

Love

Me Till The End

Kamal Kaire



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Stories Matter

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Chapter 1

Beginning

Mumbai, with its dazzling skyline and bustling streets, truly lives up to its reputation as a city of dreams. But beneath its glittering exterior, the city grapples with its share of challenges, including its fair share of crime. In the midst of this dynamic urban landscape lives Ruhana Singh, a young woman whose life is intertwined with the city's vibrancy and its darker undercurrents.

Ruhana's world is a blend of contrasting elements: her protective and dedicated brother, Senior Inspector Sachin Singh, is on the front lines of the city's fight against crime. Her closest confidante, Angel, brings a touch of unpredictability and excitement into her life, while Vineet, the love of her life, offers a sense of stability and warmth.

Despite the city's constant challenges, Ruhana finds joy and balance through these key relationships. Her brother's commitment to justice, Angel's spirited friendship, and Vineet's unwavering support each contribute to making her journey in Mumbai both meaningful and fulfilling. The city might be a complex tapestry of dreams and struggles, but Ruhana navigates it with a blend of hope and resilience, supported by the people she holds dear.

It was 1 o'clock in the afternoon. Ruhana stepped out of her college gate, her frustration evident in the way she repeatedly checked the watch on her wrist. The usual hustle and bustle of Mumbai seemed to amplify her irritation as she

stood by the roadside, waiting for a taxi that felt like it would never arrive.

The sun beat down mercilessly, adding to her discomfort. Her thoughts raced with the events of the day—perhaps a stressful exam, a disagreement with a friend, or an overwhelming amount of college work. Whatever the reason, the delay was the last straw. As she scanned the busy street for a glimpse of a taxi, her mind was a storm of impatience and annoyance.

“Phew!” Ruhana sighed with disappointment, her breath visible in the heat of the noon sun. The sweltering rays felt like they were pressing down directly on her, intensifying her frustration. She was a sweet and simple girl, standing at five feet three inches tall with waist-length hair cascading down her back. Her studies in forensic sciences were demanding enough, but today’s relentless Mumbai heat and the absence of a taxi seemed like an added cruelty.

As she walked along the crowded roads, the summer sun appeared to mock her with its oppressive heat. The pavement shimmered with heat waves, and every passing vehicle felt like a taunting reminder of her stalled plans. Despite her usual calm demeanor, today the city’s chaotic pace and the relentless sun were testing her patience to the limit.

“Goddddd! Will I get a taxi today?” She muttered in frustration, feeling the sweat trickle down her back. The relentless sun had drenched her, and she could even smell the tang of her own sweat, which only added to her irritation.

Her thoughts churned with another source of vexation. “That crazy girl,” She continued muttering under her breath, “why was she absent today? She’s taken so many leaves, and yet she’s still at the top of the class. How is that even

possible?" Her best friend, Angel, hadn't shown up at college, and she was left grappling with the mystery of her unexplained absences. Her consistent top grades despite her frequent absences were baffling, and her absence today only deepened Ruhana's confusion and annoyance.

Once again, she glanced at her watch, her frustration still simmering. But then, a glimmer of hope appeared as she spotted a taxi inching toward her through the heavy traffic. Her black, expressive eyes lit up with a flicker of excitement and relief. It was as if the city's chaos momentarily paused, allowing a ray of hope to shine through her weary day.

She straightened up, her tired posture giving way to a renewed sense of purpose. As the taxi approached, her heart quickened with anticipation, ready to finally escape the sweltering heat and the frustrations of the afternoon.

"Taxi!" she shouted in frustration, her voice barely cutting through the din of the city. But, of course, the taxi just zoomed past her, leaving her more exasperated than ever.

"Bloody idiot, can't you stop?" she yelled, her anger boiling over. "I'll sue you for not stopping for me!" In a fit of rage, she threw her bag in the direction of the departing taxi, though it was more an expression of her frustration than any real hope of hitting it. Her outburst only added to the chaos of the moment, her frustration blending with the relentless buzz of Mumbai's streets.

Meanwhile, a sleek car glided to a halt right in front of her. Before she could react further, a well-suited man, looking every bit the part of a polished gentleman, opened the back door and reached out to pull her inside. Her irritation flared as she recognized him.

"What the heck are you doing here?" she demanded angrily, her frustration bubbling over.

