anyone said. He'd roll up his sleeves, and there it was, that little string of pearls on his wrist, glinting in the light."

"That's… kinda amazing. But also, how did you get away with it? Did people think your dad was, like, secretly into jewelry?"

"Of course! Everyone made fun of him," I said, laughing softly at the memory. "They were like, 'Raghav Mishra, the man who

makes millions, and he wears pearls?" I rolled my eyes, mimicking the dramatic tone people would use when they gossiped. "'What's next? Is he gonna start carrying a handbag?'"

Alya burst out laughing, covering her mouth to stifle the sound. "I can't even imagine! Your dad, with pearls on his wrist and a handbag—now that's a look."

"He didn't care. He wore them because I gave them to him. And it made me happy. It didn't matter what anyone else thought. He was my dad, and he was my biggest fan. Always wearing that bracelet, just to show me he appreciated the little things, even if the world thought they were ridiculous."

"That's… honestly the sweetest thing I've ever heard, Brinda."

I nodded, my throat tightening a little. "Yeah, it was. And it wasn't just about the bracelet. It was about him always showing me that the little things always mattered."

Alya's voice grew quieter. "But… why keep it like this? I mean, you keep it in that box like it's some sort of treasure."

It's really getting difficult for me!

I hesitated, feeling the familiar sting of sadness creep back in.

"After he passed, they found the broken pearls in his pocket—like he was trying to hold on, too. I kept one. Just one. It rests on my wrist now, threaded into mine. A small, steady piece of him I carry every single day."

"Brinda, that's… that's beautiful. And it makes total sense why you keep it safe. It's a part of him. And part of you."

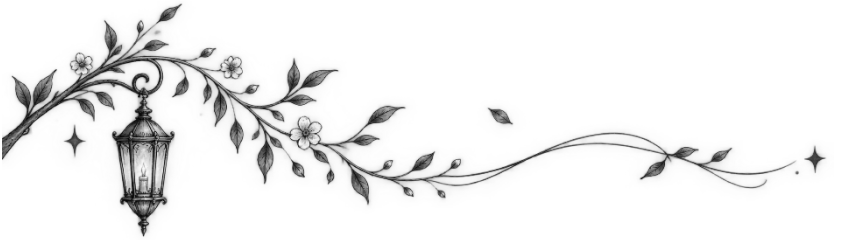
"I nodded, blinking rapidly to hold back the tears, but they came anyway. 'Yeah, exactly.'

"Just… don't go telling everyone my dad was secretly a pearl enthusiast," I said, my voice barely steady, forcing a laugh that

didn't reach my eyes. "I don't need that kind of legacy… that kind of memory… following me around."

Alya grinned. "Deal. But honestly? He was probably the coolest pearl-wearing businessman in Mumbai. You should be proud."

I chuckled through my tears, my voice cracking as I spoke. "Guess I've got some big shoes to fill… or maybe some fancy pearls to wear… though now, it feels more like the missing pearls are what I'm left with."



Twelve

Some truths are slippery. They slip away like a bar of soap in a shower, leaving you standing there, confused, frustrated, and with a stomach that feels like it's been tied in knots.
I needed to get a better grip.

The receipt. The note from two days before my father's death. It felt like a ghost pressing down on my chest.

It lingered in my mind like an annoying song that wouldn't leave my head.
AutoZone Car Care
Date: 14th August
Status: Follow-up requested. No service scheduled.
Two days before his death.

I stared at the number scribbled on the back. I could've ignored it, like I had so many others. But my gut had claws, and it wouldn't stop scratching.

I dialed.

Ring.
Ring.
Click.

"AutoZone Car Care, Aman speaking."

"Hi. I'm calling about a record from last year—14th August. The name was Raghav Mishra."

A pause.

"…We don't usually give out past client details."

"I'm his daughter," I said, trying not to sound as sharp as I felt. "He died two days after that call. I need to know who he spoke to."

Another pause. Background noise like someone tapping a desk. Or fidgeting.

"I mean… a lot of people call in. Could've been anything. What exactly are you looking for?"

"I have a record saying he contacted your center. But there's no service booked. Just… a note that says, 'follow-up requested.' That's not nothing."

The man sucked in a breath. "That note's not… supposed to be there anymore."

I froze. "What?"

He backpedaled instantly. "I mean, old logs get cleared after six months, that's all. System update. Maybe it's a glitch."

"A glitch with my father's name, his death looming over it like a dark reminder I couldn't outrun?"

Silence. Then, more noise in the background. A muffled voice—someone else in the room with him? A soft scuffle. Then:

"Look… I don't know anything, okay? You shouldn't be calling about this. It's–it's done. Let it be."

"No," I said firmly. "Tell me who handled his call."

"I'm telling you, I *don't* know."

"You're lying."

More silence.

Then, something strange: a different tone, lower, almost whispering now.

"…He asked about a brake malfunction. Wanted to know if anyone had tampered with the ABS system of a similar model. Said it wasn't for *his* car but for a friend. But the questions were… specific."

"And then what?"

Another pause. Then he muttered, "After that, he spoke to Naveen. The manager."

"Naveen?" I repeated, my mind racing. "And who else?"

He hesitated. "That's the thing. I don't know if anyone else got involved… or if he just asked a bunch of random questions."

"Random questions? About what?"

"I told you, the brakes. But he was… different. Asked a lot of specific things. Like he knew something was wrong with the system. But, you know, he said it wasn't for *his* car. He said it was for a… a 'friend.' That's all I know."

"Can I speak to Naveen?"

"No. He doesn't… work here anymore."

"Where did he go?"

A harsh laugh, almost nervous. "Wish I knew. One day he just stopped showing up. No notice. No goodbyes. Just vanished."

"What happened there?" I demanded. "Tell me the truth."

"I've told you too much already," he said, voice suddenly trembling. "I didn't touch anything. I didn't take *any* money. That was between them."

My stomach twisted.

"Between *who*?"

Click.
The line went dead.

I stared at the phone. My mind was racing at full speed, but I was also incredibly confused. Between *who*? And *why* would someone vanish like that? Why was I getting answers that felt like pieces of a puzzle—just not the ones that fit?

And who exactly was this Naveen? Was he hiding something? Or was he just as clueless as everyone else?

What had I just uncovered? A faulty brake system, a mysterious "friend," a vanishing manager… and some guy named Aman who probably didn't want me asking any more questions.

Alya was still, her back straight, eyes focused like I'd never seen before. The usual warmth in her face was gone, replaced by something else—a quiet resolve.

"You think your dad knew something," she said softly. Not a question. A realization.

I nodded, barely trusting my voice. "He was scared. I could hear it in his voice, even back then. And now… someone's trying to bury it. Him."

She picked up my phone to search for something or maybe she wanted to call Vihaan—I don't know what—when the screen lit up with a message.

Her eyes froze on it. Then she turned the phone to me.

Don't go poking around. Drop it, or regret it.

The world shifted. Slowed.

Alya didn't speak right away. She just set the phone down carefully, then looked me dead in the eye.

"It wasn't a number," she said quietly. "It came from an Instagram account. One with no posts, no followers. Sent the message, then deleted everything the second I opened it."

My stomach dropped.

"Gone?" I whispered.

"Wiped. Like it was never there."

"This isn't just about your dad anymore, Brin," she said, voice low. "It's about someone who's still watching. Still covering tracks. They thought they buried it all with him."

I swallowed hard, the corners of my vision blurring for a second. "Then why now? Why send a message today?"

"Because you made noise." Her voice was steady. "You called AutoZone. You got Aman to talk. You shook something loose."

I looked down at the receipt still clutched in my hand, now slightly crumpled. A stupid slip of paper—just a date, a name, a vague note. And yet it felt like holding a lit match over a line of petrol.

Alya stood up slowly, crossing to the window and pulling back the curtain just enough to peek outside. Habit? Instinct? I wasn't sure. But it scared me that she felt the need to check.

"I'm calling Dad," she said suddenly, reaching for her phone again. "He needs to know what we found."

Alya didn't wait for me to respond. Her fingers flew across the screen, pulling up her father's number—**ACP Rajan Singh**—and hitting dial. She turned her back on me as the

phone rang, her shoulders tense, one hand still slightly trembling.

"Dad?" she said, when he picked up. "I need to talk to you. It's about Brinda's case. It's not cold anymore."

There was a pause. I could hear his muffled voice on the other end, but not the words.

"No, listen to me," she said more firmly. "She got a message tonight. Not a call, not a number—an Instagram account. No followers. No posts. Sent one line: *'Don't go poking around. Drop it—or regret it.'* Then it vanished. Deleted, wiped clean the second she read it."

"Yeah. That's what I said too. Someone's watching her. They're still cleaning up after whatever happened to Uncle Raghav. They're still afraid someone might uncover it."

She paused, then glanced at me. "She found a receipt. From two days before the crash. Her dad asked the garage about brake failure. A manager named Naveen helped him. That same guy is now… gone. Disappeared."

There was another silence. Alya's face was unreadable.

Then she gave a sharp nod. "Okay. I'll tell her."

She ended the call and turned to face me.

"He wants you to send him that receipt."

I nodded, numb. "And the message?"

"He'll see what he can trace. But he says whoever sent it knew what they were doing. This isn't amateur stuff, Brin. It's calculated. Clean. Professional."

I stared at her. "So what do we do now?"

Alya sat down beside me again. Slower this time. Like she was choosing her words carefully. "Now? We keep quiet. We play smart. Let my dad do his part."

"But?"

She met my gaze. "But we don't stop."

My throat tightened. "What if this gets worse?"

She didn't flinch. "Then we get louder."

I sent the photo of the receipt to Alya's dad, fingers trembling more than I wanted them to. Alya double-checked the image, then texted it from her own number too. Just in case.

Then, her phone buzzed again, just a notification this time. A weather alert. But we both jumped.

"I need air," I said, pushing up from the bed.

"Brinda—"

"I'm not going far. Just…" I gestured toward the door, my voice catching. "Outside. A bit."

I stepped outside into the corridor, the heavy door clicking shut behind me. The walls of Ravenswood, usually humming with late-night laughter or stressed-out legal debates, were still.

I padded down the hallway barefoot; my arms wrapped around myself like armor.

The breeze carried the scent of rain-soaked earth and something floral, maybe jasmine. It felt too perfect for everything crashing inside me.

I walked across the patchy lawn and stopped by the railing overlooking the sloped hillside behind the hostel. The city lights blinked in the distance, tired and far away. I gripped the cold metal, grounding myself, then pulled out my phone.

I shouldn't have opened the gallery. But I did.

There they were.

Papa. Ma. Ayaan. Me. Frozen in the easy smiles of a world that didn't exist anymore.

A photo from my sixteenth birthday—Papa in his favorite navy shirt, sleeves rolled up, the pearl bracelet barely visible on his wrist. It was the same bracelet I wore every day now, but in that moment, it belonged to him. Ayaan was sneaking cake in the background, Ma laughing beside me, and I was blowing out the candles, smiling so wide, unaware of what the future would hold.

I remembered the wish I'd made that year—clear as a bell in my mind.
I had wished for everything to stay exactly the same.
For us to stay happy. Always.
God, how foolish that wish felt now. How sacred.

I swiped again.

A candid from a road trip to Lonavala—Papa driving, Ma navigating with a printed map she didn't trust, and me holding the phone up for a selfie with Ayaan making bunny ears behind us. I could still hear the old Bollywood music blaring from the car speakers. Papa's voice, off-key and too loud, singing just to annoy us.

And then, the tears came.

They slid down before I could stop them. Not loud or heaving, just soft like grief had figured out how to live in my body quietly. Like it had always been waiting for a night like this to spill over.

I stared until my screen dimmed. My reflection blinked back at me—red eyes, wet cheeks, the faint outline of a wrist that felt wrong without its weight.

I touched it. The bare skin.
Vulnerable. Unprotected.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I whispered into the night. "What were you hiding from me?"

The wind carried my words, but there was no answer.

Yet, somewhere deep within, I could feel it—the faint echo of his voice, soft but clear. *Brin, you always figure things out.*

The door creaked open behind me. I didn't have to turn around to know it was Alya.

When she reached me, she didn't speak. Just stood beside me, our shoulders brushing lightly.

I felt her place something in my hand—a packet of tissues. Of course, she'd thought ahead.

I wiped my face, awkwardly. "I must look like a wreck."

She gave a quiet shrug. "But it's a good look on you."

I managed a small laugh, the sound sharp and uneven, like it didn't belong to me.

We stood there, side by side, taking in the soft glow of the city below us, the peaceful hum of night settling over Pune.

"He would've been proud," Alya said after a while, her voice steady, but carrying the weight of something deeper.

I didn't respond, couldn't find the words. But a part of me hoped she was right.

Because everything I was about to face, every step that led deeper into this mess, it was only going to get harder.

She handed me a chocolate bar, the one she always kept stashed in her bag when I was feeling down.

"I thought you might need this," she said with a small grin, sitting down on the ground next to me.

"You know me too well."

She shrugged. "It's a gift."

She smiled, reaching for her phone. "We should probably distract ourselves. Want to watch a stupid movie? Or maybe we can scroll through the dumbest memes we can find?"

I laughed at the idea. "That sounds like exactly what I need."

She pulled up her phone and started scrolling, finding the most ridiculous videos she could. For a while, we just sat there in silence, watching the chaos on her screen and laughing. It wasn't anything profound, but it felt good. Like the world wasn't entirely on my shoulders.

After a while, I glanced at her again, feeling a bit lighter. "You always know how to make everything feel less… overwhelming."

She nudged me with her elbow, grinning. "What can I say? I'm basically a professional at distracting people from their problems."

Alya paused the video she was watching and looked over at me with a mischievous grin. "Okay, but I'm just saying, we're gonna have to have a serious talk about your taste in movies one day."

I rolled my eyes. "You're just mad because you can't keep up with the classics."

She scoffed dramatically. "Classics? Please, you just want an excuse to watch 80s rom-coms for the hundredth time."

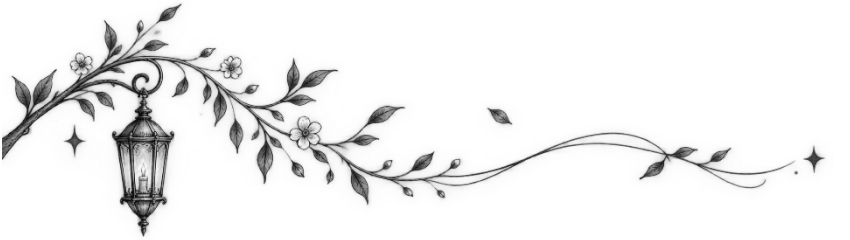
"Hey, they're *timeless*!" I protested, nudging her with my shoulder. "And I'm totally down for watching them again. I'm sure the emotional growth of the characters will inspire you."

Alya raised an eyebrow. “Emotional growth? Is that what we’re calling it now?”

I laughed, throwing my head back. “Fine, fine. Maybe I just need some old-fashioned, predictable endings in my life right now.”

“Predictable endings are overrated,” she said with a smirk. “But I get it. We all need a little comfort sometimes.”

The night grew quieter, the sounds of the city fading into a soft hum in the distance. Alya finished her chocolate bar, and we both leaned against the railing, our legs stretched out in front of us.



Thirteen

Dear Reader,

Yes, you—the one who's been lurking in the margins of my life like a nosy aunt at a family function, silently watching me trip over my own destiny. I know what you're thinking: Where did she vanish for a week?

Well, I was busy becoming a very specific type of student—the one who pretends to understand jurisprudence while internally screaming and accidentally ends every question with "…right?" in class. Confidence? Never met her.

Anyway, welcome back to my academic reality show.

A week had passed at Ravenswood Law College.

Seven days of lectures that felt like punishment for sins I don't remember committing. Seven days of figuring out where the decent food was on campus (answer: nowhere).

Meanwhile, I'd fully morphed into a hoodie-draped gremlin with the spinal posture of a shrimp.

In my glorious one-week spiral:

- I misquoted a Supreme Court case so badly, I might've founded a new religion. Legal scholars, stay tuned.
- I joined a club because someone handed me a pamphlet and I forgot how to say "no."
- I tripped on the library stairs, yeeted my notes into the air, and declared it "interpretive commentary on academic suffering." Someone applauded. I wish I was kidding.
- Also, I now despise the guy who answers every question in TED Talk format. Who hurt him? Why is he like this?

Vihaan, bafflingly, was thriving. He dubbed Thursdays "Brain Detox Day" and spent them on the lawn sorting professors into Hogwarts houses. (Contracts prof? Pure Slytherin. No warmth. No survivors.)

Then, this morning happened.

It began like every dubious morning—with Alya's alarm blaring like a fire drill, and me debating whether showing up to class was actually worth it.

Right as I was about to disappear back under my blanket, a knock shattered my grand plan.

Vihaan.

"Before you say anything," he began, holding out a manila file, "just remember you said you wanted answers."

I sat up instantly. Sleep forgotten.

Inside the file was a single page.

Call logs. Dated exactly a year ago.

And right there, in neat black ink, a number that didn't belong to anyone I recognized. A number that had called my father less than 24 hours before he died.

My fingers tightened around the edge of the page.

Alya leaned over, sleep nowhere in sight now, and whispered, "Why do I get the feeling this is the start of something… bigger?"

Because it was.

I barely registered Alya's words as my mind raced back to that day—a fragile thread in my tangled memories.

"Who is this?" I whispered.

Vihaan frowned. "No clue. But it definitely shouldn't be on the list."

Vihaan pulled out his phone, already dialing before I could ask.

"Dad's off duty today, but he said if we find anything suspicious, he's in," he said.

Alya and I exchanged a look.

Within an hour, ACP Rajan Singh—Vihaan's dad—was on a call with us, his voice calm but commanding. "Send me everything you have. I'll check the number's origin and see if there's any connection to your father's case."

It felt surreal. The police were actually helping us.

There was a long silence before Rajan's voice came through the speaker—calm as always, but this time layered with an unmistakable heaviness.

"Brinda," he said carefully, "this case… it's been closed officially, but you know how sometimes the truth hides beneath layers no one wants to dig into."

My chest tightened.

"I'll get my team on it," he continued. "If that number is tied to your father's death, we'll find out. I promise you that."

I felt Alya's hand brush mine. Vihaan's jaw was set, determination shining in his eyes.

It wasn't just me anymore. Not just a lost girl chasing shadows in a crowded law school.

This was bigger. Realer. And I had allies who could actually move mountains.

"Thank you, sir," I whispered, voice barely steady.

"Brinda, we'll find the truth. No matter what."

The call ended.

"Let's meet tonight," I said. "We go over everything—every detail, every scrap. No stone unturned."

They agreed without hesitation.

The rest of the day slipped by in a haze—classes blurred into background noise while my mind raced ahead, tangled in the possibilities that file had opened.

By evening, I found Alya and Vihaan waiting in our room, their faces tense but determined.

Alya was already scanning her laptop, her fingers flying over the keyboard. "That number? It showed up once on a burner phone registry. No name, no address—just a ghost."

Vihaan shook his head. "Calling Dad's off-duty line? That's either reckless or a cry for help. Or maybe someone wanted to make sure we noticed."

I swallowed hard, feeling the weight settle heavier on my shoulders. "Or maybe it's a warning."

Silence stretched between us, thick and heavy, until Alya's eyes snapped up, sharp and fierce. "This is just the beginning. Tomorrow, we follow every lead."

I nodded slowly, trying to steady the storm swirling inside me. "We have to be careful. Whoever's behind this… they're watching."

Vihaan closed his laptop with a snap. "Then we don't give them time. We move fast."

Alya glanced at the window, where the moon was just starting to peek through the clouds. "Let's make a list—contacts, locations, anything unusual from that day."

"We start with the people who knew Dad well. Friends, business associates… anyone who might've seen something off."

Vihaan's jaw tightened. "And if this number belongs to someone dangerous, we'll need to watch our backs."

"Alya, you dig through the contacts and business records. Vihaan, you check anything related to the phone number—call logs, locations, anything Dad might've mentioned in passing. I'll start reaching out to Dad's close friends and anyone who might know more."

Alya nodded sharply.

Vihaan's eyes flicked to the door, then back to me. "We should keep this quiet. For now, only us four—me, Alya, you, and Dad."

The hours passed quietly as Alya worked through the data on her laptop. Vihaan studied his phone, tracing the number's origins. I took notes, trying to keep everything straight.

Then Vihaan suddenly froze.

His eyes narrowed, thumb hovering above his screen. "Wait."

Alya and I both looked up at once.

"What is it?" I asked, already bracing myself.

Vihaan's brows furrowed as he scrolled through the screen, then tapped to enlarge a timestamped log. "This number… it's not random," he muttered.

"It shows up four times in the call history. All within the last month before your dad died. Three missed calls, one connected—just for forty-three seconds."

Alya leaned over. "Whose number is it?"

"It's registered under the name Ranvijay Mishra."

My pen slipped from my hand. "What?"

"Brinda… you know him?"

I swallowed. Hard. My mouth felt like cotton, but the name alone had summoned a rusted door in my memory. One I hadn't opened in years. "He's… he's my uncle. My dad's younger brother."

Alya blinked. "You have an uncle?"

"Technically, yes. But we haven't spoken to him since I was three. He's never been in our lives. My dad used to say he was a dangerous man. Selfish. Heartless. The kind of person who looks out only for himself, no matter who he hurts."

Vihaan set the phone down slowly. "Then why was your dad trying to contact him?"

"I don't know," I said quietly. "He never talked about him in detail. Just… hints. Warnings. And even those were rare. I remember once—when I was maybe seven—I asked if we could invite more family for my birthday. He just froze. Then said, 'Some people aren't meant to be family, even if they share your blood.' I knew he meant Ranvijay."

"Do you think he might've reached out… because he was in trouble?"

"I don't know,"

"We need to find him."

"He doesn't even live in India anymore," I said. "He left years ago. Some vague story about settling in Dubai or Singapore—Dad never told me exactly. But he's not here. He wasn't at the funeral. Didn't call. Didn't send a message. Nothing."

Alya's face twisted in quiet disbelief. "Not even when your dad…?"

"No," I said bitterly. "Not a word. I remember Mom pacing the living room, checking her phone constantly those first few days. I thought she was waiting for condolences. But now I think… she was waiting for him. And he never came."

"Then why did your dad try to call him? Especially multiple times in that last month?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "But if Dad thought it was worth trying—after all these years—then something must've been really wrong."

Vihaan was quiet for a moment. Then he stood, pulling his phone from his pocket and heading toward the window.

"Where are you going?" Alya asked.

"You're telling ACP Rajan?"

Vihaan stepped out into the corridor. We could hear the faint murmur of his voice, serious and controlled. Bits of his side of the conversation drifted in:

"…yes, Dad… Brinda just confirmed it… Raghav Mishra's brother. Name's Ranvijay… no contact for years, but multiple calls before the incident…"

"…registered overseas, we think. Possibly Dubai. Can you pull anything from Interpol or passport records?"

Alya and I sat in silence, the laptop screen casting a soft glow on our faces. Somewhere in the distance, a door slammed shut, and a crow cawed like punctuation.

Vihaan returned a few minutes later, his face unreadable.

"Well?" I asked.

"Dad's already on it. He's going to run background checks, dig through immigration data, financial activity—whatever he can find. He said he'll keep it off the record for now."

"So what now?" I asked quietly.

Vihaan's eyes met mine. "Now… we wait. But not passively. We keep looking. We stay sharp. And if Ranvijay is hiding something—" He paused, his voice lowering, "—we'll find it. One way or another."

I reached for my notebook and flipped to a clean page, writing in bold letters: **RANVIJAY MISHRA.**
Underneath, I scribbled:
– Last contacted by Dad before his death
– Overseas (Dubai/Singapore?)
– No contact with family since I was 3
– Didn't attend the funeral
– Dad called him *after* years of silence

"What if he didn't pick up on purpose?" Alya asked quietly. "Maybe he knew something, and wanted to avoid getting involved."

"Or maybe," Vihaan said, tapping his pen, "he *was* involved. And your dad found something out—something worth breaking his silence over."

The thought sent a cold rush through me. I forced myself to keep writing.

Next steps
– Wait for ACP Rajan's report
– Trace Ranvijay's current location
– Check Dad's emails and letters and look for mentions
– Ask Mom… carefully

That last one burned a little. I hated the idea of lying to her, but I also couldn't risk tipping her off until we were sure.

"I can help decode any financial records if we find them," Alya said, leaning forward. "Cross-reference accounts, foreign transactions, shell companies. If he's been moving money, there's a paper trail somewhere."

"I'll start looking into known associates," Vihaan added. "If Ranvijay was ever into 'bad stuff' like your dad said, then maybe he left some breadcrumbs behind."

I nodded, gripping the notebook like it was a lifeline.

The next few hours blurred into a hushed storm of typing, scribbling, and half-muttered theories.

Every now and then, I caught myself glancing at the name I'd scrawled in thick ink—**Ranvijay Mishra**. It looked foreign on paper, like a ghost crashing into a life he had abandoned long ago. My father's brother. My uncle. A stranger.

Alya leaned across the bed, tapping my notebook with her pen. "Your dad's files—did he ever mention where Ranvijay went? Not just the city, but any address, company, even a hotel?"

I shook my head. "Nothing specific. Just vague stories about 'the Gulf' and how Ranvijay was chasing quick money. Dad always brushed it off. Said some men choose their greed over their name."

Vihaan whistled low. "Sounds like a family reunion waiting to happen."

I gave him a look. "If he shows up, you better be the one shaking his hand. I might throw something."

Vihaan smirked. "Noted. I'll wear a helmet."

Just then, his phone buzzed. The sound cracked through the quiet like a whip. He checked it and sat up straighter.

"Dad messaged," he said, and we both stopped breathing.

He unlocked the screen, eyes scanning the message, his expression tightening with every word. "He ran preliminary records through passport control and some internal agency links. It's not confirmed yet, but…"

"But what?" I asked.

"Ranvijay's name appeared in an intelligence note from last year. No criminal charges, but his name was flagged in a report related to money laundering in Dubai. Shell corporations, cash funneling, false real estate portfolios. All linked to a dummy firm called *Zayan Holdings*."

Alya raised a brow. "That sounds… subtle."

"He's not just sitting around sipping cocktails," Vihaan added grimly. "He's hiding behind something."

A pit opened in my stomach. "But Dad wasn't in business with him. He *hated* that kind of thing."

"Exactly," Vihaan said. "So why call him? Unless Dad found something—*or* someone—linked to Ranvijay. Maybe he thought he could reason with him. Or warn him. Or threaten him."

Vihaan stepped back into the room just then, phone still in his hand. His face was unreadable, but his eyes were locked on me.

"I talked to Dad," he said. "Confirmed it."

I sat up straighter. "Confirmed what?"

"Ranvijay Mishra did come to India. Landed in Mumbai five days before your dad's death. Alone. No return flight listed until ten days later."

Alya stiffened beside me. "So he was *here* when it happened."

"Yeah. ACP Rajan traced the immigration logs. He stayed under a business visa. Didn't list any family contacts. No hotel registered under his name, but a private apartment rental showed up in the system—under an alias."

"Alias?" I echoed.

"Same last name. Different first. Rajan's looking into who else may have rented the flat. But here's the kicker—" Vihaan's jaw tightened. "He left the country the day after your father's funeral. Didn't attend. Didn't call anyone. Didn't even bother sending a condolence message."

My mouth was dry. I felt something dark and cold curl in my chest.

Alya's voice was low, cautious. "That doesn't add up."

"No, it doesn't," Vihaan agreed. "It's like he came for something else entirely. And the moment your dad died… he ran."

I looked down at my hands.

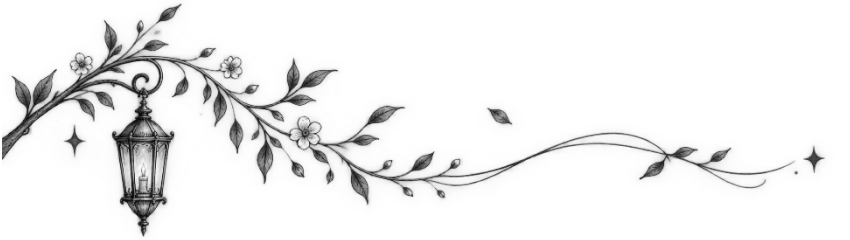
My father had always told me Ranvijay was selfish. Heartless. "Into bad stuff," he'd said once, his tone like steel. But he'd never explained. Never elaborated. As if speaking it aloud might give it weight.

And now here he was, years later, flying in under a false name, hiding in a rental apartment, and vanishing the moment the ashes cooled.

"He didn't come for Dad," I said. "He didn't come for *us*."

Vihaan looked me straight in the eye. "No. He came for something else. And whatever it was… we're going to find it."

Alya opened her laptop again. "Let's start by digging into that alias. And if your dad left any trace—an email, a meeting log, even a scribbled note—we'll catch it."



Fourteen

Vihaan's eyes flicked to Alya, then back to me. "Fine. But if we're doing this, no more blind trust. No more fairy tales."

I swallowed the lump in my throat; the torn photo still crushed in my fist. "No promises."

The air between us thickened, charged with a silent resolve. It felt thicker than the gravy at my Mom's Sunday lunch, and I wasn't sure if it was nerves or the leftover tension from Vihaan almost dropping my precious torn photo like it was radioactive.

Vihaan stuffed his phone in his pocket like he was hiding a sneaky snack, then leaned forward, eyes sharp. "We need to be careful. Ranvijay isn't just some weird uncle who forgot our birthdays; he's got more connections than a social media influencer at a networking event. If he's involved, this could get messy fast."

Alya nodded, already typing furiously on her laptop. "I'm pulling everything I can find on Zayan Holdings. Corporate records, property deeds, even the board members. Who knows

what juicy secrets are hiding in those digital files? If there's a thread, we'll find it."

I swallowed hard, trying to steady the whirlwind inside my chest. This wasn't just about my father anymore. It was about uncovering a web that stretched further than I ever imagined.

"We can't let them know we're poking our noses where they don't belong," I warned. "If Ranvijay suspects, we're sitting ducks."

Vihaan's jaw tightened. "My dad's going to help, but we'll have to move in the shadows."

Alya's eyes met mine, a mischievous glint in them. "Then shadows it is. Time to channel our inner ninjas."

A brief pause settled, then I pulled out the torn photo from my bag—the one I'd found last week. "This," I said, holding it up, "is our starting point. It's more than a picture. It's a key."

The edges were frayed, the image incomplete, but the faint outline of a familiar face lingered.

"Who is this?" Vihaan asked quietly, leaning in.

"That's what we need to find out."

Just as Vihaan leaned back, looking all cool and crime-thriller-serious—you know the pose, right? The one where someone's about to drop some profound deduction?—his phone chose that exact moment to stage a rebellion. **BZZZZZZZZZ!**

The vibration was so loud, it might as well have been a bomb. Vihaan jumped like he'd been electrocuted and somehow managed to knock his chair back so hard that he fell off it.

Yes. You read that right. Imagine a full-body, action-movie fall, but instead of deflecting bullets, he's just… deflecting gravity. It was less "graceful descent" and more "human slinky."

He hit the ground with a loud *"Oof!,"* arms splayed out like a starfish that had just lost the will to live.

I clutched my stomach, trying desperately not to double over from laughter, because I'm a good friend, mostly. Alya, however, is a significantly less kind friend. She didn't even try to hide it; she straight-up snorted.

"Are you okay?" I managed between giggles.

"I think I saw my life flash before my eyes," he groaned from the floor. "It was mostly rejection emails and noodles."

Alya stood up, her hands on her hips. "Oh my god, Vihaan. That phone buzzed like it was just mildly annoyed, not like it was delivering death threats."

He pulled himself up, rubbing his elbow. "You don't know what it's like to live in a world where your ringtone gives you PTSD."

Alya rolled her eyes and handed him his phone. "Let me guess. Spam call?"

He looked at the screen and frowned dramatically. "Worse. It's from Bhav."

I gasped, laying it on thick. "You still haven't blocked him, Vihaan? That's like choosing to let a mosquito live in your room, buzz-buzzing about its *personal brand*."

He shrugged, leaning back with a mischievous glint. "Sometimes I like to suffer. Builds character, you know?"

"Must be the masochist in you," I muttered, grabbing a biscuit from the plate Alya had brought earlier. I winked at Vihaan. "So, what profound wisdom is our guru dispensing tonight?"

"Oh, just his new 'self-growth routine'," Vihaan groaned, scrolling. "Apparently cold showers and celery juice are going

to 'elevate his aura.' At midnight. Who texts about aura elevation at midnight?"

"He used to be fun," Vihaan sighed, shaking his head with mock sadness. "Then he discovered LinkedIn. It was downhill from there."

"He posted his own debate speech and thanked himself in the comments," I added, unable to keep the grin off my face.

"Remember that? He literally wrote, 'Thanks to Bhav for always believing in Bhav.' Who needs friends when you're your own biggest fan club?" I looked pointedly at Alya, baiting her.

Alya, who had been silently typing, finally closed her laptop with a decisive snap. She turned to us, a small, knowing smile playing on her lips. "You two done bullying Bhav, or should I order snacks and make it a full event?"

Vihaan snorted, surprised. "You're not seriously going to defend him too? Alya, come on."

"I'm not saying he isn't extra," Alya countered, a sparkle in her eye. "The man wears cufflinks to breakfast, sure, but he **owns it**. He's genuinely passionate, has big dreams, and works hard—even with the celery juice. Plus, he's got a really sharp mind when he's not trying to sound like a motivational speaker."

My jaw nearly dropped. "Did Alya just… compliment Bhav?" I turned to Vihaan, wide-eyed.

Vihaan looked equally stunned. "I think she did. Are you feeling okay, Alya? Should we check your temperature?"

Alya just laughed, a genuine, warm sound. "You two act like you're above it all and then spend half your life talking about him. It's almost sweet, how much you think about him."

She turned to me, a mischievous glint in her eyes. "And you, Brinda, pretend to hate Bhav but you read every post he puts up, just so you can screenshot it and send it to me with commentary. That takes effort. Effort equals interest."

"Gotta do it for the memes," I replied, grinning.

"Sure," Alya said, a perfectly innocent smile on her face. "And I drink black coffee because I like pain. Everyone likes this version of Alya until she turns the mic on them, huh, boys?"

Vihaan just mumbled, "Low blow," looking utterly defeated.

Alya turned back to her screen. "Good. Now, if we're done with this episode of *The Roast of Bhav*, can we get back to unravelling a possible murder conspiracy?"

The room quieted again, the banter fading like steam off a forgotten cup of chai.

I hesitated; the torn photo still clutched in my hand. The jagged edge pressed against my palm like a reminder—of Dad, of truth, of how far this rabbit hole might actually go.

"What if…" I began slowly, eyes fixed on the faded image, "I talk to Professor Gaurav Bhatia?"

Both heads turned toward me.

"He was Dad's best friend. Back when… back when things were normal. They ran that small consultancy together before Zayan Holdings blew up. If anyone knows something—anything—that we don't, it's him."

Vihaan's eyes darkened. "Gaurav Bhatia? Come on, Brinda. You honestly trust some guy who's been lurking around your dad's shadow like a vulture? People like him aren't saints; they're snakes in tailored suits."

My fingers clenched the torn photo until it crumpled slightly. "Don't! Gaurav was the only one who ever cared. You don't get to trash his name just because you love playing detective."

Vihaan leaned forward, voice low and venomous. "I'm not trashing anyone—I'm warning you. Maybe Gaurav helped your dad when it was convenient, but when things got dirty? He vanished. Just like you're about to."

"You're wrong. You don't know him or what he means to me. Unlike you, I'm not some cynical—"

Alya's voice cut through, sharp but pleading. "Enough, both of you! This isn't helping. We're supposed to be on the same side, remember?"

Vihaan shot her a glare but said nothing.

I swallowed hard, biting back my next words. Vihaan pressed on, ignoring Alya. "Oh, so now I'm cynical? Maybe because I don't live in some fairy tale where everyone loves you and your dead daddy's friends are saints. Face it, Brinda—your whole 'trust everyone' act is why you're stuck."

"Better to trust than to be a paranoid coward who pushes away everyone trying to help. Maybe if you cared as much as you pretend, you wouldn't be so damn bitter."

"Care? The last thing you need is more fake loyalty. You cling to ghosts while the real world laughs at you."

I felt heat rise inside me, thick and suffocating. "You're selfish, Vihaan. You don't get to decide who I trust or who my father was."

Alya jumped between us, hands raised like a referee stopping a fight. "Stop it, both of you! This isn't about loyalty or betrayal. We're breaking down walls, not building new ones. Vihaan, don't push Brinda away. And Brinda, don't shut us out because it's hard."

Vihaan's jaw clenched. "I'm not pushing anyone away. I'm trying to protect her from falling deeper into this mess."

I shook my head, bitter laughter bubbling up. "Protect me? By calling everyone I care a liar? By acting like I'm the problem?"

Alya's voice softened but was firm. "Look, I get it. This is messy. But tearing each other apart won't get us anywhere. We need each other—flaws, doubts, and all."

Without another word, I spun on my heel and stormed out, the slam of the door echoing louder than the pounding in my chest. Alya's voice followed me softly, a fragile bridge I wasn't ready to cross.

Vihaan's words weren't just words; they were tiny daggers dressed up in business suits, sharp enough to slice through every fragile hope I'd been clutching onto.

Snakes in tailored suits, he'd said. *Vanished when it got dirty. Paranoid fool. Selfish.*

It felt like he wasn't just talking about Professor Gaurav Bhatia. No, those words landed right on me, too.

Did Vihaan really think I was paranoid? Selfish? Foolish? Maybe he was right. Maybe I was all of those things and more. But what hurt most was the ease with which he dismissed my faith in Gaurav, in my father's oldest friend. As if loyalty was just a naive fairy tale, and everyone really had a price tag attached.

And Alya—her silence was its own kind of verdict. Not quite disagreement, but not support either. They were both standing on the edge of a cliff, waiting for me to jump or fall, and I wasn't sure which was scarier.

Why had I dragged Vihaan into this mess? Because I needed someone who wouldn't look at me like I was losing my mind.

Someone who might just believe that beneath the tangled lies and shadows, there was a truth worth finding.

I pressed the photo against my chest, its rough edges digging into my skin like reality itself was trying to wake me up from a dream I didn't want to leave. If this was the price of searching for answers—losing the people I trusted—maybe I was better off alone.

But loneliness was its own monster, and it wasn't exactly a comforting companion.

I let out a shaky breath, trying to steady the whirlwind in my chest. "What have I done?" I whispered to the quiet room, my voice barely more than a ghost.

The irony wasn't lost on me: here I was, tangled in a web of secrets and lies, and the one thing I couldn't untangle was the mess inside myself.

My grandmother used to say, "We laugh hard, and then, sometime later, we cry just as hard."

And sitting there, the laughter from minutes ago still echoing faintly in my ears, I finally understood what she meant—because now, I could feel the ache rising in my throat, and the storm settling quietly in my chest.

I lingered in the corridor longer than necessary, the door in front of me blurred by unshed tears. My fingers hesitated on the knob, as if entering the room meant stepping back into a world I wasn't sure I belonged to anymore.

But the corridor didn't have answers either.

So I turned the knob and walked in.

The room was quiet.

Vihaan was gone.

His absence hit me like a sudden gust of wind, pulling the breath right out of my chest. No sarcastic remark waiting. No muttered apology. Just a hollow space where he had stood.

Alya looked up from her bed, her eyes soft and searching. She didn't say anything at first. She just closed her laptop slowly, carefully as if sensing that too much noise might shatter me completely.

"You okay?" she asked gently.

That question. It always felt like both a lifeline and a lie.

I gave her a small nod, the kind that wasn't convincing but said: I'm trying. She stood up and walked over without another word, wrapping her arms around me like she'd been waiting to do it since the moment I left.

I buried my face in her shoulder, and for a brief second, let myself fall into the comfort she offered. No explanations. No judgment. Just warmth.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

"You don't have to be," she said into my hair. "It's okay to feel everything all at once."

We stood like that for a moment—two people caught in a storm they never asked for.

Then I pulled back, wiping my face quickly. "I have so much work to do. Lectures, notes… everything's already piling up."

Alya raised an eyebrow but didn't press. She knew what I was doing—retreating into structure, into the illusion of control. But she just nodded and sat back on her bed. "Let me know if you need help. I'll be right here."

I opened my books with trembling hands, spreading them out like shields. The soft scratch of my pen became the only sound in the room. I underlined lines I didn't read. Made notes I

didn't feel. My eyes scanned words while my mind replayed Vihaan's—sharp, brutal, and so damn familiar.

"Snakes in suits."

"You cling to ghosts."

"You don't know who your father really was."

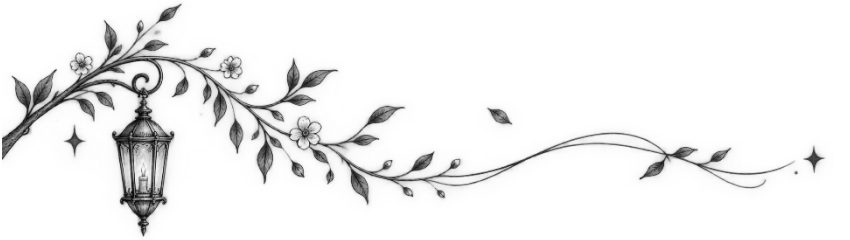
The words echoed louder than any professor's lecture could.

I tried to drown them in legal jargon, but they floated just beneath the surface, tugging at me like riptides. I kept reading anyway. Because reading meant not crying. Studying meant surviving.