He bowed his head slightly, adjusting his black shades with a practiced ease. "Madam, Sir is waiting for you," he said briefly, his calm demeanour only adding to her annoyance.

"Tell him I'm not interested—and he can go to hell!" she shouted, flinging her books at him in a burst of frustration.

The man didn't flinch. With practiced calm, he bent down, collected the books, and placed them gently in the back seat.

"Apologies, madam. But you don't really have a choice... as usual," he said with a faint, teasing smile.

Ruhana glared at him, her voice dropping to a quieter register. "Can't he come himself?"

There was a flicker of something deeper in her eyes—not just anger, but hurt. The man didn't respond. He didn't need to. She already knew the answer. With a weary sigh, her shoulders slumped. She climbed into the car, surrendering to the inevitability of it all.

As the car came to a stop, he opened the door for her. "Here we are," he said, his voice carrying a hint of satisfaction.

She stepped out of the car and threw a withering glance at the well-suited man before walking toward the building. It was an imposing, multi-story structure with "Oberoi's" emblazoned in bold letters across the front. The security guards saluted her as she entered through the large glass doors, and she was greeted with a flurry of respectful nods and smiles from the staff.

Ruhana felt a wave of shyness wash over her. She was from a middle-class background and was unaccustomed to such royal treatment. Her cheeks flushed a deep shade of red

as she tightened her grip on her books, her head bowed slightly to avoid eye contact. The attention felt overwhelming, and she walked with a downcast gaze, trying to compose herself amidst the unexpected formality.

When she finally reached the outside of the CEO's cabin, a peon opened the door and saluted her with a respectful nod. She managed a simple, reserved smile in return.

As she entered the cabin, she saw the nameplate on the door: *****"CEO"*****. The office was impeccably furnished, reflecting both elegance and authority. Her heart raced with a mix of apprehension and curiosity as she prepared to face the person waiting inside.

"Is this how you get me here? Couldn't you come meet me yourself, idiot? I should file a complaint—for negligence!" Ruhana snapped, her voice rising with each word. She stood stiffly near his desk, arms crossed, fury radiating off her.

Vineet didn't even look up. Her eyes narrowed. That calm indifference only stoked her anger. In a flash, she yanked the file from his hands and flung it to the floor.

"I'm talking to you! You could've called me—or shown up like a normal person. But no! You always have to pull these ridiculous stunts to get my attention!"

Finally, he looked at her. And smiled. That maddening, effortless smile.

Before she could hurl another word at him, he stood, wrapped his arms around her, and pulled her into a hug. His scent, his touch—warm, familiar, infuriating—softened her, even as her hands remained clenched at his chest.

"Let me go," she mumbled, trying (and failing) to sound fierce.

But when she looked up, that smile was still there—mischievous, tender, annoyingly irresistible. Her glare wavered.

He gently pulled her down onto his lap, his hands steady on her waist. Her heart raced, betrayed by her own emotions. She hated how easily he could disarm her.

And yet... she didn't move away.

"I missed you a lot, Roo," he whispered into her ear, placing a tender kiss on her forehead. The warmth of his breath sent a shiver down her spine.

Ruhana took a moment to regain her composure, her initial anger melting into a mix of affection and annoyance. "Then who told you to go to Australia for three whole months?" she complained, her tone softening to a more playful, babyish whine.

He beamed as his arms encircled her waist. "It's business, Ruhana. I can't neglect my job, it is my obligation." He answered, combing through her hair to clear away the strands that were blocking his view.

"But Vinnie, this isn't fair." She stood up from his lap as she said his nickname—the one she loved calling him.

Her love, Vineet Oberoi, her boyfriend, her life, whether he irritated her most of the time with his absence, busy schedule and this kind of forceful act but she loved him truly. They had been together for three years.

"What is not fair, Ruhana?" He looked stupid asking such a question.

"Bringing me here, like this! Your staff recognises me now and your irritating bodyguard, Karan. I just hate him! Please next time don't do this. If you want to see me, then

come personally; don't send Karan next time." She made faces, as she really hated his idea of getting her here like this.

She made a face, clearly annoyed. "I really hate that you brought me here like this—it just shows you're not as sincere about us as you say."

He just smiled mysteriously. "I love you Roo." He said, holding her hands. She was pink with blush at the nickname he had given to her. Her cheeks turned red. She lifted her gaze and met with him. His dark brown orbs were filled with love for her.