But deep down, under all the ink and effort, I was still just a girl with a torn photo, a breaking heart, and too many questions for the silence to answer.

And as I flipped to the next page, I realized that I wasn't angry anymore.

I was just… tired.



Fifteen

After weeks of debates so intense they probably deserved a moderator (and maybe some noise complaints from the neighbors), back-to-back Bollywood movies with completely unnecessary but ridiculous dance breaks—yes, we got up and did the steps, and no, we don't regret it—and the never-ending argument of Team Conrad versus Team Jeremiah (which at this point feels less like a preference and more like a personality test), Alya and I had managed to turn our dorm room into… well, let's just say it looked like two people actually lived there.

And yet, beneath the volley of playful insults and laughter, something quieter began to take shape. A subtle shift, almost like the air itself had stilled, carrying that unspoken sense of *we've had our fun—now what lies beyond it?*

I replayed the last time I saw him—like my mind was a projector, fumbling to pause the reel at the exact second his smile flickered, so I could pin it up in some secret gallery inside my head and wander back whenever the ache threatened to take over.

Warm.

You know how sometimes someone looks so exactly like themselves in a moment, it almost hurts? That was him.

He'd been standing there in those oversized black jeans—not sloppy, not overdone, just that rare kind of look that somehow makes you wonder if he spent hours getting it "wrong" on purpose.

Honestly, it was infuriating… and maybe a little distracting.

Paired with a plain white T-shirt that somehow made his skin look warmer, more alive—and over it, that dark green shirt.

That shirt. You'd think it was just a shirt, right? But it wasn't. It was the exact shade of pine after rain, like forest shadows and fresh starts, and it suited him so well it felt unfair. As if someone, somewhere, custom-dyed it with him in mind.

And the way he pushed his sleeves up, like he was always on the edge of doing something reckless, or thoughtful, or both. Like he might say something sharp and ruin you, or something soft and save you. And either way—you'd let him.

Tell me, have you ever tried to memorize someone so deeply that even their silhouette feels like home?

Because I did.

If everything I'd read in those detective novels was true, the only hope left for our friendship was in that last look.

But no matter how much I told myself to face him, to unravel whatever knot was tied between us, I couldn't. It wasn't like he hadn't tried to reach out. Just after our argument, when he left the room with that stormy expression, my phone buzzed with a message that still felt like a whisper in a crowded room: *"Sorry. Can we talk?"*

But I was already drowning in my own family detective drama—papers, secrets, and half-truths piling up faster than I

could handle. I needed space. So I ignored him. Not because I didn't care, but because I wasn't sure how to care without falling apart.

Days turned into a quiet standoff—silent texts left unread, awkward glances in the hallway, the kind of tension that made the air thick enough to cut with a knife. But sometimes, the smallest cracks let light in.

It was a rainy evening when it finally happened. I was curled up on my bed, half-distracted by a documentary that barely held my attention, when my phone buzzed. His name flashed on the screen.

I hesitated, fingers hovering over the screen like a lifeline just out of reach. Then, with a deep breath that felt like I was diving into freezing water, I answered.

I answered.

"Brinda!" Vihaan's voice was wild, cracking with panic. "It's Alya—she's not okay. I think she fainted? Maybe hit her head? There's blood—I don't know what to do. Just come to Lena's room. Now."

My soul left my body.

"What?! Blood?!" I screeched, already half out the door, adrenaline pumping like I was sprinting into a war zone. "I'm coming—just hold on—don't let her sleep—elevate her legs or whatever the Internet says!"

I flew down the hallway barefoot, heart galloping, hair flying, and dignity absolutely nowhere in sight.

When I reached Lena's door, I didn't knock—I *attacked* it. "Alya?! Vihaan?! OPEN UP!"

Vihaan opened it.

And the man was smiling. Not bleeding. Not crying. Just… standing there like some smug peacock.

I shoved past him with the force of a very concerned hurricane. "WHERE IS SHE?!"

And then I froze.

Because there she was—Alya—very much alive, upright, and laughing with Lena and Bhav on Lena's bed. Eating chips. With zero blood. Unless you count ketchup on the floor, which I later learned was from Bhav's tragic samosa spill.

"You," I said, turning to Vihaan with nuclear-level betrayal in my eyes. "You absolute menace."

Then I punched him. Right in the arm.

"Ow—OW!" he yelped, rubbing the spot like I'd broken him. "Okay! Okay, I deserve that!"

"You made me think my best friend was DYING!"

"Would you have come otherwise?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

I blinked.

"You were avoiding me. And you had every right. But I thought… maybe Alya could get you here. Because if it was just me asking, you wouldn't show up."

He pulled something from behind his back.

A bouquet. Tulips—white and soft pink, freshly plucked from either a garden or his guilty conscience.

"I'm sorry," he said, gently. "These are for you."

Okay.

Okay, listen.

I'm still mad. Super mad. But also—**TULIPS?!** Do you know how niche that is? Do you know how violently specific your love for a flower has to be for someone to *remember it*?

"Wait," I said slowly, trying not to smile like an idiot. "How do you know I like tulips?"

He glanced toward Alya, who was holding up her phone like she'd just won a matchmaking award. "She told me."

Of course she did.

"Unbelievable," I muttered, still cradling the tulips like they weren't already my emotional support bouquet.

"Just so we're clear, I *am* still mad."

Alya threw a chip at me. "No, you're not."

Bhav sipped her Coke. "You're smiling."

"Shut up," I grumbled, turning away, but not before Vihaan caught the very real, very un-ignorable upward twitch of my lips.

And hey, dear reader, you ever try to hold a grudge while holding tulips?

Yeah. It's impossible.

So here I was—humiliated, emotional, and slightly in love—with a bouquet in one hand and a mental note to maybe one day, possibly, kinda, forgive Vihaan.

Maybe.

After he bought me biryani.

Anyway, yeah. That's what happened.

A fake medical emergency, a bag of chips, and tulips I definitely did *not* cry over (mind your business). That's how Vihaan tricked me into talking to him again. And fine—I may have

smiled; I may have forgiven him *a little*… but that doesn't mean I forgot.

Because while the tulips were lovely, and the prank was *almost* clever, real life wasn't giving me flowers. It was giving me cryptic phone records, missing pieces, and one very shady uncle who had suddenly become too quiet to ignore.

So, dear reader, if you thought this was just a cute college love story with chips and chaos—think again, because it's not.

"So," I said, twirling a tulip like it was a gavel, "you two done emotionally ambushing me, or should I expect a mariachi band next?"

Alya grinned. "Only if you keep pretending you're mad when you're clearly glowing."

"I am not glowing," I muttered, glowing.

Vihaan raised his hands. "Truce. No more fake emergencies. Pinky promise."

I squinted. "I don't trust your pinkies."

"But," I continued, putting the tulip down and sitting up straighter, "we do need to pull off something a little riskier than your stunt."

Their smiles faded like someone had turned off the sitcom track. Alya exchanged a glance with Vihaan. He shifted, immediately alert.

"I want to talk to Gaurav uncle," I said.

Silence.

Alya blinked. "You mean *Gaurav Bhatia*? Your dad's best friend?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "Gaurav uncle. He was there when everything fell apart. After Dad died, he handled the hospital,

the paperwork, the press… even the people who tried to turn his death into a headline. He was the one who made sure Mom and I could breathe."

Vihaan leaned forward. "And you think he knows something?"

"I don't think he's hiding anything sinister," I said quickly, firmly. "This isn't about suspicion. It's about trust. He's the only person connected to my dad whom I know for sure wasn't pretending. He was devastated when Dad died. He's been like—like a shield around our family ever since."

Alya raised a brow. "Then why do you need to talk to him?"

"Because I trust him," I said. "And if I'm going to start putting together the pieces, I want his voice in the mix. I've been so caught up chasing trails and second-guessing everyone, I forgot I still have someone who might just tell me the truth without twisting it."

Vihaan nodded slowly. "But he hasn't responded to you?"

I sighed. "No. I emailed him twice from my own ID—no reply. Which is… weird. He's never ignored me before. So maybe I need to approach this differently. Not as a grieving daughter, but as someone who deserves answers."

"There's a fundraiser next weekend," I said. "He's on the alumni board, so I know he'll be there. I'll go. I won't make a scene. I'll just ask. Calmly."

Vihaan frowned. "And if he doesn't want to talk?"

"Then I'll remind him who I am," I said. "Not just Raghav Mishra's daughter, but someone who still believes he can help. I don't want suspects. I want allies. And if I'm going to break this open, I need someone who knew my dad better than anyone."

Alya folded her arms. "You trust him that much?"

I met her gaze. "More than I trust myself right now."

Vihaan exhaled through his nose, his expression tight. "Look, last time we fought… it was because of all this—because of him, *kind of.* And I hated that. I don't want to risk that happening again."
He paused, then met my eyes with something softer. "But if you believe this is what you need—then I'm with you. No hesitation. Just… please be careful, okay?"

"Thanks," I said softly.

I stared at the phone screen for a long time before pressing "Call."

My thumb hovered over the green icon like it was the launch button on a missile. Stupid, right? It was just Gaurav Uncle. My dad's best friend. The man who once made me the world's soggiest hot chocolate when I broke my arm in sixth grade.

And yet—my heart was sprinting.

"Hello?"
His voice. Just like I remembered.

"Uncle?" I said.

"Brinda?" The surprise in his tone was immediate, but it wasn't cold. Just startled. "My God, beta, it's been— I've been meaning to call. I got your emails, I just–things have been–"

"It's okay," I cut in, because I already felt the guilt creeping in through the cracks in his voice. "I just… I really need to talk to you. In person, if that's okay."

A pause.

"Of course," he said, and I could hear the shift—the concern, the protectiveness threading back into his voice like muscle memory. "Of course it's okay. Are you all right?"

I hesitated. "Not exactly. But I was wondering if we could talk?"

"I teach till four," he said. "But after that, I'm free. Same office—you know where to find me."

"Yeah," I said, smiling a little despite myself. "I still remember helping you carry all those dusty law journals before my interview."

He chuckled. "You're the only one who's ever offered. And I'm pretty sure you scared the admin into giving you that seat with your closing argument."

"Maybe," I said lightly. "Or maybe you just made sure they couldn't say no."

He didn't deny it. "Come by around 4:15?"

"I will," I said. "Thanks, Uncle. Really."

"I'm glad you called, Brinda," he said quietly, and it landed like a full sentence of unsaid things—grief, loyalty, and a shared history that neither of us had completely put down.

"Me too," I whispered. "Me too."

At exactly 4:13 p.m., I was pacing the corridor outside the Law Department like a caffeinated squirrel. My phone read 4:14. My palms were sweating. And my heart? Tap dancing like it was auditioning for *India's Got Talent.*

I stopped right outside **Room 212: Prof. Gaurav Bhatia (Legal Theory & Ethics)**—a door I'd passed a dozen times without flinching.

The clock finally blinked to 4:15.

I knocked.

"Come in," came the familiar voice, calm as ever.

I pushed the door open slowly and stepped into a room that honestly looked more like a secondhand bookstore than a professor's office. Stacks of case law digests teetered on the edge of every surface. The faint smell of old paper and strong chai filled the air. On one wall, a corkboard was pinned with yellowed newspaper clippings and handwritten notes. And dead center—behind a desk drowning in files—sat Gaurav Bhatia, spectacles perched halfway down his nose, eyes kind.

"Brinda," he said, rising slightly from his chair. "You look taller."

"You say that every time," I replied, smiling. "And I haven't grown since class ten."

He gave me a look over his glasses. "Well, you carry yourself taller now. That counts."

I stepped inside and shut the door behind me.

"You sure it's okay I came?" I asked.

He waved me in. "Of course. Sit. You want water? Tea? Coffee? A stress biscuit?"

I blinked. "Is that an actual biscuit or an emotional category?"

"Depends," he said, reaching into his drawer and pulling out a pack of Bourbon. "Take two. These are court-approved."

I laughed—nervously, but still. It was easier than I expected to settle into the chair across from him. Like my bones remembered this place before my heart did.

"So," he said, folding his hands. "What's on your mind, beta?"

I looked at him—his salt-and-pepper hair, the familiar frown line between his brows, the faint circles under his eyes that hadn't left since Dad died.

He was still the same. And maybe that's what scared me.

"I need to talk to you about Dad," I said.

His smile faded—gently, not in alarm, but in recognition. Like he'd been waiting for this moment too.

"Of course," he said. "Tell me everything."

"I've been trying to make sense of everything," I began, fiddling with the corner of a Bourbon wrapper. "What happened to Dad… it's been over a year, and I still don't understand it. Not really."

Gaurav uncle didn't interrupt. He just leaned back slightly, eyes fixed on me, hands clasped together like he was holding the silence steady so I wouldn't fall through it.

"They said it was an accident. That it was raining. That the brakes failed." My throat tightened. "But I've been going through old records. His call logs. Notes. Bits and pieces from his office. And something just… doesn't add up."

His brows knit together. "What doesn't?"

"He had a call with someone the night before," I said. "Someone I can't trace. There's a number—unknown ID, no record in the database. And there's this photo. Torn, folded. It was hidden behind a frame in his study." I paused. "It had your name on the back."

He looked surprised—but not guilty. Just surprised.

"Brinda, I swear I don't—"

"I don't think you did anything," I cut in quickly. "I need you to know that. I'm not here to accuse you. I came because I trust you more than anyone who was close to him. You *were* close to him. You knew what he was working on. What he was worried about. What he wouldn't tell even Mom or me."

His face softened. "Your father and I built our careers side by side. He was… like a brother."

"I know," I whispered.

"Stress," he said quickly. "Pressure. You know how many deals he was handling—"

"This wasn't business pressure," I snapped. "This was different. And I know you know that."

His lips pressed together in a thin line.

"Uncle, I'm not asking for your approval. I'm asking for your help. If there's even the *slightest* chance this wasn't just an accident, don't you want to know? Don't you want to be sure?"

He exhaled slowly, and this time it wasn't out of patience—it was defeat.

"You sound just like him," he said quietly.

I froze. "What?"

"Your father. That stubbornness. That fire. He was the same way when he believed something wasn't right. No matter how many people told him to let it go, he wouldn't."

I swallowed. "So you'll help me?"

He rubbed his temples, then looked at me, really looked at me.

"I don't think you'll rest until you get answers," he said. "And if I don't help you, you'll go into things that could get messy."

"Probably."

He let out a short, tired laugh. "Alright then. I'm in. I'll help you. But Brinda, if we're opening old wounds, you need to be ready for what we might find. Your dad had enemies. Powerful ones."

I nodded. "I'm ready."

"You really believe there's something hidden?"

"I know there is."

He stared at me for a beat longer, then reached into his drawer and pulled out a slim notepad. "Then let's start where we should've started a year ago."

"One more thing," I said, quietly but firmly.

He looked up. "Yes?"

"You can't tell Mom. Or Ayaan."

His pen paused mid-stroke.

"Brinda—"

"I mean it," I said. "Mom's just starting to sleep through the night without medication. And Ayaan… he's finally laughing again. I can't drag them into this unless I'm sure there's something real here."

He gave me that same unreadable look he used to give Dad when he was silently deciding whether to scold him or support him.

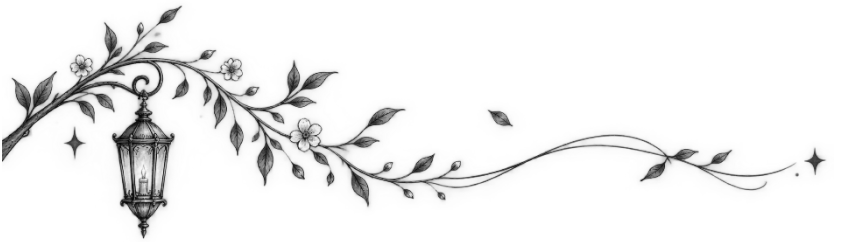
Then he nodded. "Alright. This stays between us. For now."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Thank you," I said, softer this time. "Really."

He gave a faint smile. "You Mishras are exhausting, but addictive. You know that?"

I grinned. "We get that a lot."



Sixteen

The morning sun in Pune had no business being this cheerful.

I sat stiffly in the backseat of ACP Rajan Singh's car; fingers curled tightly around my phone. The screen still glowed with the address we'd found last night—Hotel Vivanta Royale, tucked discreetly on the fringes of Lonavala. According to my father's final call log and transaction trail, this was where he stayed the night before… before everything spun off its axis.

You ever get that feeling like you're on a rollercoaster you never agreed to ride?

That was this. One hundred percent.

"Hey, Brin…" Vihaan's voice broke the silence, casual but curious. "Did you and your family ever stay at this hotel before? Like, on a vacation or something?"

I didn't respond.

Not because I was ignoring him—truthfully, I didn't even register the question. My mind was too deep in the fog, replaying imaginary scenes of my father walking through

these doors, checking in, maybe glancing over his shoulder. What was he thinking? Did he feel safe? Or was he already looking over his shoulder?

"Brinda," Alya said softly beside me, her fingers closing gently over mine. "You okay?"

Her voice pulled me back like a thread tugging me from underwater.

I blinked. "Yeah… sorry." My throat was dry. "Just… lost in thought."

You ever get like that? So far inside your own head you forget you're sharing space with the world? It's terrifying how quiet everything feels when you're wrapped in grief that hasn't even finished blooming.

ACP Rajan hadn't spoken during the drive, and somehow that made me respect him even more. He wasn't trying to fill the silence with empty comfort. He just let it breathe. It was the silence of someone who didn't need to prove anything, someone who'd seen truth rip apart people before, and still chose to find it anyway.

The car eased to a stop.

When I looked up, I expected something unremarkable. Maybe a chipped-tile motel or a forgettable nameplate. But no, this was Vivanta Royale. Grand sandstone walls, a sleek valet in uniform, a chandelier visible even from outside. Everything about it screamed elegance. Quiet, calculated wealth.

And that? That was what chilled me.

My father didn't stumble into this place. He chose it. Carefully.

Inside, the lobby smelled of jasmine and leather polish. A soft instrumental piece looped in the background, elegant and eerily calm. The floor glistened like glass. Even the

receptionist, a young man in a navy blazer, straightened like a soldier when ACP Rajan flashed his badge.

"Good morning, sir. How can I assist you?"

That's when it hit me. We were here. Finally standing in the very space where my father spent his last known night alive.

"I need access to your guest records and CCTV footage from the 16th of March last year," Rajan said with quiet authority.

"The police are investigating a reopened case connected to a death that may not have been accidental."

The manager—a balding man with a hesitant frown—arrived shortly after and led us to the tiny control room behind the lobby. The air in there was warm and slightly metallic, and I tried not to let my nerves eat me alive.

The manager slid an old hard drive into the system and pulled up the surveillance recordings. I leaned forward, heart pounding.

We started with the footage from 6:00 p.m. onward.

There he was.

My father.

Dressed simply in a crisp white shirt and jeans like he always did when he didn't want to draw attention, but somehow still managed to look like he owned the entire building. His gait was calm, measured, and confident. No limp. No hesitation. He walked into the hotel lobby alone, greeted the receptionist with a polite nod, signed the register, and disappeared into the lift.

Room 204.

My throat tightened.

I leaned in unconsciously, my face inches from the screen. Every pixel, every shadow, every second—it all felt sacred.

Like I was being handed a piece of time I thought I'd lost forever.

He didn't look panicked. Not scared. Not even anxious.

If anything… he looked *deliberate*.

The footage flickered. Skipped ahead to midnight. Then to morning.

8:42 a.m.

My father reappeared, walking out of the elevator, his posture exactly the same. Calm. Controlled. He was carrying a slim black briefcase—one I hadn't seen before, and that instantly made my stomach twist. He paused at the reception, said something to the staff, and then stepped outside.

My breath hitched.

He walked toward the road, purposeful, scanning the street. And then—he stopped. Near the curb.

That's when my vision blurred.

Not dramatically, not with gasps and sobs and tragic violin music. No, it was quieter than that. The tears rose slowly—burning the backs of my eyes, collecting like tiny storms behind my lashes. But they didn't fall.

They couldn't.

Somewhere deep inside, I knew that if even one tear escaped, I might break open completely.

So I blinked hard. Swallowed the ache. Clenched my hands tightly in my lap, digging my nails into my palm.

He looked so… real. So alive.

Like he could walk right back in and scold me for skipping breakfast.

But this was a recording. A shadow of a moment. And I hated it.

That's when it happened.

A deep charcoal Toyota Fortuner slowed to a smooth halt just outside the hotel gates.

My heart stuttered.

A man stepped out from the passenger seat. Tall. Broad-shouldered. Wearing a cap pulled low and dark sunglasses that masked most of his face. But even in the grainy footage, his body language gave something away—he wasn't a stranger. He wasn't cautious. He walked with the ease of someone who belonged.

He didn't just shake my father's hand.

He *hugged* him.

They spoke for a moment—too softly for the camera to catch. My father gave a slight nod, then… he smiled. Not wide, not showy. Just a small, genuine curve of his lips.

And it broke something in me.

Then, calmly, he stepped into the back seat of the Fortuner. The man climbed into the passenger side, the door shutting with practiced ease.

"Pause," I said, my voice suddenly hoarse. "Can you zoom in? On the number plate?"

The manager tried, and for a moment the grainy pixels danced. Then it settled.

The image sharpened just enough.

MH 12 AX 9083.

The room went cold. Rajan leaned forward, scribbling the number down into his notebook with controlled urgency.

"That number plate… I can run it through the regional transport office database," he said. "We'll find out who owns that vehicle."

I nodded slowly, still staring at the screen. My father hadn't looked afraid when he stepped into that car. But he hadn't returned either.

Something about that man—his body language, the calculated way he looked around before opening the car door—made my skin crawl.

"What if the man driving that car is connected to Ranvijay?" I asked softly.

Rajan didn't answer. He didn't need to.

Because for the first time in months, we had something real.

As we left the hotel, the sun had dimmed behind grey clouds. I slipped my father's watch from my wrist and clenched it in my palm.

"Don't worry, Papa," I whispered, quietly enough that only the wind could hear. "We're getting closer."

The screen flickered again.

"Owner name: Vikas Pradhan, resident of Rewa, Madhya Pradesh."

I blinked. "Sorry—what? Did you say Rewa?"

The officer nodded, rotating the screen toward us. "Yes, ma'am. The car is still registered in that district. Not even Maharashtra. No transfers, no re-registration. And from what I can see—"

He clicked another tab, opening the vehicle's movement log based on toll data and traffic cameras.

"—it hasn't shown up in Rewa for almost a year. It's been moving through Maharashtra the whole time. Mumbai, Nashik, Pune, even some stops in Kolhapur."

That didn't make sense.

"You're telling me," I said slowly, "that a car from another state, still registered to someone in Madhya Pradesh, has been driving around Maharashtra for months, and nobody noticed?"

"Exactly." Rajan's voice was low and tight. "Which means either Vikas Pradhan gave his car to someone, or it was taken without his knowledge. But here's the worst part—"

He turned to me, his eyes sharp now.

"Whoever picked up your father that day wanted it to seem boring. Legal. Traceable. But not *too traceable*. That's not a coincidence. That's design."

I felt the weight of his words hit the pit of my stomach.

"Can we contact this Vikas Pradhan?" I asked, though my voice wavered.

Rajan nodded. "Already on it. My officers in Madhya Pradesh are tracking him down. But if he's clean, we'll know soon."

"And if he's not?"

"Then this thing is bigger than we thought. Someone's laundering connections through people far from the crime. People who don't even know they're part of a game."

A silence settled in the room—thick, humming with dread.

And suddenly, every word Gaurav uncle had ever said to me replayed in my mind like echoes in a metal chamber.

"Your father was under pressure, but it was all business."
"He never said anything about being afraid."
"I wish I had known something was wrong."

Now, I didn't believe any of it.

It was barely noon, but the air in the police control room felt heavier than any courtroom I'd ever stepped into.

ACP Rajan's phone buzzed once, a shrill, clipped tone that made all of us sit up straighter. He glanced at the screen, answered with a curt, "Yes," and listened.

A few silent beats later, he nodded once, said, "Good. Send me the dashcam extract and coordinates," and ended the call.

He turned toward me, his face unreadable. The kind of unreadable that only cops and lawyers truly mastered.

"We just got hold of highway toll footage and matched it with traffic camera data from the expressway that morning," he said.

"The Fortuner," he continued, "didn't just pick up your father."

He paused, giving the words weight.

"It also dropped him off—forty kilometers away. At a restaurant off the old highway near Khopoli."

I sat up straighter. "What restaurant?"

Rajan turned the laptop toward me.

Grainy CCTV footage. My father stepping out of a Fortuner. Not into some shady dhaba, but a surprisingly decent roadside spot—clean tiles, decent lighting, even a guy in uniform holding a menu.

"Devraj Highway Retreat," the sign read.

Alya squinted. "Isn't that the place with overpriced paneer butter masala and tissue rolls that feel like sandpaper?"

"Classy," Vihaan muttered.

There was my father—shoulders squared, black briefcase in hand—stepping out of the Fortuner and walking toward *Devraj Highway Retreat* like it was just another business lunch.

But this wasn't restaurant footage.

It was from a highway surveillance camera, slightly tilted, zoomed out—just enough to catch the entrance, not what happened beyond the glass doors.

He disappeared inside.

The timestamp ticked on. Ten minutes. Then fifteen.

And then, a different car pulled up.

Not the Fortuner.

A black sedan—familiar.

"That's his car," I said, leaning closer. "From home."

"And that's his personal driver," Rajan added. "Look, he just hands him the keys. No conversation."

The driver left on foot.

My father came out, briefcase still in hand.

He got into the driver's seat and drove off.

"Wait," Vihaan said slowly, "he drove? Himself?"

"Yep," I murmured. "The same man who used to call parallel parking a 'cruel modern artform.'"

Alya frowned. "So why take over now?"

Rajan closed the laptop with a quiet click. "Because whatever happened inside that restaurant… wasn't meant to be dramatic. But it was definitely deliberate."

Silence settled over us.

"You think Devraj still has CCTV inside?" I asked, already knowing what I didn't want confirmed.

"Maybe," Rajan said. "If their manager's better at paneer pricing than hard drive maintenance, we might get a glimpse."

Alya grabbed her sling bag. "Guess we're taking this case out for a late lunch."

Vihaan cracked a grin. "I just hope they serve closure with a side of garlic naan."

I didn't smile.

Because even though nothing happened inside that building—no meeting, no visible threat, no exchange—it was still something.

He waited. Calm. Alone. Like a man told to follow instructions without asking why.

We were done guessing, now we were going to Devraj to see it for ourselves.

We were inside Devraj Highway Retreat.
And it felt wrong from the moment we stepped in.

The walls were too clean. The air too fragrant. The lighting too soft for a place that might've held my father's last moments before his world fell apart. Honestly, I expected drama. Shadows. At least one shady corner. But no.

This place looked like it served overpriced thalis to highway dads and Instagram reels to tourists.

Vihaan leaned close to me and whispered, "Should've brought a tissue. Just in case their famous ones still feel like sandpaper."

"Shut up," I muttered, but I didn't mean it. My nerves were buzzing too hard to snap properly.

Let me say this up front: I didn't walk into Devraj Highway Retreat expecting peace.
I wanted answers. Clues. Maybe even confrontation.
What I got was a polite manager with a clipboard and an annoying smile.

"I'm afraid we don't have footage from that far back," he said, like he was informing me the gulab jamun was out of stock. "We overwrite surveillance files every thirty days. Hotel policy."

I stared at him. Hard. "So you're telling me that one of your guests—my father—was possibly murdered, and your answer is *policy*?"

Vihaan stepped forward, his tone calmer but firmer. "Sir, this isn't just a family request. This is part of an active investigation. ACP Rajan Singh is right outside. Either we do this here, now, or the place gets sealed by lunch."

The manager blinked. Swallowed.

"I-I can speak to the IT team," he said, already pulling out his phone. "Sometimes… archived drives aren't wiped properly. Let me check."

Alya raised an eyebrow as he scurried off. "So much for hotel hospitality."

I crossed my arms. "If they don't find that footage, I swear—"

"They will," Rajan said as he walked in, flashing his ID with a casual flip. "No one formats drives that cleanly. Not unless they're hiding something. Give them fifteen minutes."

Turns out, we only needed ten.

"We… found something. One of the backup drives wasn't completely overwritten. Some fragments of March 17th exist.

Lobby camera, mostly. And… a table view from the dining area."

He looked like he expected us to throw confetti.

"Show us," I said, my voice steel.

And then—

"There," Rajan pointed.

My heart punched my ribcage.

Vihaan leaned closer. "Doesn't look nervous. Just… waiting."

"For someone," I murmured.

Then we saw him take out his phone. Call someone. His expression—*smiling*. For five full minutes.

"You seeing this?" I said, staring at the screen. "This isn't fear. He's not panicking."

"He's comfortable," Alya whispered. "Like he knows who's on the other side of that call."

The smile wrecked me. I hadn't seen him smile like that in months before his death. It wasn't wide. It was warm. Familiar. Trusting.

Rajan stepped forward, muttering to the manager, "Do you have audio?"

"No, sir. Only visual from this angle."

Great. Just great. Five minutes of silent smiling.

"Rewind. One more time," I said. "Pause when he ends the call."

The image stilled. He put his phone down. Faced the door. Waited.

But no one came in.

Nothing suspicious happened.

It was just… my father. Sitting alone. And then getting up calmly, like his business was done.

He walked out. Right into his car.

"This changes everything," Vihaan said quietly.

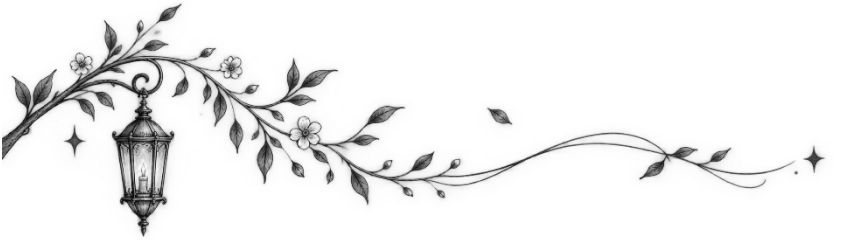
"Yeah," I replied. "Because now I'm not sure if he was lured… or if he was *in on something*."

Rajan spoke next. "We'll try tracing that call. And we cross-check the number against known contacts. But one thing's clear—"

He looked me straight in the eye.

"Your father didn't walk into danger. He walked into a meeting. Voluntarily."

And you, the one reading this—yeah, you—I know what you're thinking:
What kind of man smiles just before his own vanishing act?



Seventeen

A dhaba on the edge of Satara, sitting under a rusted tin roof with a chipped mug of watery chai.

The chai was terrible.

It tasted like boiled regret with a dash of disappointment and a hint of burnt sugar.

The dhaba around me was the kind of place that didn't believe in ambience. A torn menu flapped against the rusted tin wall. The waiter looked vaguely suspicious of my existence. And the ceiling fan above was doing more wobbling than spinning.

I checked the time again.

They should've been here by now.

Unless they'd changed their mind. Unless Vihaan had decided I didn't deserve backup after this level of betrayal. Unless—

A screech of tires interrupted my spiral. A dusty grey sedan skidded slightly as it pulled up in front of the dhaba.

Okay, listen.

If you've made it this far into the story, you deserve a medal. Or therapy. Possibly both. But before you go booking

appointments, let me bring you up to speed on today's breaking news from the Department of Suspicious Uncles.

Drumroll, please.

Vikas Pradhan.

The legendary Vikas Pradhan—yes, him again—was officially confirmed to be neither dead nor living under a new identity in Mexico. He was alive, well, and living in a sleepy corner of Kothrud with his wife and their one-year-old baby. A baby, by the way, whose biggest crime was probably eating Lego or waking up his parents at 3 AM with bloodcurdling shrieks.

Not exactly a prime suspect.

But ACP Rajan had eyes everywhere, and his sources confirmed the timeline. Vikas had been in town when my father died. Quiet. Low-profile. Untraceable—until now.

We were *this* close to confronting him. I could almost feel the conversation unspooling in my mind, scene by scene: the surprise on his face, the tension, the maybe-confession. But before any of that could happen, Rajan dropped the anchor.

"I've been called to Nashik," he said briskly, folding his arms in a way that meant no arguing. "Internal affairs. Sensitive case. I'll be gone for at least fifteen days."

We all exchanged a look that said: This is the worst possible timing, but also, typical.

"You're not going to Vikas without me," ACP Rajan said firmly, turning to me with the kind of look that could power a polygraph machine. "Brinda, I'm sending you the address for reference only. I repeat—reference. Do. Not. Act. Until I'm back."

I crossed my arms. "And how long is back, exactly?"

"At least fifteen days. Maybe more. Depends on how complicated the Nashik case gets."

"This is Vikas Pradhan. You said yourself he's been off the radar for years. What if he disappears again? What if this is our only shot?"

"That's exactly why you shouldn't go alone," he said.

"I'm not stupid–"

"No one said you were," he interrupted sharply. "But you are emotional. Impulsive. You take risks without thinking them through. That makes you vulnerable."

"This isn't a scavenger hunt, Brinda. This is real. If Vikas is involved in your father's death—even remotely—he won't hesitate to lie, manipulate, or worse. You're not trained to handle that."

"I don't need to be trained," I snapped. "I need to be *there*."

"You need to stay alive," he shot back. "And sane. And safe."

The room went quiet for a second, tension hanging like static between us.

"I get that you miss him," Rajan said more gently now. "I do. But storming into a stranger's house on pure instinct isn't justice. It's a mistake. And if something happens to you—if you get hurt or worse—I'll never forgive myself. And neither will your mother."

That last line hit lower than I expected. My fists unclenched.

I hesitated, my heart pounding.

He sighed, his voice gentling. "Brinda, you've done enough. Let me take it from here. Please."

"Understood," I said.

But I did not wait.

The moment he left, I felt like I was strapped into a seatbelt made of patience I didn't have. Waiting fifteen days felt like trying to hold my breath underwater while the truth hovered just above the surface.

Still, I tried to behave. For exactly 16 hours and 37 minutes.

And then… I packed a bag.

I didn't announce it. I just started gathering things with the quiet urgency of someone sneaking out of a prison, not because they hated the place, but because they had unfinished business beyond the walls.

Alya was in the bathroom. Vihaan was on the beanbag, lazily flipping through an article on his phone, though I could tell he was watching me in that way only a sibling does when they know you're up to something.

"You're being weird," he said finally, not even looking up. "Like… unusually quiet. And you've folded the same T-shirt thrice."

"It's wrinkled."

"It's polyester."

I zipped my bag and avoided eye contact. "I'm going home for a few days."

There it was.

Vihaan sat up slowly, letting the silence stretch long enough to suffocate a lie.

"You're going home?"

I nodded, feigning nonchalance. "Yup. Mom's been calling. She says I sound 'emotionally dehydrated.' Her words. Not mine."

He studied my face, eyebrows raised. "And this has *nothing* to do with Vikas Pradhan?"

I laughed—too quickly. "Seriously? I'm not that reckless."

He didn't smile. "That's the thing. You are."

There was a pause. His eyes searched mine, not with judgment, but with something worse—concern.

"You said you'd wait for Dad," Vihaan said quietly.

"I am waiting," I replied, too quickly. The kind of reply that folds in on itself if you look too closely. "This isn't about going behind anyone's back. I just… need a breather."

"Don't," he interrupted gently. "Don't turn it into a joke. Just tell me if you're lying."

I froze. For a second, my guilt nearly bubbled up and spilled out. But the truth felt too heavy, too raw, too soon.

I've honestly lost count of the number of times I've wondered—*how does he do that?*
How does Vihaan always seem to know exactly what I'm thinking before I say a word?
It's like he's tuned into some private frequency in my head, decoding thoughts I haven't even finished forming.

It's not just annoying. It's unsettling.

And in moments like this—when I'm trying to keep my voice even and my eyes steady—it feels impossible to hide anything from him.

So I shook my head and forced a tired smile. "I'm not."

Vihaan stared at me for a beat too long.

Then he exhaled and leaned back, running a hand through his hair like he'd just lost a silent argument with himself.

"Fine," he muttered. "Go. Take your break."

"Thank you," I said softly.

I turned away, clutching my bag tighter than necessary, and walked toward the bathroom—mostly to escape, partly to breathe. The second I reached for the door handle, it swung open and out came Alya, hair wrapped in a fluffy towel, singing some half-dramatic K-pop ballad under her breath.

"Oh!" she said, startled, then narrowed her eyes. "Why do you look like you're about to run away and change your name to Priya from Patna?"

I managed a small smile. "I'm going home. Just for a few days."

Her expression immediately shifted to something softer. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah."

She nodded slowly, the towel slipping off her head as she stepped aside to let me through. "Call me if you need anything. Even if it's just to yell about Indian train timings or terrible roadside chai."

"I will," I said with a small laugh that didn't quite reach my eyes.

Inside the bathroom, I stared at myself in the mirror, letting the faucet run unnecessarily while my thoughts scrambled in every direction. I didn't look like someone with a plan. I looked like someone holding one big, impossible secret in a too-small body.

When I stepped out a few minutes later, Alya was drying her hair with a hairdryer on low speed, and Vihaan had returned to pretending to scroll—though he was definitely still watching me from the corner of his eye.

I picked up my phone from the desk beside the beanbag, checked that the address Rajan had sent was still saved in my starred messages, then slipped it into my pocket.

I just crossed the room, hugged Alya—brief but warm—and then Vihaan, who surprised me by actually hugging back.

And then, I left.

The air at Pune Junction smelled like fried snacks, old rust, and decisions people weren't ready to make.

I stood on Platform 4 with my bag slung over one shoulder, the morning sun filtering in through a veil of smog and train announcements.

My train to Mumbai wasn't due for another fifteen minutes.

And yet… I wasn't moving.

My phone buzzed inside my pocket. I didn't have to check. It was probably Vihaan, double-checking that I'd boarded. Or Alya sending me a meme with an "are you okay?" disguised as a joke.

But I didn't look. Instead, I opened my messages and scrolled to the pinned chat with ACP Rajan Singh.

The address he had sent three nights ago was still there.

Flat No. 203, Pushkar Enclave, Satara.
Name on the doorbell: Vikas Pradhan.

I stared at it for a full thirty seconds, my thumb hovering over the screen.

Rajan had asked me to wait. To *not do anything stupid.* Vihaan had trusted me—even if reluctantly.

One quick U-turn through a crowd of porters and confused tourists, and suddenly, I wasn't heading to Mumbai anymore.

I was walking out of the station, adrenaline curling in my veins, the city heat sticking to my skin like guilt.

What if I see him and he doesn't recognize me?
What if he does?
What if he lies?
What if he tells me the one thing I'm not ready to hear?

I climbed into an auto and gave the address before I could talk myself out of it.

My phone buzzed.

I ignored it.

Buzz. Again.

On the fourth buzz, I sighed, pulled it from my pocket, and saw the name glowing on the screen.

Vihaan.

I picked up.

"Hey," I said, in my most unbothered, lying-through-my-teeth tone. "What's up?"

There was a loaded pause.

"Where are you?" he asked, light and casual, like he wasn't about to go full CBI on me.

"Home," I said smoothly. "Mum dragged me into some nostalgic recipe marathon. She made dal, rice, and two side dishes like it's Diwali or something. I've eaten so much I might enter a food coma."

Another beat of silence.

Then—

"Interesting," he said slowly. "Because your live location says you're about ten minutes away from *Pushkar Enclave*, Satara."

My heart stopped mid-beat.

"What?"

"You left your phone unattended," he said flatly. "While you were pretending to do some deep existential thinking in the bathroom, I shared your location with myself. Just in case you pulled a Brinda."

I blinked. "You did *what*?"

He didn't even raise his voice. That was the scariest part.

"Don't act surprised. You've been humming with guilt since last night. I knew you were going to do something reckless the second you folded that T-shirt for the fourth time."

"Vihaan—"

"No," he snapped. "Don't 'Vihaan' me like I'm being dramatic. Dad told you to wait. I told you to wait. But you're so obsessed with doing this alone, you lied to everyone and just—*vanished*."

His voice cracked—just a little—but enough to make my throat tighten.

"Vihaan…" I tried again, softer this time. "I wasn't going to *do* anything. I just wanted to see him. Just see."

"I *know* you," he said sharply. "You don't just see. You confront. You dig. You throw logic out the window the second your heart starts sprinting."

I stayed silent because he wasn't wrong.

There was some rustling on the other end—movement, voices, something being zipped up—and then I heard Alya's unmistakable voice in the background.

"Tell her we're forty minutes behind her. Max."

Wait, we?

My eyes widened. "Vihaan, what do you mean we? What's happening?"

"I mean stay wherever you are," he said, every word clipped with restrained panic. "Find a crowded place. A café, a petrol pump, I don't care. Just do not go to that address alone."

"You're coming?" I whispered, not sure if I was relieved or panicking harder now.

"We're already halfway there," he said. "Alya's bullying our cab driver like she's auditioning for *Fast & Furious: Sibling Edition*. So if you love your kneecaps, Brinda, stay put. Don't move. Don't think. And for the love of God, don't knock on that man's door."

"But—"

"No buts!" he barked.

The call ended before I could answer.

I stared at the screen for a second, still breathing hard, then glanced outside the auto.

The highway stretched ahead, open and sun-baked. I was exactly seven minutes away from Vikas Pradhan's building.

I leaned forward. "Bhaiyya, stop at the next tea stall. I need a break."

The driver nodded.

And just like that, I was pulled over at a run-down tea stall. I knew before the door even opened: *they were here.*

Alya burst out first.

She didn't walk. She marched like a one-woman army on a mission to slap sense into civilians using nothing but sharp words and pure fury.

"Are. You. Kidding. Me."

That was her opener. No hello. No warm embrace. Just a statement delivered with the lethal precision of a final exam question designed to ruin your GPA and your will to live.

I opened my mouth.

"Nope," she snapped, raising a finger like a traffic cop. "You don't get to speak yet."

Vihaan followed behind her, less aggressive, more resigned like he'd accepted long ago that being my sibling meant having the emotional stamina of a Himalayan monk.

"Hi," I offered weakly.

Alya crossed her arms. "Brinda. What part of *'Do not go to that address alone'* did your brain interpret as *'sprint to Satara in a rickshaw and order bad tea like a spy in denial?"*

"It wasn't bad tea—okay, it was—but that's not the point," I muttered, avoiding both their eyes.

Vihaan pulled out the plastic chair opposite mine and dropped into it with a sigh. "We were halfway through our waffle breakfast when your location pinged from halfway across the state."

"You tracked me," I said, narrowing my eyes.

"You *lied*," he countered.

Touché.

Alya dropped into the chair beside him, shaking her head so dramatically I half expected her to break into a lecture titled *How to Be Reckless 101: Brinda's Autobiography.*

"Look," I said carefully, "I wasn't going to confront him. I just wanted to see him. Just look at the man who might've—"

My voice cracked before the sentence could finish. I hated that it did. Hated that the words refused to cooperate when I needed them the most.

Vihaan softened. "We know. That's why we came."

Alya's tone, too, dropped a note. "We're not mad that you care. We're mad that you think you have to do this alone."

Silence.

Silence.

And then, Alya leaned forward, her voice quieter now. "You're brave, Brin. But being brave doesn't mean charging into a burning building without checking for exits. It means knowing when to ask for help. *Let us help.*"

Alya leaned back and finally reached for my mug. One sip later, she made a face like she'd licked a battery. "Okay, this is vile."

"Told you," I said, laughing softly.

"Next time you want to run away dramatically," she muttered, "at least pick a café with decent coffee."

Vihaan grinned despite himself. "Or maybe just call us *before* we nearly hijack a cab from a suspiciously cheerful Ola driver."

"I'll consider it," I said.

We didn't speak much on the way.

The car ride to Pushkar Enclave was soaked in tension—the kind that hums just beneath your skin and makes every passing milestone feel like a countdown.

Alya sat beside me in the back seat, arms crossed so tightly it looked like she was holding herself back from launching into a full-blown lecture. Her jaw was clenched, eyes narrowed, tracking every street sign like they'd personally offended her. Vihaan sat in the front, one hand gripping the headrest,

occasionally glancing back at me through the rearview mirror. He didn't say a word, but the weight of his silence pressed against my chest harder than any scolding ever could.

The building was… normal.

Deceptively normal.

Cream-colored walls, a sleepy watchman dozing under a torn umbrella, a tiny elevator that sighed when we stepped in. Nothing about Pushkar Enclave screamed *key to a possible murder mystery*—but then again, most dangerous things don't advertise themselves.

When the elevator dinged at the second floor, I felt my heart thud once, twice, then spiral into full-blown gymnastics. My palms were sweaty. My thoughts, louder than ever.

Flat No. 203.
The door was plain, wooden, with a slightly crooked nameplate: *VIKAS PRADHAN*.

No dramatic lighting. No haunting music. Just a door.

Alya gave me a sideways glance. "You ready?"

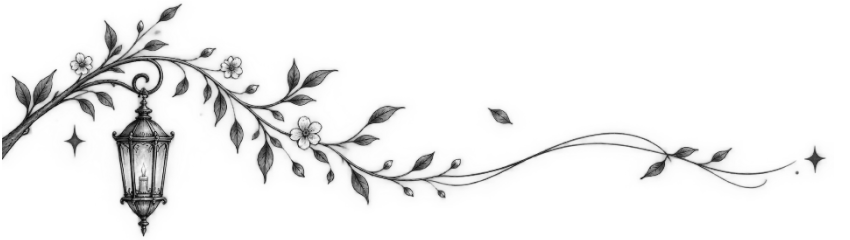
"No," I whispered.

"Perfect," she said, stepping aside. "Let's do it anyway."

I knocked.
Once.
Twice.

Footsteps approached. Light, unhurried. The door creaked open.

And there he was.



Eighteen

The door opened.

And standing there wasn't a stranger.

A living, breathing ghost from a part of my life I'd buried with my father's ashes.

He looked older than I remembered—leaner, lines etched deep into his face, hair flecked with more grey than black. But those eyes? I knew those eyes. Cunning. Calculating. And once upon a time… kind.

Vihaan stepped forward, cautious but calm.
"Hi, are you—"

I clutched his arm, as if anchoring myself to something half-remembered, half-dreamed. My breath faltered, caught in the hush between heartbeats. When I spoke, it was a whisper, fragile and frayed, like velvet worn thin by time.

"Ranvijay Uncle…?"

The man froze. Just for a second. But it was enough.

Then he blinked, eyes widening in recognition.
"Brinda beta… you?"

Vihaan turned sharply toward me, confusion erupting across his face.
"Wait, *what*?"

I took half a step back, pulse thundering in my ears. "Guys," I whispered, still staring at the man in front of us like he'd been pulled out of a nightmare. "This isn't Vikas Pradhan. This is… Ranvijay. My father's brother."

Before any of us could speak again, a woman's voice called out from deeper inside the flat.

"Vikas? Who is it?"

My spine straightened. *Vikas?*

Footsteps followed—soft, quick—and then she appeared in the doorway, holding a baby in her arms. For a moment, I forgot to breathe. She was stunning. Not in a flashy, magazine-cover way, but the kind that rooted you to the spot. Her beauty was graceful and grounded—almond-shaped eyes that held depth, high cheekbones, smooth, sun-kissed skin that glowed without trying. A soft pink kurta flowed around her like it belonged, simple yet elegant, and her dark hair was tied back in a loose bun, with strands falling perfectly around her face like they'd been placed there on purpose.

The baby stirred in her arms, his tiny hand clutching her shoulder, and she adjusted him with a gentle, practiced ease. She looked like she belonged in a painting—strong, serene, maternal. The kind of woman people trusted without needing a reason.

But the moment her eyes landed on me, everything changed.

Her eyes went wide. Her lips parted in shock.

Then, in a voice that sounded like disbelief had cracked straight through her chest, she breathed,
"Brinda… *you*?"

It was as if someone had ripped the floor out from under me.

I blinked at her, my mind scrambling to catch up.
"You… you know me?"

Ranvijay turned toward her sharply. "Avni, go inside."

But she didn't move. Her grip on the baby tightened as she stepped forward instead. "She's Raghav's daughter," she whispered. "You never said—you said it would never come to this—"

"Avni," he snapped, voice tight with panic. "Inside. *Now*."

Alya stepped closer to me, her voice quiet. "Brinda… who is she?"

"I don't know what she's doing here," I murmured, still locked in a silent stare with the woman. "That's his wife… I saw her in one of Dad's old photos. But I never knew they had a child."

Ranvijay rubbed his face once like he was trying to wipe away the truth, then reluctantly stepped aside and motioned us in.

A large photo frame hung above the television, and the moment I looked up, I stopped breathing.

It was beautiful—devastatingly so. The kind of photo that didn't just capture a moment, but held it hostage in time.

It was exquisite—almost unreal. Dad stood at the center, dignified in ivory, his smile caught between ease and something quieter, almost reverent. My mother stood beside him, draped in lilac silk, her hand resting lightly on my shoulder. And there I was—barely five—nestled between them, eyes tilted up toward him, wonder etched across my face like a brushstroke.

Ranvijay hovered just left of Raghav, his presence reserved, expression inscrutable. Their parents framed the scene like

pillars—his father solemn, his mother luminous in gold, her eyes distant, unreadable.

They looked untouched by grief. A family mid-breath, unaware of what would shatter.

And for a moment, I wanted to reach into the glass—to touch that stillness. To stay.

Avni disappeared into the next room with the baby, but her parting glance lingered like a scar.

Ranvijay shut the door with a soft click, then turned to face us. "Sit," he said. It wasn't a suggestion.

Alya and Vihaan followed me to the worn-out grey sofa. My fingers gripped the cushion's edge like it could anchor me.

Ranvijay stood for a long moment, then finally lowered himself into the single armchair across from us. The silence was louder than the ceiling fan groaning above.

"I'm going to ask once," I said, my voice tight. "Why did you lie about everything?"

He didn't flinch. "Because I had to."

"That's not good enough," Vihaan cut in, jaw tense. "We traced the car. The one Raghav uncle was last seen in. You were in it."

Ranvijay's expression faltered.

"You disappeared," Alya added. "No funeral. No call. Just vanished. And now we find you here, playing happy family under someone else's name."

I leaned forward, voice low and shaking. "You let us believe you lived abroad. That you were unreachable. Official records still say you're in Australia. But the truth is, you never left India, did you?"

He closed his eyes for a beat. Then, he spoke.

"No. I didn't. After Raghav died… I couldn't leave."

"You *never* left," I repeated, stunned. "You were living right here. In Satara. Hiding under a new name."

He gave a single nod. "Vikas Pradhan. That's the identity I took after—after everything fell apart."

"Why?" I snapped. "Why fake your own life?"

"Because I didn't feel safe," he said quietly. "And I didn't want *you* to feel unsafe either."

"What does that even mean?" Alya said sharply. "Are you saying someone threatened you?"

"I'm saying… Raghav's death wasn't an accident," Ranvijay muttered. "And I panicked. I ran. Because I was afraid I might be next."

"But you just said you didn't know what he was into," Vihaan snapped. "So what exactly were you scared of?"

"I didn't know everything," Ranvijay admitted, voice tight.

"But I knew enough to realize something was wrong," Ranvijay muttered, his voice quieter now. "The night he died, it wasn't him who was scared. It was me."

We all froze.

He looked at the floor like it held the rest of his crumbling courage. "I asked him to meet. I told him… I thought someone was watching me—following me. But things weren't adding up. My phone felt tapped. Someone had tried to get into my emails. I thought I was being paranoid until I found the break-in at my flat."

"You told Dad?" I asked, my voice flat.

"I begged him," he said, almost ashamed. "I told him to take security. I told him if something was happening to me, it could happen to him too."

"But he wasn't worried," Vihaan guessed bitterly.

Ranvijay nodded. "No. That was Raghav. Calm. Composed. He told me to breathe, that we'd look into it together. He even joked I'd been watching too many spy thrillers."

I swallowed hard. It sounded exactly like something my father would say.

"But I pushed him to be careful," Ranvijay continued, now trembling. "I told him not to go back to Mumbai alone that night. He promised me he'd be in touch the next day."

He looked up—and in his eyes, I saw something that cracked me open a little.

"He never called back," Ranvijay whispered.

A heavy silence followed, one that pressed against the walls of the small living room. The baby had fallen asleep in Avni's arms. Outside, the sky had begun to dim. But inside, it was already twilight.

I swallowed the tightness in my throat and sat up straight.

"Then tell me something else," I said, my voice quieter, more brittle. "Why weren't you ever in touch with us? Why didn't you even come to his funeral? Why did my mother pretend you didn't exist? Why did *he* never mention you again after I turned ten?"

Ranvijay exhaled shakily, rubbing his face like he was trying to erase the memories from it.

"Because I'd already destroyed everything," he said softly.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

He looked at me—really looked at me. Then he said, "Because of my mistakes. Horrible ones."

Alya shifted beside me, tense. Vihaan stared like he was already piecing something together.

I didn't blink. "What mistakes?"

Ranvijay paused. Then, like ripping off a bandage, he said, "I was a drug addict."

The words hung like a slap.

His voice turned hoarse. "Not just that. I got involved with the wrong people. Started peddling it. Small-time at first. But it grew. I was reckless. Self-destructive. And while Raghav was trying to build our family name in business… I was quietly tearing it down."

I didn't speak. Couldn't.

He continued, "Our fathers—yours and mine—were already public figures. Raghav was the one everyone trusted. And then there was me. The liability. The shame. No matter how much they tried to cover it up, rumors spread. My name, our surname… it started showing up where it shouldn't have."

He looked down, ashamed. "Raghav tried everything. He begged. He threatened. He even offered to send me abroad for rehab. But I didn't listen. I couldn't stop."

I could hear my own heartbeat pounding. This wasn't just a mistake. This was betrayal—of family, of legacy, of love.

"And then, when you were about ten…" he said, looking up at me again, voice barely a breath, "they tried to 'fix' me. Our families arranged my marriage."

My stomach twisted. "To whom?"

"Your mother's younger sister," he said. "My parents thought marrying me into the family, giving me some responsibility,

would straighten me out. They were desperate. Your mother didn't agree, but she didn't fight them either. And I… I said yes."

His eyes were bloodshot now, rimmed with something old and aching—a grief that had never fully settled.

"But I didn't love her," he murmured. "I loved Avni. I'd met her already. I wanted to be with her."

I stared at him, something tight and hot rising in my chest.

"Then why?" I asked, the words escaping before I could temper them. "Why agree to marry someone you didn't love?"

He looked at me, and for a moment, he seemed impossibly young—like the boy he must have been when it all began.

"Because I was already a burden," he said softly. "They were tired. Disappointed. I didn't want to start another fight. I thought… maybe if I just went along, maybe if I gave them this one thing, they'd stop looking at me like I'd already ruined everything."

"But I didn't have the spine to say no to the marriage. I got married. And within a year… I ruined her life too."

I covered my mouth.

"She left. I divorced her. And then I married Avni. That decision—choosing love after everything I'd already broken—was the final nail. My father disowned me. Your father stopped speaking to me. Your mother couldn't even say my name after that."

He looked at me. "They chose to erase me. From everything. I wasn't invited to functions, festivals, even when your grandfather passed. I had become the ghost they buried alive."

Tears pricked at my eyes, but I didn't let them fall.

"And then… you were gone," I whispered. "And we never knew why."

He gave a small nod. "I didn't blame them. I wouldn't have forgiven me either."

The baby stirred in Avni's arms, as if the air had shifted.

I sat back, completely drained.

"So when Dad died…" I said slowly, "you didn't just run from danger. You ran because you thought you had no one left to come back to."

His voice was barely a whisper. "I didn't think I deserved to."

Silence.

Avni stepped out from the hallway. She rocked the baby gently in her arms and looked straight at me. Then, with a voice so tender it made my chest ache, she said, "Let me get you all some water."

She disappeared into the kitchen. None of us spoke.

A few moments later, she returned with three glasses and placed them gently on the center table. Her fingers lingered for a second on the rim of the glass closest to me.

Then, her eyes met mine again—and they softened into something I wasn't ready for.

"Brinda," she said, her voice gentle and warm, "I missed you."

My breath caught.

"You were so small," she continued, a faint, nostalgic smile flickering across her face. "When I used to play with you… you had the chubbiest cheeks and the most dramatic tantrums if your toys weren't arranged alphabetically."

Alya blinked. Vihaan leaned forward slightly.

I stared at her, stunned. "Wait… you've met me before?"

Avni looked at Ranvijay, then back at me with a nod. "Many times. You probably don't remember. You were around four or five. Back when I used to tag along with Ranvijay and his friends. Just… friends, back then."

Before I could form a thought, Ranvijay broke in quietly.

"She's telling the truth," He said. "You knew her, Brinda. When you were little, Avni would come over with a few of our college friends. We'd play board games, eat street chaat, crash on the living room floor. You were always there—clinging to your father or sitting on my shoulders."

His voice thickened.

"We both… we both loved you so damn much."

Avni sat beside him now, her hand brushing his knee as she nodded silently.

"But then," he whispered, "everything got messed up."

My lips parted, but the words wouldn't come. A strange ache bloomed in my chest—not grief, not anger. Something older. Something abandoned.

I looked at Avni again, and for a second, I thought I saw tears forming in her eyes.

"How could I not remember you?" I said, my voice breaking a little.

Avni smiled softly. "You were a child. And then, just like that… I was gone from your world."

I looked down at the sleeping baby in her arms, and for the first time since we entered the flat, it truly hit me.

This wasn't just some fugitive hiding behind a fake name. This was a man with regrets too large to bury and a woman who had once played with me like a big sister.

This was family.

Broken, buried, complicated family.

And yet, I couldn't ignore the storm that still lingered. Because despite everything I had just heard, my father was still dead. And the answers were still incomplete.

Finally, I asked the question that had been scraping at the edges of my mind.

"How did Dad even agree to meet you that night?" I said, voice low. "After everything… after the distance… why would he?"

Ranvijay looked down at his hands—his knuckles white, fingers shaking slightly—as if just touching the memory scorched him.

"Because your father forgave me," he said softly. "Before I even deserved it."

"What do you mean?"

A heavy silence fell. For a few seconds, all I could hear was the slow, rhythmic breathing of the baby in Avni's arms.

Then, Ranvijay spoke.

"There was a time," he began, voice hollow, "when I was… gone. Not physically, but mentally. Spiraling. I had started peddling for quick money. Pills, weed… then harder stuff. One of the big suppliers I worked under—his name was Manik Das. Ruthless. Connected. The kind of man you don't say no to twice."

Alya's eyes widened. Vihaan shifted uncomfortably beside me.

"I was stupid," Ranvijay continued bitterly. "So damn stupid. I used to talk too much when I was high. I thought I was invincible. One night, I ended up oversharing—told Manik about my family. About Raghav. His business holdings. His contacts. I didn't mean harm… I just wanted to sound important. I didn't know that by trying to prove my worth, I was handing him a map."

A sick chill crawled up my spine.

"Raghav and your mother tried everything," he said, his voice cracking. "They put me in rehab. They got my parents involved. Hell, they even paid off one of the dealers once just to get me out. But I kept relapsing. And then… I crossed the line. I married your mother's sister, but I divorced her to be with Avni—who everyone thought was just a friend back then. That broke everything. They cut me off for good. And I… deserved it."

His eyes were wet now, but he didn't wipe them.

"Years later, when I was finally clean—when I got a job, when I tried to build something real with Avni—I got a call. Out of nowhere. It was Manik."

My chest tightened.

"He said he wanted to meet Raghav. Said there was a 'business opportunity' he was interested in. I told him to stay the hell away. I screamed at him. Told him I wasn't part of that life anymore, that Raghav would never deal with scum like him."

His fists clenched. "That's when he laughed. And he said… 'It's already too late. You think this is about you? You think I haven't already been given permission?'"

I blinked. "Permission? From whom?"

Ranvijay looked straight at me.

"He said, 'The betrayal won't come from me, Ranvijay. It'll come from someone Raghav trusts. Someone who already opened the first door.'"

My stomach turned. I felt Alya's fingers tighten around mine.

"He didn't say who?" Vihaan asked sharply.

Ranvijay shook his head. "No. Just hinted. Said it was already in motion."

"And then?" I asked. My voice was shaking. "You met Dad that night?"

"I panicked. I called Raghav. I told him everything. He said, 'Meet me.' That night. No phones. No calls. Just face to face."

"And?" I whispered.

He smiled—soft, sad, trembling. "We talked. For hours. We sat in the car. He listened. He didn't shout. He didn't accuse. He just… listened."

His voice cracked again. "And then he said, 'I knew you'd come back.' He hugged me, Brinda. Properly. Not that side-pat, awkward-bro thing. A real hug. The kind that says *I see you. And I still love you.*"

A tear rolled down my cheek, but I didn't wipe it.

"That was the first and last time we hugged like that in years," he whispered. "And… now I wonder if he already knew. If he felt something coming."

None of us spoke.

Because there were no words that could cover the weight of what we'd just heard.

Raghav had forgiven him. Given him grace when the world turned away.

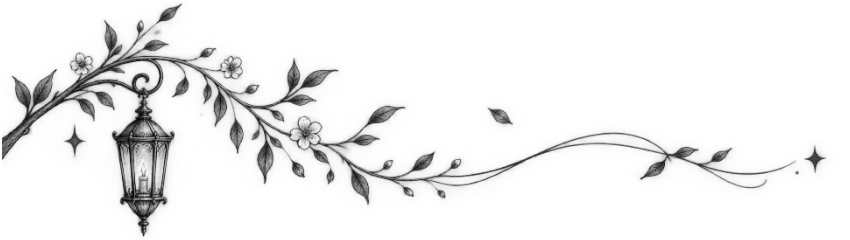
And now he was gone.

And we were left with this terrible, unfinished story.

But one thing was clear now.

Someone close to Dad—someone trusted—had helped open the door.

And we were finally close enough to knock on it.



Nineteen

They don't teach you this in law school:
The truth doesn't wait for office hours.
It shows up while you're eating soggy canteen idlis, clutching a highlighter like it's a weapon, and trying not to cry over Article 21.

Mine arrived disguised as a crumpled petrol receipt.

Leave it to my life to turn into a legal thriller with bad lighting and no intermission.

Enter: Ranvijay Mishra.

My father's estranged brother.

The man whose existence I'd mentally archived under "Too Complicated to Unpack" and shoved into a dark corner of my mind, beside failed math exams and the trauma of open mic poetry night.

He vanished the exact week we started digging into my father's death. No call. No message. Not even a passive-aggressive thumbs-up to acknowledge he'd seen Vihaan's 237 missed calls. It was as if I'd suddenly developed the emotional visibility of a traffic cone.

Then, just yesterday—while the Pune sky dipped into that amber haze that makes everything feel heavier than it should—he walked into ACP Rajan Singh's office.

Did he come to confess, to warn, or just to unburden? I couldn't tell. But guilt hung off him like a second skin.

Just him. Taller than I remembered. Thinner too, like he'd been living off guilt and second-hand air. He wore a blazer two seasons too old and one size too big, as though his body had shrunk around secrets he couldn't carry anymore. His face? Worn out. Not in the way age wears you down, but in the way silence does.

I was sitting between Alya and Vihaan, spine stiff against the couch, pretending the cold plastic water bottle in my hands was enough to keep me from combusting. The overhead fan let out a groan of protest, as if it too resented being part of this scene. The air smelled like bleach, paper, and something unspoken waiting to burst.

Ranvijay didn't take a seat.

Because sitting implies intention. Commitment. A willingness to stay. And he didn't come here to stay.

He moved to the center of the room, deliberate and slow, then reached inside his coat—fingers hesitant, like even he wasn't sure if he should go through with it.

It wasn't big enough to look threatening but the kind of small thing that ruins sleep, shatters alibis, and kicks open locked doors in your memory.
It wasn't a photo.
Not a weapon.
Not a diary scrawled with confessions or apologies written too late.

It was a receipt.
A thin, curling strip of thermal paper, faded at the edges like it had survived more than just a glove compartment.

Ranvijay placed it on Rajan's desk like he was unloading something heavier than guilt.

Rajan, whose temperament had all the warmth of a courtroom bench, leaned forward and picked it up with two fingers like it might stain. His eyes moved across the print slowly, methodically, as though each digit could detonate.

"Bharat Petroleum," he muttered. "Full tank. ₹3,920."

He turned it toward us.

The timestamp did it.

11:26 PM.
The night before my father died.

Something uncoiled inside me. Not panic, something colder. Slower. Like a tide of ice crawling up from the base of my spine, curling around my ribs, whispering: *This isn't just a number.*

Ranvijay's voice came next, low and distant, like he was narrating someone else's mistake.

"Raghav told me they needed to look like they were going far," he said. "I didn't ask what that meant."

Didn't ask?

I wanted to scream.
I wanted to lunge across the room, grab him by the collar, and demand, *why? Why didn't you ask? Why didn't you stop him?*

But I didn't.

Because the only thing louder than my fury… was my fear of what he might say.

Rajan stood abruptly, his chair scraping back with a sound that felt like a verdict.

"We're pulling CCTV from that pump. Vihaan, with me."

"I'm coming too," I said, already halfway out of my seat.

"No." Rajan didn't raise his voice, but the sharpness in it clipped me like a door slammed in my face. "You'll know what you need to know."

Which, translated from Adult Male Cop to Normal Human, meant: *Relax, Sherlock Junior. This is where the big leagues take over. Go grab popcorn while the experts sift through the mess.*

So I waited.

For *eight* godforsaken hours.

Or, as I now remember them: one sleepless night, two anxiety spirals, and a breakfast so full of caffeine it could've fueled a spaceship.

When we finally reached the back office of the Bharat Petroleum pump, it was barely 7 AM, and the air smelled like mildew, engine oil, and old betrayal. The AC wheezed in the corner like it had tuberculosis, and the only chair I could find creaked every time I shifted.

Then the monitor blinked on.

Blurry. Grayscale. Time ticking at the bottom corner like a countdown to something I wasn't ready for.

11:34 PM.

"There," Rajan said, his finger tapping the edge of the monitor. "That's Raghav's car."

I leaned forward, breath stalled somewhere in my throat, my eyes narrowing as the grainy footage flickered on the screen. The hum of the CCTV room faded into nothing, replaced by a

thundering silence inside me—thick and suffocating, as though even my heartbeat had paused to listen.

And then he appeared.

My father.

Not as I remembered him in dreams, softened by time and grief. Not as a smile frozen in a photograph, or a voice preserved in the echo of old voicemails. No—this was different. This was real. Immediate. He stepped out of the white sedan, captured in the dispassionate frame of a security camera. There was no hesitation in his stride, no tension in his shoulders. He moved with the ease of a man going about an ordinary evening—routine, casual, unaware that history was watching him. He reached into his wallet, handed over cash to the attendant, and stood there as if time hadn't already decided to run out on him. He checked his watch. He waited.

And I watched.

Every muscle in my body locked in place as the footage played. It wasn't the moment of seeing him that shattered me; it was the mundanity of it all. The heartbreaking normalcy. He looked like someone who had plans for the rest of the night. Like someone who believed he'd make it home.

Then something in me gave way.

Not loudly, not dramatically. There were no sobs. No hands flying to cover my mouth. No whispered cries of disbelief. Just the quiet collapse that comes when the weight of everything you've carried finally slips through your grip. The tears began before I even felt them—soundless and steady, slipping down my cheeks in defiance of the numbness I'd clung to for weeks. They weren't gentle, or cathartic. They were cruel in their simplicity. The kind of tears that didn't ask to be seen. The kind that arrived when you'd been strong for too long.

And still, I didn't look away.

I couldn't. Because for those few seconds, he was here. Breathing. Existing. Moving through the world like nothing was about to end. And I—I was his daughter, sitting in a sterile room years later, watching a man who didn't yet know that this was the last ordinary thing he'd ever do.

The tears slid down my face—slow, hot, and sharp, like they'd been waiting too long to fall. My hands stayed clenched in my lap, trembling from the sheer effort of holding everything in.

Alya didn't notice; her eyes were still fixed on the screen. Rajan didn't look. He was already fast-forwarding through my father's final moments. Even the fly buzzing by the monitor had somewhere else to be.

But Vihaan noticed.

He didn't turn. Didn't speak. Just reached across the table and slid a tissue toward me—quiet, simple, sure.

And in that moment, I could've wrapped my arms around him in silent thanks, if only they hadn't gone numb. If only my heart didn't feel like it was cracking open for the second time, this time under fluorescent lights and CCTV.

Then it happened.

A scooter drifted in from the far-right corner—slow, too slow. Like it didn't belong. Like it had been told to stay out of frame but couldn't help slipping in.

Two riders. Both wearing helmets. Both swallowed by oversized hoodies.

One had a skull on the back—cracked, faded, more tired than terrifying. Like even death had grown quiet.

And something about them felt… wrong. Not rushed. Not curious. Just watching. Waiting.

"Zoom in," Vihaan said. His voice had shifted—cool, precise, stripped of all emotion.

Rajan leaned forward and adjusted the feed without hesitation.

The footage sharpened, and what came into view sent a shiver through the room.

The scooter had no number plate. Not covered. Not dirty. Just… missing. As if it had been intentionally removed—carefully, deliberately, by someone who knew exactly what they were doing.

Our bodies leaned toward the screen at the same time, breath caught mid-throat. Every heart in the room seemed to beat louder.

The pillion rider reached into his pocket.

Something slipped from his hand—small, silent, barely noticeable at first.
It landed on the concrete with the faintest clack, catching a sliver of light as it rolled slightly before coming to a stop.

At first, it looked harmless. Just a phone. The kind people drop hundred times a day without thinking twice. Nothing suspicious, nothing dramatic.

But then, almost like the truth unraveling itself frame by frame, another object slid free—more deliberate, more damning.
It glinted under the security light, rectangular and sleek, the kind of thing that should've stayed tucked safely inside a wallet or behind a locked drawer.

Rajan leaned closer, his fingers tightening on the mouse as he zoomed in again.

And in that moment, I felt something shift inside me.
Like air being sucked out of the room.
Like gravity tilting sideways.

It was an ID card.

I didn't need to see the name.
I already knew.

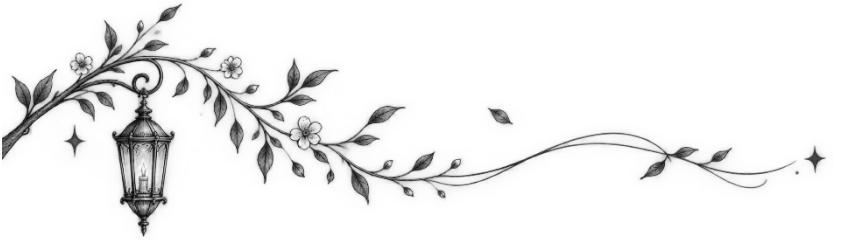
Because recognition doesn't always happen in words.

There it lay, just behind the rear tire. Its edges glinting under the harsh glare of the petrol pump. Part of it was swallowed in shadow, but the rest…

The name was smudged, impossible to read.

But the maroon stripe running vertically along the left side stood out stark and clear.

Ravenswood Law College



Twenty

The phone kept ringing. And for a second, I just stared at it like it wasn't mine. Like the name flashing on the screen—Maa—was a stranger I'd forgotten how to answer to.

My body was frozen in that terrifying in-between space: too shocked to function, too awake to faint. I wasn't even blinking. I just sat there.

"Don't pick it up," Alya said softly. Her voice didn't raise—it didn't need to. It was the kind of calm that held authority, the kind you use on a glass about to fall off a shelf. She reached toward me like she could catch me mid-crack.
"You're not in the space to talk to her, Brin. Let Vihaan handle it. Tell her you're in a lecture."

Vihaan nodded, already moving to take the phone from my hand. Like damage control was second nature to him. Maybe I would've let him. Maybe I should have. Because there was a part of me—okay, a lot of me—that didn't want to hear Maa's voice. Not when I had so many pieces of myself scattered all around me, and no map to pick them back up.

But then…
Then I heard her.

From the kitchen, from the car, from Sunday mornings when she was trying to oil my hair while I squirmed.

The version of her who still made tea in my father's favorite cup.
The Maa who would wait for me to come home before she started eating, even when I was late, even when she was starving.

I knew if I didn't answer now, I'd have to lie to her later. And I couldn't. Not tonight. Not to her. So I whispered, "No… I'll do it," and stood. I barely registered the way Alya's hand slipped away from mine or how Vihaan stepped back silently, letting me go without a word. My legs moved without permission. My mind dragged behind.

I stepped out of the dorm room like I was stepping off a ledge. The air outside felt different—too sharp. Too still. It was that eerie, sterile silence only college corridors could pull off at night, when the world pretended to sleep but your mind didn't get the memo.

I didn't even realize my hand had already hit the green button.

The phone was already at my ear.

And before I could find the right version of my voice to answer with, I heard hers.

"Brinda beta, guess what?" she said, her tone laced with the kind of excitement that only mothers manage without running out of breath.

"Ayaan won the pickleball competition! Can you believe it? Your brother actually *won*. Gold medal and everything!"

My lips parted—maybe to smile, maybe to speak. But nothing came out. The silence on my end didn't matter, though. Maa had already launched into full storytelling mode.

"Uff, you should've seen him! He was so full of drama, pointing to the sky like those cricketers do after hitting a six. And when the principal handed him the medal, he gave a speech, Brinda. A full *speech.* About 'family support' and 'inner strength.' Arre, I was so embarrassed, but also so proud… I cried, beta. I actually cried."

I pressed the back of my hand against my eyes, hard.

Not because of the medal.
Not because of the speech.
But because I couldn't tell her what had just shattered inside me twenty minutes ago.
Because right now, all I had was a front-row seat to joy I couldn't afford to feel.

"That's… amazing, Maa," I managed, my voice a pitch too high, too tight. "Ayaan really pulled it off, huh?"

"I told you na, he's just like Papa," she chuckled. "That same stubborn streak. If he wants something, he'll drag the sun down for it."

I laughed—at least, the sound I made was meant to be one. It cracked halfway out.

"And what about you?" she asked, suddenly quieter. "Where are you, Brin? Everything okay? You sound… tired."

I turned my face away from the corridor wall, away from where I knew our dorm room door stood slightly ajar. Even the stillness felt like it was listening.

"Yeah," I said quickly. "Yeah, I'm good. Just… just stepped out of a lecture. Professor Mehra was going on and on about

precedent and stare decisis. My brain melted somewhere around tort law."

"Hmm," she said, suspicious but sweet. "That means you're learning something, at least."

"Learning to survive," I whispered.

"What, beta?"

I cleared my throat. "Nothing. Just said I'm starving."

"Oh ho. You want me to send something? Tell me, I'll call Swiggy from here."

I laughed again, softer this time. "No, no, it's okay. Alya and I will grab something."

"Okay, fine. But don't skip meals, haan? You already vanish like smoke these days. I don't want to be able to blow you away the next time you come home."

The ache in my chest pulsed like a bruise.
I wouldn't tell her that something *had* blown me away tonight.

"Promise," I said, lying through my teeth and tears.

"So… Alya?"

"She's good."

"Good? That's it?"

I smiled faintly. "She saves me from starving. Yells at me to eat. Even drags me out of the room."

Maa chuckled. "Haan, haan. She's the sensible one. You're the hurricane."

I sighed. "Thanks for the compliment."

"It's true. She already sounds like family."

"She is," I whispered.

Then, with a sudden shift in tone, "Now… Vihaan?"

My stomach tightened. "What about him?"

"Oh, come on. His name shows up and suddenly you sound like you swallowed a dictionary."

"He's Alya's brother," I muttered.

"Ah yes, the famous disclaimer," Maa said dryly. "You repeat it so often, I feel like it should be printed on his ID card."

"Maa, please."

She laughed.

I pressed my palm to my face. "You're imagining things."

"I don't imagine. I observe. I'm a mother, not a novelist," she quipped.

"Maa…"

"Tell me," she continued, relentless, "does he at least carry your books?"

"Sometimes."

"Oh? Very gallant. Next thing I'll hear he's holding umbrellas for you, writing your assignments, singing love songs under your balcony—" I chuckled bashfully.

"You see?" she said smugly. "Even your laughter agrees with me."

I rolled my eyes, though she couldn't see it. "Or maybe I'm just laughing at how ridiculous you sound."

"Ridiculous? Please. I'm the voice of reason in this family," she declared. Then, after a pause, her tone softened. "You know… your dad would've been so proud of you, Brin."

The words landed like a stone in my chest.

I went quiet, staring at the floor tiles as my throat closed up.

"He would've loved hearing you talk about your classes," she went on gently. "Law, justice, all that fire in you… it's him all over again."

"Maa…" My voice was barely a whisper.

"And Alya, Vihaan—your little circle here," she added, smiling through her words, "he'd have teased you just as much as I do. Probably worse. He was shameless like that."

A shaky laugh escaped me. "Great. Double the embarrassment."

"Yes," she said, warmth and ache tangled together. "But also double the pride. He'd be bragging to every person he met—'That's my daughter."

"I love you, Brinda."

And just like that—
Just like that, everything inside me caved.

But I didn't let it show.

"I love you too," I whispered, letting the tear fall silently down my cheek, tracing a path the truth couldn't follow.

Then I hung up.

The screen went black.
And I stood there, phone pressed to my heart like it could stitch something back together.

The corridor stayed silent—too silent—for someone who had just spoken to her mother.

How could he?

The phone was still warm in my hand, but my body wasn't. I felt hollow, stretched thin like a paper lantern lit from the inside.
And then memory dragged me back.

One moment I was fine. The next, my chest seized like it had been clamped shut. I gasped, but nothing worked—air was everywhere, yet I couldn't reach it. My hands shook, nails digging into my skin. My heart thundered so loud it felt like it would split me open.

Maa wasn't there.
It was Papa who found me.

The sound of his shoes pounding against the floor, the door flung open, and then he was on his knees beside me, his briefcase abandoned, files flying.
"Brin? Brin!" His voice cracked. "What's happening—what's wrong? Talk to me, beta!"

I tried. Nothing came out. Just a strangled sound, my throat locked tight.
Tears blurred everything, my body trembling like it didn't belong to me.

He cupped my face with shaking hands.
"Breathe, sweetheart. Look at me—look at Papa." His voice was breaking, but he forced it steady. "Inhale, exhale. Come on, with me. Like this. Hoo… haa…"

He exaggerated every breath, desperate, eyes darting over me like he could fix me if he just looked hard enough.

"Papa…" I rasped, barely a sound. My lips quivered around the word.

"Yes! Yes, I'm here." His thumb stroked clumsily against my wet cheek. "Nothing's going to happen to you, Brinda. Not while I'm here. You're safe. You hear me? Safe."

I was shaking so violently he pulled me against his chest, arms wrapping around me like a shield. I could feel his heart hammering almost as fast as mine.
"Please, beta… just breathe. Please." His whisper cracked at the edges, raw and terrified.

Little by little, the storm inside me broke apart. The air returned, ragged but real. My fists unclenched. The trembling dulled.

But Papa didn't let go. He kept rocking me, murmuring nonsense—"My brave girl… I've got you… you're okay now… shhh, you're okay."

And when I finally dared to lift my head, I saw it. His eyes, glassy with tears. His jaw tight, his breath uneven.

That look—helpless, almost broken—burned itself into me. Because in that moment I realized something terrifying: my father wasn't invincible.
And the thought of being the reason he looked that way… hurt worse than the attack itself.

But that wasn't the only time.
It happened again. And again.

There were nights I would curl into myself, the walls closing in, my chest locking without warning. Maa tried—her hands smoothing my hair, her voice desperate but uneven. Dadi whispered prayers, pressing her palm against my forehead as if faith could loosen my lungs.
But nothing worked.

Only Papa.
Only his arms around me, his voice anchoring me, his breath teaching mine how to survive.
He was the only one who could pull me back.

And then, years passed. The storms faded. The episodes stopped visiting. Slowly, I believed maybe I had outgrown them. Maybe I had left that fragile, trembling version of myself behind.

Until now.

I didn't even notice it at first. Not until the silence around me thickened, swallowing my breaths whole.

My heart began to slam against my ribs in that old, terrifying rhythm.

My throat tightened, my fingers going numb around the phone still clutched to my chest.

No. No, not here. Not again.

My body folded in on itself, like it had learned this choreography years ago. My chest heaved, but the air wouldn't come.

Hot tears blurred my vision, spilling too fast for me to wipe away. I hated them. I hated how loud they felt in the silence. My hand shook as I pressed it against my mouth, trying to choke down the sobs before they escaped.

But my body betrayed me too.

I dug my nails into my arm, desperate for some anchor, some pain that made sense. The sting grounded me for a second, then slipped away, swallowed by the storm pounding inside me. My skin burned where I clawed it, half-moons of red rising under my fingertips.

"I can't—" My voice cracked, useless. "I can't—"

My knees buckled, hitting the cold floor with a thud that rattled up my bones. I curled forward, arms wrapped tight around myself as though squeezing hard enough could force my lungs open.

All I could do was cry. Cry and press my nails deeper into my skin. Cry and beg my body to remember how to breathe.

They were still there.

They heard the entire conversation.
I could feel them behind me, their presence heavy in the small room, every breath of mine ricocheting against the walls straight into their silence.

They had heard it all.
Every choked sob, every broken *"I can't,"* every sound that made me feel nine years old again.

"I want Papa—"

The words ripped out of me, ugly and shaking.

"Brinda!"

I didn't even register their footsteps until Vihaan was already in front of me. His hands caught mine, firm but careful, prying them away from the angry red marks I was digging into my arm. His voice cut through the static in my head, low and steady, like an anchor.

"Hey, hey, look at me. You're okay. Just—breathe. In, out. Come on, Brin. I'm right here."

His eyes locked on mine, refusing to let me sink. My chest heaved, but the words slipped past my lips anyway, broken and childlike. "I—I can't—Vihaan—"

"You can," he said quickly, squeezing my trembling hands. "You're stronger than this. Just don't cry, okay? You don't need to cry. Breathe with me, Brin. In–out. Just like that."

Then Alya was there, her arms wrapping around my shoulders from the side, warm and grounding. "Brin, listen to him. It's okay. We've got you. You don't have to fight it alone." Her

cheek pressed against my temple, and she whispered, "You're safe. Just let it out with us, not against yourself."

I was shaking between them—Vihaan steadying my hands, Alya's embrace pulling me closer, both of them refusing to let me fall apart alone.

"Brinda, hey—look at me. Just breathe, okay? In, out. Slow. You're safe." His voice was steady, almost pleading, like he was holding his own breath until mine came back.

I blinked, tears blurring my vision, and through the blur I saw Ranvijay step closer.

"Don't hurt yourself, beta," he said softly, crouching down beside Vihaan. His hand hovered near mine, hesitant, as though he wasn't sure he had the right. "You'll only make it worse. Look at me… please. Just try."

I wanted to speak. God, I wanted to *say* something.

"P-Phone…" I croaked, shaking my head, trying again as Vihaan leaned closer. "V…Vihaan… my phone."

He frowned, confused, but didn't hesitate. "Where, Brin?"

I forced my trembling hand up, pressing the phone into his palm. My nails had left tiny half-moons on its glass surface. "Dad… contact. Play… the recording."

Vihaan's brows knit, but he unlocked it with careful hands, scrolling fast. "Got it. Is it… this one?"

I could only nod, pressing my fist against my mouth to keep from shattering completely.

Then his voice filled the air.

My father's voice.

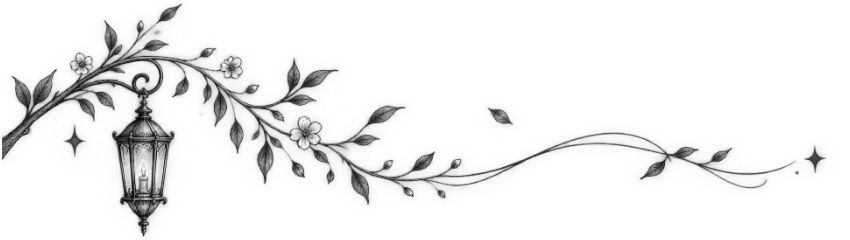
"Brin, my star. First position—in the eleventh class, ha! I knew it. Didn't I tell you? Now I finally have a reason to tease

Sharma ji next door properly. You've outshined everyone, just like I always believed you would. You have no idea what it feels like, beta… watching you prove yourself again and again. It's the kind of pride that makes my chest feel too small for my heart. Don't you ever forget, okay? I love you more than anything."

The room tilted. My ribs cracked open. And for the first time since he died, I *let myself hear him again.*

The tears slowed, then stopped, like his voice had found a way to reach into the storm and switch it off.

For the first time that night, I could breathe again.



Twenty One

Gaurav Bhatia. My father's closest friend. The man who had stood beside us at the funeral, his hand on my mother's shoulder, telling her how much Raghav meant to him. The man I had trusted. The man my father had trusted. How could he?

In my head, I could hear nothing else—just the relentless, accusing echo of a question I didn't want to ask: How could he do this to Papa? How could he look me in the eye and lie?

My chest felt like it was being crushed, each breath sharp and shallow. It was too much.

I had imagined this confrontation a thousand times, rehearsed it in my head until every word, every pause, every tear was perfectly timed. I thought I'd feel sadness. Maybe even a flicker of hope that I was wrong.

That somehow, impossibly, I was overreacting. But now, looking at Gaurav, none of that existed.

Now he stood there like a stranger. A stranger in a familiar face. Every word he spoke slid across my ears like poison, sweetened just enough to trick me into believing it was harmless.

My mind screamed, louder than I thought I could bear: *You were there. You knew. Maybe you even pulled the strings that killed him.*

I never thought walls could suffocate. But that office—Rajan Uncle's office—was pressing in on me with every second.

Across the table sat Gaurav. Professor. Mentor. My father's "brother." His suit immaculate, his voice smooth.

"You called me here for this… drama?" Gaurav's sneer was sharp. "Brinda, you've been poisoned with lies. Your father's death… it was an accident. Nothing more."

I stared at him, but my eyes kept flicking to the laptop. The petrol pump footage. My father's car. A bike trailing behind. Him. Gaurav.

I swallowed hard. "You followed him." My voice was tight. Trembling.

Gaurav's face twitched. Almost human. Then back to calm. "I… don't know what you're talking about. Grainy images. Shadows. You can't be sure."

I slammed the laptop shut. "Don't insult me. Every toast. Every comforting gesture. Every smile. Every lie. You perfected it. Don't deny it now."

Alya stepped forward, arms crossed. "And your faculty ID, left at the petrol pump. Coincidence?"

He blinked. Jaw tightening. "I… I was there. But not… following him. I just—happened to be there."

I laughed bitterly. "Happened to be there? That's your excuse?"

Tears blurred my vision. Hot, sharp. My chest heaving. "I always trusted you. I leaned on you. My second father… my

mentor… my strength. And you… you shattered it. You used that trust. That love… against us."

Alya's hand found mine. Firm. Quiet.

Vihaan's laugh was sharp, bitter.

"Happened to be there? On a bike? Trailing Papa's car with another man? You're joking, right?"

I whispered, voice cracking, "He stood beside us at the funeral. He held my mother's hand… while knowing…"

Gaurav's eyes darted. "I—Brinda, stop. I never wanted—"

"You never wanted?" I cut him off, venom in my words. "You wiped her tears. Called yourself his closest friend. And all along… you were—"

"Following him? Watching him? You think I wanted this?!" His voice rose, cracking.

"Yes!" I shrieked. "Exactly that!"

Ranvijay's expression shifted, almost amused. "Then let's make it simple." He gestured to the laptop. "The footage. Watch. Think again."

Gaurav stiffened. "I… I don't need—"

"Watch." Ranvijay's voice was calm. Deadly calm.

The screen flickered. The petrol pump. The car. The bike. The figure behind it. Gaurav. His hand on the throttle. Leaning. Watching. Waiting.

Gaurav froze.

"You—this… this isn't…" His voice shook.

"Isn't what?" I asked. Soft now. Sharp. Controlled. "Isn't murder? Isn't betrayal? Isn't *why Papa's gone*?"

"I—I didn't… I never meant—"

"You never meant?" I echoed. "You chose to be there. You chose to follow him. You chose to watch. And when it happened… you chose silence."

"Brinda…" He whispered, broken. "I didn't kill him. I didn't"

I leaned forward. Eyes locked. "Then explain this."

I gestured to the screen.

His breath caught. "I… I—"

I cut him off, quiet but cutting. "Yes. You. Were. There."

Gaurav's throat tightened. "…I didn't know it would happen. I was manipulated."

"Manipulated?" I repeated, disbelief cutting through every word. "By whom? Who could turn my father's friend into a murderer?"

"It… it was your aunt. Your mother's sister."

I froze. "…What?"

"Yes. She wanted him gone. She wanted your father out of the way for money. And… she wanted revenge on Ranvijay."

"Revenge?" My voice trembled. "Why? Ranvijay… he's my father's brother."

"She married him for love—or at least she thought she did," he began, voice low, almost pleading.

"But Ranvijay… he left her. Divorced her. She never forgave him. She blamed him for every humiliation, every slight she endured. And Raghav… he had wealth, respect, everything she craved. He even used his money and influence to suppress the scandal surrounding Ranvijay's divorce, to protect him from public disgrace. But all of that—every ounce of protection,

every favor—fell back on her. The whispers, the judgment, the blame… it was all hers to bear. And she hated him for it."

My stomach twisted. "You're saying… she wanted Dad dead?" I hissed.

"Yes," he said, voice cracking. "She wanted everything. His money, his influence, his life. And she knew I could help her. She manipulated me, Brinda. She promised wealth, power, control… everything she knew I wanted. And I… I let myself be swayed. I thought I could manage it. I thought I could control it."

I laughed bitterly, hot tears brimming. "You thought? You thought while my father—while my family—trusted you? You weren't controlling anything, Gaurav. You were a pawn. You *were* the weapon she used."

Gaurav flinched but nodded. "Yes. I was her pawn. She said if I didn't follow her plan, I'd lose everything—my career, my reputation, my family. I wanted to survive. I wanted to protect myself. And she… she knew how to make me comply."

I could feel the rage coiling in my chest, tightening every muscle. "And my father?" My voice was trembling, yet every word cut sharp. "He trusted you. He called you his brother. And you… you let *him* die?"

I pressed my hands to my face, hot tears burning. Every betrayal cut deeper than I could have imagined. My own blood—my aunt, my father's friend—had conspired in shadows while we mourned in daylight.

Vihaan slammed his hand against the table, breaking the heavy silence. "No choice? You followed him that night, and he died! And then you—with your hand on his coffin—acted like a friend?"

WHAT JUST HAPPENED?

I could barely breathe. I could barely think. The truth was heavier than grief.

And I realized then: the anger wasn't enough. Justice wouldn't just fall into our laps. The truth needed to be exposed, untangled, wielded carefully. Because if we didn't act, this web of lies would continue consuming the living, and I would make sure it never touched anyone else.

Gaurav sank lower into his chair, his hands trembling on the table. His eyes, once sharp and confident, now shimmered with a desperate vulnerability.

"Brinda… please," he whispered, voice raw. "I… I know I don't deserve this. I know I've destroyed everything you trusted me with… everything your father trusted me with. But… I beg you—please, don't hate me completely. I… I'm sorry. From the bottom of my soul, I am sorry."

Part of me wanted to scream, to strike, to make him feel even a fraction of the torment he'd caused. But another, quieter part—the part that had once looked up to him as a guiding star—heard the plea beneath the guilt and the fear.

"You expect me to forgive you?" I croaked, my voice barely above a whisper. "After everything? After my father… after all of this?"

"Yes," he said, voice breaking, almost pleading. "I don't… I don't deserve it, but I… I need you to hear it. I am sorry, Brinda. I failed him, I failed you… I failed myself. I… I can't undo it, but I can… I can live with the shame if you can find it in your heart to forgive me someday."

So easy for them to say "sorry"—first Ranvijay, and now him. Does he truly believe a single word can undo the devastation he's caused? After he stole my world, the reason behind my smiles, my happiness, the very breath I lived for—my father, the one I loved more than life itself—he dares to offer me a mere sorry?

Does he not see that nothing could ever bring back the man who was my world, whose absence I will feel with every waking breath I take?

Alya's eyes narrowed, her voice growing sharper, more relentless. "Brinda, don't let him charm you with his excuses. Every word, every tear he sheds now doesn't change what he did. You think saying 'sorry' makes it okay? It doesn't. Not even a little."

She stepped closer, her gaze locking on Gaurav with unflinching fury. "You think you can walk away after destroying a life, a family, a father? No. You will be held accountable. The law will make sure of it. Every lie you told, every move you made in the shadows, it will come back to haunt you. You won't escape this, not ever."

"Brinda, I know how much this hurts. I know the betrayal runs deep. But we're not letting him get away with it. You don't have to carry this alone. Justice will come, and he will pay—for your father, for your family, for everything he tried to steal from you."

She reached out, gripping my shoulder gently, grounding me. "We'll make sure he faces it. We'll make sure he can't hide behind his lies anymore."

Her conviction, her unwavering loyalty, wrapped around me like a shield.

The man who had once been my mentor, my second father, my strength… would no longer be untouchable. Not now. Not ever.

The room went quiet as if the air itself had been summoned to bear witness. Gaurav's shoulders folded in on themselves; the arrogance that had sat so comfortably on him all these years dissolved into something ragged and small. For a long second, he looked less like my father's friend and more like a man who had been stripped off of every lie.

His voice came out low, shaking. "We didn't just stand by. We paid. We bribed. We made sure it looked like an accident."

The words hit me like a slap. Paid. Bribed. Accident. The truth was spilling out, ugly and raw. My father's death had not been fate. It had been purchased.

Rajan's tone was sharp. "Who?"

Gaurav's lips trembled. He shut his eyes for a second, as if searching for courage he no longer owned.

Then he spoke. "A mechanic. Naveen. A small garage on Kalyani Road. He was the one who touched the brakes. And there was money to keep the police quiet. Envelopes. Transfers. We funneled it all through a company called Kunal Traders."

The name sat between us like a stone.

Alya's voice cut in, cold and precise. "How much?"

Gaurav exhaled. "Fifty here. Seventy there. Cash for the station inspector. Larger transfers through the traders. It was all arranged to blur the truth."

My chest felt tight. He wasn't confessing to a mistake. He was confessing to a system. A chain of greed that ended with my father in a coffin.

We left Rajan's office that evening with a single destination. Naveen.

We didn't find Naveen at the garage. The place was empty, save for the smell of grease and the ghosts of unfinished work. Tools lay scattered on a bench, oil stains bloomed on the concrete floor, but there was no sign of the man who had tampered with my father's car.

That was when Vihaan turned to Ranvijay. His voice was calm, too calm. *"Call him. Now."*

My uncle hesitated, shifting from one foot to the other, sweat pearling at his temple. He tried stalling, tried playing innocent. But Vihaan's gaze pinned him down like a needle to glass. Finally, with hands that trembled more than he probably realized, Ranvijay pulled out his phone.

The call was short, tense. Ranvijay spun a story about needing to meet for "urgent work." Naveen's voice crackled through the speaker, sharp and defensive. *"Not now. It's too risky. I can't."* He tried to hang up.

Vihaan snatched the phone from Ranvijay's grip before he could protest. His tone was sharper, firmer. *"Listen carefully, Naveen. Either you show up, or we'll come to you. And trust me—you don't want that."*

There was silence, long enough for my pulse to drum in my ears. Then a sharp, frustrated bark from the phone: *"No. I'm not coming. Not anywhere. Don't call me again."* And with that, the line went dead.

Ranvijay's fingers trembled on the phone. He opened his mouth to speak, to argue, but Vihaan's glare silenced him instantly.

ACP Rajan didn't flinch. Calmly, he tapped a few buttons on his own device. A moment later, his expression shifted—alert, focused. *"Got it,"* he said. *"He's somewhere north of town. His phone is pinging GPS. He can't hide from us now."*

I felt a flicker of relief, quickly replaced by tension. Naveen hadn't agreed to meet. He hadn't been convinced. But Rajan had the leverage. Location, movement, the faintest digital breadcrumbs—enough to make him show up, whether he wanted to or not.

The city lights blurred past as we followed the GPS ping, the car humming with quiet determination. Naveen didn't know we were on him yet. He had parked at the edge of a deserted

lot, the engine idling, hands gripping the wheel like he could will it to protect him.

Vihaan drove, steady, his eyes flicking to the rearview mirror. Alya sat beside me, calm but alert, her fingers brushing against my hand every so often in silent reassurance.

Finally, we moved in. Vihaan signaled with a glance; Rajan stepped out first. I held my breath, heart hammering. This was the man who had tampered with my father's brakes.

The man who had traded morality for money. The man whose actions had killed someone I loved more than the world.

We cornered him without hesitation. Rajan's hand landed firmly on the driver's side window. "Step out," the ACP said, voice low and unyielding.

Naveen's hands trembled as he tried to start the engine again, but Vihaan blocked him, slamming the door shut. The click of the lock echoed like a gavel.

"I—I don't know anything!" Naveen stammered, sweat beading on his forehead. "I was just following orders. Please, you don't understand—"

Rajan's eyes didn't waver. "I understand perfectly. You're going to tell us everything. Now."

Naveen's body sagged, a man collapsing under invisible chains. His voice was barely a whisper. "I… I didn't want him to die. I swear. I only… I only did what I was told. They paid me. They promised I'd be safe. I didn't know…"

I leaned closer, my voice low but deadly. "You *did* know, Naveen. Every time you touched that car, every adjustment you made… you knew it could fail. And it did. My father is gone because of you."

He swallowed hard, his eyes darting to Rajan, then Alya, then finally to me. The weight of our presence, the undeniable evidence trailing every word, crushed the remnants of his bravado.

"You tampered with the brakes. You *knew* exactly what would happen."

Naveen looked at me then. Just for a second. His eyes were glassy, full of fear. "I was given orders. Money. I couldn't say no. They said if I didn't do it, I'd lose my garage. My family would—"

"No excuses," Rajan snapped. "Who paid you?"

Silence.

Alya's arms crossed. "Answer. Or we drag you to the station tonight."

Naveen's jaw clenched as he exhaled shakily. "It was Ranvijay. But not just him. There was a woman too. She gave the first payment. He gave the rest."

My chest tightened. "A woman?"

His head dropped, his voice barely above a whisper. "Your aunt. She met me once outside the city. She told me exactly what to do. Loosen the brake line. Damage the pads. Make it look like ordinary wear and tear."

The words sliced through me like glass. I gripped my knees tightly, my nails digging into my skin as I fought to keep myself together. Vihaan noticed almost immediately. His hand slipped over mine, gently prying my fingers open before they could do more damage. "Don't," he whispered, so quietly that only I could hear him. "Don't hurt yourself."

I couldn't look at him. If I did, I knew I would break.

"How much?" Rajan demanded, his voice cold and controlled.

"Fifty thousand at first. Then another one lakh. Cash. Always in envelopes. Always through Ranvijay," Naveen muttered. Shame flickered across his face. "I didn't want to take it. But… I did."

Alya's eyes narrowed. "Where?"

Naveen looked up, confused. "What?"

"Where did you keep the parts? The evidence. The brakes. Don't tell me you threw them away."

A muscle in Naveen's jaw twitched. For several seconds, no one spoke. The silence stretched between us, heavy with anticipation. Then, unexpectedly, Naveen laughed. There was nothing humorous about it. It was the hollow, bitter laugh of a man who had finally realized there was no way out.

"You think I kept them?" he whispered.

He dragged a trembling hand through his hair and stared at the ground. "No mechanic would keep evidence like that."

"What did you do?" Alya asked quietly.

Naveen swallowed. "I destroyed them."

The words landed harder than I expected. ACP Rajan Singh's expression darkened instantly.

"Explain."

"The car was taken away after the crash. A few days later, I got access to the damaged parts through some contacts. The brake line, the pads—everything that could have proved the tampering was deliberate." His voice cracked. "Gaurav made it very clear that nothing could remain."

For a moment, nobody moved.

"You lying piece of—"

"Shut up!"

Vihaan's voice cracked through the night like a gunshot. Gaurav immediately fell silent, his face tightening with fury.

Naveen swallowed hard before continuing. "I cut the brake line into pieces and burned whatever I could. The rest…" His eyes dropped to the ground. "We dumped it in an industrial scrapyard outside the city and mixed it with scrap metal."

The words settled over us like ash.

Even after the confessions, even after the lies had been dragged into the light, even after the masks had finally fallen away, one truth remained unchanged.

I still couldn't bring him back.

No confession could change that. No arrest could undo it. No amount of justice could return the man whose absence had haunted every corner of my life.

Rajan drew a slow breath before speaking. "You understand that this statement is enough to reopen the case."

Naveen nodded weakly.

"You understand that you are confessing to the destruction of evidence, criminal conspiracy, and aiding in the cover-up of a murder."

Another weak nod.

Then Rajan turned.

Not toward Ranvijay.

Toward Gaurav.

The movement alone made my stomach drop.

For years, Gaurav Bhatia had been a part of our family. He had sat beside us during the funeral. He had held my mother while

she cried. He had looked me in the eye and promised that he would help us find answers. He had stood beside us while we mourned, all the while knowing that he was one of the people responsible for putting us through it.

And now he stood there looking like a cornered animal.

"Gaurav Bhatia," Rajan said quietly, his voice carrying the weight of finality, "you are under arrest for criminal conspiracy, murder, destruction of evidence, witness intimidation, and obstruction of justice."

"No—"

The word burst from Gaurav before the officer had even finished speaking.

"No, listen to me. You don't understand. Raghav left me no choice—"

The first officer grabbed his arm.

"Don't touch me!"

Gaurav jerked violently, trying to pull himself free. For a moment, the respected professor I had known for years disappeared entirely. In his place stood a frightened man drowning beneath the consequences of his own choices.

"I didn't mean for it to happen like this!" he shouted, his voice cracking beneath the weight of desperation. "I just wanted the documents! I just wanted him to hand them over!"

Slowly, he turned.

His eyes found mine.

They were red, desperate, and filled with something that might once have been remorse.

"Brinda…"

My throat tightened.

"I never wanted it to go this far."

I stared at him without saying a word.

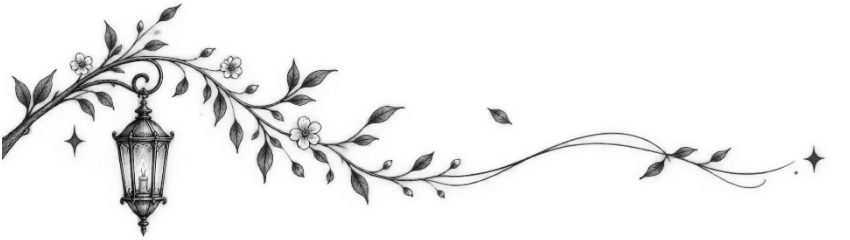
At the man who had called himself my father's best friend. At the man who had stood beside my family while we grieved. At the man who had promised to help us uncover the truth while knowing that he was one of the reasons we had spent years searching for it.

The betrayal hurt more than the confession ever could.

For a long moment, I simply looked at him.

Then I shook my head.

Because some apologies arrive long after they have lost all value.



Twenty Two

Sleep and I had officially filed for divorce.

The ceiling above my bed had become painfully familiar sometime around three in the morning. By four, I had memorized every crack in the paint. By five, I was considering whether it was possible to sue life itself for emotional damages.

The answer was probably no.

Which was disappointing.

Meanwhile, my family had apparently graduated from ordinary dysfunction and entered the criminal conspiracy division.

Wonderful.

I stared at my phone.

No new messages.

No missed calls.

No miraculous notification saying:

Congratulations! Your father is alive, and this has all been one giant misunderstanding.

A knock sounded against the door.

The kind of knock Alya used when she believed doors existed solely to inconvenience her.

"Brinda," she called. "Open the door before I commit property damage."

I groaned.

"Violence isn't the answer."

"It is when you're being dramatic."

I opened the door.

"You look like a Victorian ghost."

"Thank you."

"It wasn't a compliment."

"Then why did you say it like one?"

Vihaan followed a second later, carrying two coffees and the expression of someone who hadn't slept either.

His dark hair was a mess.

"Coffee?" he asked.

I accepted it immediately.

We reached ACP Rajan's office an hour later.

The atmosphere inside was heavy.

For several seconds, I could do nothing except stare at Naveen. His confession had changed everything. My aunt, my mother's sister. The woman who had been part of our family for years had personally arranged the first payment and instructed Naveen to tamper with my father's car. I remembered her standing beside my mother at the funeral, comforting her when she could barely stand. I remembered her hugging me, telling

me that Dad would never want us to lose ourselves in grief. I remembered how naturally I had trusted her, never once imagining that she had known more about his death than she had ever admitted. Now, every one of those memories felt distorted. The worst part was not simply discovering that she had betrayed us. It was realizing that she had watched our family suffer while knowing that she had helped cause that suffering.

"How long before the accident did she meet you?" I asked Naveen, my voice quieter than before.

"About three weeks," he replied. "She contacted me herself. She used another number and told me to meet her outside the city. It was a small roadside restaurant. She came alone and gave me the first payment in cash. She knew exactly what she wanted. She told me which parts to damage and made it clear that the car had to look as though the accident had been caused by ordinary mechanical failure. She never told me everything, though. She only said that your father had become a problem and that he could not be allowed to expose what he knew."

My stomach tightened. "And Gaurav?"

Naveen glanced toward him. "Gaurav became involved afterward."

Gaurav's face hardened. "That is not entirely true."

"Then tell us what is true," Rajan said.

Gaurav said nothing.

Rajan waited for several seconds before continuing. "You have already admitted that you wanted documents from Raghav. You have also admitted that you knew about the situation before his death. What exactly were those documents?"

Gaurav finally looked at me. "Raghav had information that could have caused serious problems for several people.

Financial records, transactions, correspondence. He had been investigating something that he should have left alone."

"What was he investigating?"

"I cannot give you the entire answer."

"You can," Rajan said firmly. "And you will."

Gaurav lowered his head. "He had discovered that money was being moved through several accounts and businesses. He had copies of records that connected people who were not supposed to be connected. He believed the information was enough to expose them."

"And you were one of those people?"

His silence answered me.

I felt my hands begin to tremble. "So you were afraid of what Dad knew."

"Yes," Gaurav admitted quietly. "But I did not arrange the accident."

My eyes moved toward Naveen.

"You said Gaurav made sure the evidence disappeared."

"He did," Naveen replied. "After the accident, he was concerned that the damaged parts could reveal that the brakes had been deliberately tampered with. He told me through a contact that nothing could be left behind. I followed the instructions because I was already afraid of what would happen if the police discovered what I had done."

Rajan looked at Gaurav with visible disgust. "You may not have physically damaged the car, but you helped conceal what happened afterward. That makes your involvement considerably more serious than you seem willing to admit."

Gaurav opened his mouth, but no words came.

I barely heard the conversation anymore. My attention had shifted to my aunt.

"Where is she?" I asked.

Rajan looked at me. "We are working on locating her."

"She knows?"

"We have reason to believe she may know that the investigation has reached her."

A cold feeling settled in my chest.

"She is going to run."

"We will not give her much opportunity to do so," Rajan replied.

I looked at Naveen again. "You said she paid you fifty thousand first and another one lakh later. Where did the second payment come from?"

"Through Gaurav."

My head snapped toward him.

Gaurav's expression changed.

"You said the second payment came through him?"

Naveen nodded. "I never met your aunt again after the first meeting. Gaurav arranged the rest."

For the first time, Gaurav looked genuinely frightened.

Rajan immediately turned toward the officers. "Trace every financial transaction connected to Gaurav during the period Naveen mentioned. I want the cash withdrawals, transfers, phone records, and anyone who had contact with him during that period."

The officers nodded and began moving.

I stood silently, trying to understand how deeply the betrayal had reached into my family. My aunt had arranged the beginning of it. Gaurav had helped continue it and had later helped destroy the evidence. Naveen had carried out the sabotage. Each of them had played a different part, and together they had created the lie that had robbed us of years of answers.

Then I looked toward Ranvijay.

He stood away from the others, silent and visibly shaken by everything he had heard. For a moment, our eyes met, and I realized something important.

He had not been part of this.

He had been dragged into the aftermath just like the rest of us.

I turned away.

There were enough people responsible for my father's death. I would not accuse someone who had nothing to do with it simply because I was angry and desperate for answers.

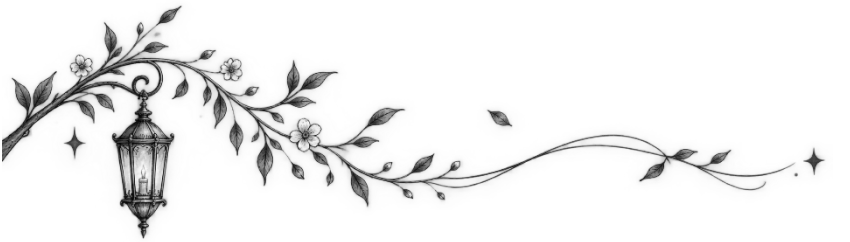
My aunt was the person I needed to find.

Not Ranvijay.

Not anyone else.

Her.

Because she had started this, and until she was found, I knew there were still pieces of my father's death that we had not uncovered.



Twenty Three

The officer returned a few minutes later with his phone still in his hand. "Sir, we have located her residence. The local team is checking the property now, but there is no sign of her there." Rajan's expression tightened. "Any indication of when she left?" The officer nodded. "A neighbor saw her leave approximately forty minutes ago. She was carrying a medium-sized suitcase and told them she was going out of town for a few days. Her car is also missing." My stomach dropped. She had not simply disappeared in panic. She had prepared to leave, which meant that somewhere along the way, she had realized that the investigation was getting too close to her.

"Does she have another property?" Rajan asked.

The officer checked the information on his phone. "There is an old family house registered in her name outside the city. We are verifying whether she has gone there."

"Send someone immediately," Rajan ordered. "And check the railway stations, bus terminals, and airport records. We need to know whether she has already tried to leave the city."

I stood there listening to them, but my thoughts had become painfully focused on one thing: she had known. Perhaps not

everything, but enough to understand that the truth was finally catching up with her. That realization hurt more than I expected. I had spent years believing that the people around me were grieving alongside my family, when in reality, at least one of them had been protecting a secret that had destroyed us.

Alya touched my arm. "Brinda, are you okay?"

I shook my head, feeling small, "No."

It was the first honest answer I could give.

Vihaan remained beside me, close enough that I could feel his presence without him saying anything. I was grateful for that. There are moments when words become useless, when someone simply standing beside you is more comforting than anything they could possibly say.

Rajan approached me after finishing another call. "Brinda, I need you to think carefully. Is there anywhere she might go? Somewhere she has family, friends, or a place she regularly visited?"

I tried to think beyond the anger and disbelief. "She has a house outside the city. My mother mentioned it a few times, but I don't know if she still uses it."

"Where?"

I gave him the location.

Rajan immediately passed it on to the officer. "Get the address verified and send a team there. Do not approach the property casually. If she is there, we need to make sure she cannot destroy anything before the search begins."

I nodded, then suddenly remembered something.

"Wait."

Everyone looked at me.

“There is another place.”

“What place?” Rajan asked.

“My aunt used to keep some of her personal documents in a locker at a private bank. I remember because she once asked my father to help her with some paperwork related to it.”

Rajan’s expression changed. “Do you know which bank?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know whether your father had access to it?”

“I don't know. But if she was keeping anything important, there is a possibility that it could still be there.”

Rajan immediately instructed the officer to verify the locker details and determine whether there had been any recent access.

Gaurav, who had been silent for several minutes, suddenly spoke.

“She would never leave those documents there.”

Everyone turned toward him.

I stared at him. “How would you know?”

He hesitated.

“How would you know what she kept in that locker?” I repeated.

“I don't.”

“You clearly do.”

Gaurav looked away.

Rajan stepped toward him. “You have already made the mistake of withholding information once. Do not make it again.”

Gaurav took a slow breath. “She moved some of the documents months ago.”

“Where?”

“I don't know.”

“You knew she had them.”

“Yes.”

“And you knew she moved them.”

Gaurav nodded reluctantly.

My anger returned with such force that my hands curled into fists. “You knew all of this and still stood beside my family, pretending you were helping us.”

Gaurav looked at me, but this time I did not see the same confidence he had always carried. He looked exhausted.

“I was afraid,” he said.

“So was my mother. So was I. So was everyone who lost him. The difference is that we were afraid because we had lost someone. You were afraid because you knew why we lost him.”

He lowered his eyes.

Rajan turned toward the officers. “Take him into custody and begin the formal procedure. We will deal with the documents separately.”

As the officers led Gaurav away, he stopped for a moment and looked back at me.

“Brinda,” he said quietly, “there is something else you need to know.”

I stared at him.

“Your father was not killed simply because of the documents.”

The room seemed to become completely still.

Rajan immediately stepped forward. “What exactly are you saying?”

Gaurav looked at him, then back at me.

“Those documents were only part of the reason.”

My heartbeat accelerated.

“What was the other reason?”

Gaurav hesitated for a long moment before answering.

“Raghav had found out who was behind the money transfers. He had proof that someone close to your family was involved.”

My face went cold.

“Who?”

Gaurav opened his mouth.

Before he could answer, Rajan’s phone rang.

He glanced at the screen, answered the call, and his expression changed almost immediately.

“What happened?”

There was a brief silence as he listened.

Then he looked directly at me.

“We found your aunt’s car.”

Rajan’s words were quiet, but they altered the entire atmosphere of the room. Until that moment, her disappearance had been something we could still explain away as panic: she had realized the investigation was closing in, taken a car, and left before the police could reach her. But if her car had been found somewhere else, abandoned and empty, then the situation had changed.

Rajan listened to the officer on the phone for several more seconds, asking short, precise questions before ending the call. He slipped the phone into his pocket and looked at me. “The car was found near the old service road leading toward Khopoli. It was parked behind an abandoned warehouse. The driver's door was unlocked, the keys were still inside, and there is no sign of her.”

“Was there blood?” I asked.

“No.”

“Her phone?”

“Not in the car.”

“Her bag?”

“Also missing.”

The answers came too quickly, too cleanly. I felt an uneasy pressure settle in my chest. If she had simply wanted to disappear, why abandon her car and leave the keys behind? Why take her phone and bag but leave the vehicle where anyone could find it? It felt deliberate, and deliberate actions were always more frightening than desperate ones.

Rajan seemed to be thinking along the same lines. “Nobody touches that car until the forensic team arrives. I want photographs of everything exactly as it was found. Check the steering wheel, gear shift, door handles, seats, floor, boot, and every surface that could carry fingerprints or trace evidence. Also check whether the vehicle shows any sign of being forced or damaged.”

The officer nodded and left.

I looked at Rajan. “Why would she leave the car there?”

“We don't know yet.”

“But you think she did it intentionally.”

“I think we should assume nothing until we have evidence.”

That answer was typical of him. He never allowed a theory to become a fact simply because it sounded convincing. In a case where everyone had spent years manipulating the truth, that discipline mattered.

Gaurav, however, had gone unusually still.

I noticed it immediately.

“You know that place,” I said.

His eyes moved toward me.

“The warehouse near Khopoli. You know it.”

“I've heard of it.”

“You're lying.”

Rajan turned toward him. “Why?”

Gaurav hesitated.

Then he said, “Raghav used to go there.”

My heart stopped for a moment.

“What?”

“He went there several times before his death.”

Rajan’s expression hardened. “You never mentioned this.”

“I didn't think it was relevant.”

“Anything involving the victim visiting a location that has now become connected to a suspect is relevant.”

Gaurav swallowed.

I stepped closer. “Why did Dad go there?”

“I don't know.”

“You knew he went there.”

“Yes.”

“How?”

Gaurav looked at the floor. “Because I followed him once.”

The confession hung between us.

“Why?”

“Because I was suspicious of what he was investigating.”

I felt a strange mixture of anger and fear. “What did you see?”

“Nothing unusual. He met someone.”

“Who?”

“I couldn't see her face.”

“Her?”

Gaurav nodded.

Rajan immediately picked up on it. “You said someone. Now you're saying her. Why?”

“Because I saw her get into his car. I recognized her from the way she was dressed and the way she walked.”

My heart began pounding.

“Who was she?”

Gaurav looked at me.

For the first time since his arrest, he seemed genuinely afraid of the answer.

“Your aunt.”

The room went silent.

I shook my head slowly. “No.”

“I didn't know what they were discussing.”

“You're lying.”

“I swear I'm not.”

“Then why didn't you tell us?”

“Because by the time I realized how serious it was, Raghav was already dead.”

I turned away from him, pressing my fingers against my forehead. My aunt had not merely met Naveen. She had not merely arranged the payment. She had apparently met my father before his death, and Gaurav had known about it.

Rajan broke the silence. “What happened after that meeting?”

Gaurav shook his head. “I don't know.”

“You followed Raghav. You saw him meet her. You knew he was investigating something. Then he died. You helped conceal evidence afterward. And you're asking us to believe you simply didn't know what was happening?”

Gaurav looked defeated.

“I knew something was wrong,” he admitted. “I just didn't know how far it had gone.”

Rajan's phone rang again.

He answered.

This time, his expression changed before he even spoke.

“What did you find?”

He listened.

Then his eyes moved toward me.

“Don't touch anything. I'm coming there myself.”

He ended the call.

“What is it?” I asked.

Rajan took a moment before answering.

“The forensic team found something inside your aunt's car.”

“What?”

“A small envelope.”

My pulse quickened.

“What's inside?”

“We don't know yet. It's sealed.”

He paused.

“And there's a name written on it.”

My throat tightened.

“Whose?”

Rajan looked directly at me.

“Your father's.”

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

My father had been dead for years.

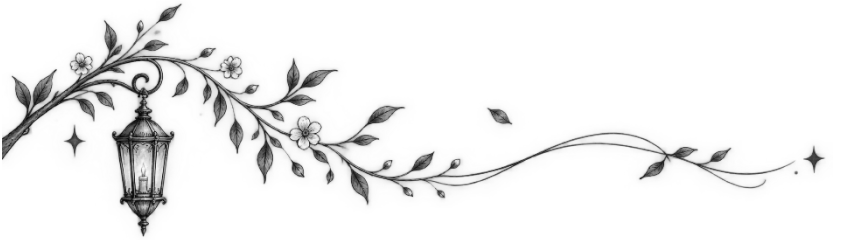
Yet somehow, his name had just appeared in the one place we had never expected to find it.

And suddenly, the abandoned car no longer looked like an escape route.

It looked like a message.

The question was no longer simply where my aunt had gone.

It was whether she had left that envelope for us to find, or whether someone else had left it there to make us believe she had.



Twenty Four

If you have been following my story closely, you already know the truth is not as complicated as we once believed. There was no unknown murderer hiding behind the people we had already uncovered. No mysterious stranger. No secret mastermind waiting to be revealed. It was my aunt and Gaurav. They had both been involved, and Naveen had carried out the sabotage. That was the truth. What we still needed was the reason behind it and enough evidence to make sure none of them could escape what they had done.

Rajan turned toward Gaurav. "You said Raghav had discovered financial records. What exactly did he find?"

Gaurav finally stopped resisting the inevitable. "He discovered that money was being moved through several companies and accounts. Some of those transactions were connected to me. Your aunt also knew about them. Raghav was collecting evidence because he intended to expose everything."

I looked at my aunt. "So Dad was going to expose you both."

She lowered her eyes. "Yes."

"And that's why you decided he had to die?"

Her voice was barely audible. “I was afraid of what would happen if he went to the police.”

“You were afraid,” I repeated bitterly. “So you paid someone to sabotage his car.”

She nodded.

Gaurav spoke quietly. “I knew about the plan. I didn't stop it. After the accident, I made sure the evidence disappeared because I knew the truth would lead back to us.”

There it was. No complicated explanation. No excuse that could make any of it less horrifying. My aunt had initiated the plan, Gaurav had knowingly helped cover it up, and Naveen had carried it out for money. My father had died because three people had decided that protecting themselves mattered more than his life.

Rajan collected the statements, photographs, payment records, and every piece of evidence that connected them to the crime. This time, there would be no missing brake components, no altered reports, and no convenient explanation that could turn murder into an accident.

I looked at my aunt one last time.

For years, I had wondered what I would feel when the person responsible for Dad's death finally stood in front of me.

I expected anger.

I expected hatred.

Instead, I felt empty.

“You didn't just kill my father,” I said quietly. “You made us grieve him while knowing exactly why he was gone.”

She began to cry.

I didn't.

Because some betrayals are too deep for tears.

Rajan gave the officers a signal, and they took her away.

As Gaurav was led out behind her, he looked at me one final time. “Brinda, I'm sorry.”

I held his gaze.

“I know,” I said. “But being sorry doesn't bring him back.”

The doors closed behind them.

For the first time in years, there was no mystery left between my family and the truth.

My father had been murdered.

The people responsible were finally going to face justice.

And although nothing could give me back the man I had lost, at least his death would no longer be remembered as an accident.

It had finally been called what it always was.

Murder.

Rajan came to stand beside me, his expression softening as he looked at me. “Brinda,” he said quietly, “let’s go back home.”

I nodded. We walked out together and got into his car. I sat in the passenger seat, staring silently out of the window as he started the engine. For a few minutes, neither of us spoke. The silence felt different now. It wasn't filled with unanswered questions anymore.

Then Rajan’s phone rang.

He glanced at the screen and answered. “Yes?” He listened for a few seconds, his expression slowly changing. “What?” I turned toward him, immediately noticing the concern on his face.

He ended the call and looked at me. "That was one of my officers. They found something else while going through your aunt's belongings."

My heart sank. "What?"

Rajan reached for the evidence folder beside him and took out a small transparent pouch. Inside were a few tiny pearls.

I stared at them, my breath catching in my throat. "The bracelet," I whispered.

Rajan nodded. "They believe these belonged to your father's bracelet. Your aunt had kept them, and she wants to give them to you."

My fingers trembled as I took the pouch. I already had one or two pearls from the missing bracelet, kept safely with me for years. Now there were two or three more.

I counted them quietly. Two. Then three.

I looked at Rajan. "But this still isn't the whole bracelet."

"No," he said softly. "There are still pieces missing."

I looked down at the pearls resting in my palm. They were tiny, almost insignificant, yet they carried a piece of my father with them. My aunt had kept them hidden all these years, and now, after everything, she was finally returning them to me.

Not all of them.

Just a few.

I closed my fingers around the pearls and looked out of the window as Rajan started the car again. The mystery was over. The truth had finally been uncovered. But as I held those few remaining pieces of my father's bracelet, I realized that sometimes, even when you cannot put everything back together, having a few pieces is still better than having nothing at all.

The pearls in my hand would never form the same bracelet again.

Too many pieces were missing.

Too many had been lost forever.

Yet perhaps that was the point.

Perhaps life wasn't about finding every missing piece.

Perhaps it was about learning to treasure the ones that remained.

And as the last light disappeared beyond the horizon, I closed my fingers around the broken pearls and finally understood that some absences never leave us, yet they still guide us toward who we are meant to become.

After all, the brightest stories are not written by what remains.

They are written by the absent pearls.

Acknowledgements

To Dad,

Thank you for believing in me before there was anything to believe in—for every "you can do it" and for always making my dreams feel possible.

This book has my name on it, but your faith is woven into every page. I hope it makes you as proud as you have always made me.

To Mom,

Thank you for being my constant strength, for believing in me, and for loving me through every doubt and every draft. This book would not be the same without you.

To my younger brother,

Who kept asking, "Is your book completed now?" and told everyone, "Do you know my sister is writing a book?"

See? Persistence works. You made it to the acknowledgements.

To Rishita and Aneel,

Thank you for all the memories, the laughter, the conversations, and for being such an important part of a chapter of my life. Even though another city stands between us now, there will always be a place for those memories in my story.

To Tanmay,

Who read the book before everyone and anyone—and somehow survived it. Thank you for being my first reader and for making it through every page.

And finally, to you, the reader,

Thank you for giving my story your time, my characters your patience, and hopefully, a little space in your heart. I hope you laughed, gasped, suspected everyone—and enjoyed the ride.

A book begins as an idea, becomes a story through countless pages, and finally becomes real when someone chooses to read it. By opening this book, you have given *The Absent Pearls* its final and most important chapter.So, from the first page to the last—

thank you for being here.

The End.