"I'm sorry, Roo, I know that I did wrong and I can't help it! Isn't the thing I stated more important than what I did wrong?" He asked, aware of her concern.

"I don't want to bubble wrap you in front of the media or public. I want an easy quiet love story, not the next headline. Can you just endure this for a little bit more or we can be official?" he said, while he gently massaged her hands with his thumbs. His tone was a silent plea for her understanding. He grinned at her and caught her into custody by his arms. He tucked her hair flicks behind her ear to look at her face clearly. He took her scent in and kissed her on the forehead. She sighed deeply. She sighed; she can't resist him, can't stay upset with him. She cupped his face, searching his eyes for understanding.

"I understand your situation, Vineet. And I don't want to be a hurdle in your business. But please, don't force me like this to come here." She said, displeasure etched on her face.

She hesitated for a moment, while he let her continue, "It feels weird. I'm just a student, Vinnie. And— and I'd love it if you come to meet me personally, or even to pick me up. It feels like an obligation when you send Karan to pick me up." She finally voiced her concern.

He knew she never liked him sending his bodyguard and he was aware of her wishes that she wants him to meet her personally, rather than sending someone else. She was right, indeed. Yet he didn't have any other option, but he did love her truly and was determined to make things right for her. He's just waiting for the right time, maybe.

However, he decided to change the line of conversation. "How's your brother Roo?" He asked while looking at her. It was the easiest way to divert her.

She sighed. "As usual; duty, duty and duty!" Ruhana's response, with a sigh and a tone of disappointment, indicates that her brother is constantly occupied with work, possibly to the detriment of his personal life. Her repeated mention of "duty" suggests a sense of frustration, perhaps because she wishes he would have more balance or spend more time with family.

He smiled. "Okay, leave him. How's your college going and what about your crazy friend?" Vineet's questioned, his tone laced with naughtiness, reflected his playful side and awareness of Ruhana's current irritation.

His recognition of her annoyance suggested that he's aware of the tension but chose to address it with a hint of mischief. This playful approach might be Vineet's way of lightening the mood or deflecting from a more serious conversation, hoping to ease her frustration with his charm and humour.

"Don't ask about her. Today she was absent again. God knows why she is absent this much. She will definitely come in the evening and will be saying Roo Darling, I need your help. Is there any new assignment or project? What about today's lecture?" Ruhana said while mimicking her best friend. He laughed at her antics.

“All idiots are in my life only, hmph!!” She too smiled, but a pinch of irritation was audible in her voice.

“Okay, take this, some dresses and a necklace. I bought it from Sydney.” Vineet passed some packets towards her..

She fixed her gaze at Vineet’s face. “But my brother, what would I say if he asked anything?” She asked confusingly, as she knew her brother. He was a crime branch officer and he could interrogate her even if he found anything fishy.

“As you always say, Your crazy friend gave it.” Vineet replied with a smile while Ruhana laughed.

Ruhana’s laughter at Vineet’s statement showed that she found his suggestion amusing and it helped lighten the mood. Despite her initial concerns, his playful response seems to have eased her worries. After enjoying some quality time together, Ruhana leaves with Karan, heading back home. This ending underscored the blend of affection and lightheartedness in their relationship, even amid practical concerns and challenges.

Chapter 2

Making a Deal

On the other side of the city, a man in his mid-thirties sat in the driver's seat of a car parked by the roadside. He was speaking through a Bluetooth earpiece, giving instructions to someone on the other end. His sharp eyes were locked onto another man standing across the street with a young woman. The two were sipping juice from a small corner stall, their body language suggesting familiarity and comfort.

The man being watched had striking features, a fair complexion, and deep black eyes. He spoke to the woman in a refined manner, exuding an air of sophistication.

"So, Rekha, is he still looking at us?" the man asked, lowering his voice as he leaned toward her.

She chuckled, as if he had cracked a joke. "Yeah, you're so funny, dear," she replied, nodding subtly.

Tilting his head slightly, he met the watcher's unwavering gaze. A smirk played on his lips. "We can't let him go today. After all, he has been after us for six months," he murmured, patting Rekha's hair.

She pretended to blush and composed herself quickly. "Then let's go, sir," she whispered near his ear, her breath tickling his skin.

He laughed and pulled her into a side hug. "Come on."

Still smiling and chatting, they turned and started walking in the opposite direction, their movements casual but deliberate.

From inside the car, the man tracked their every step. His grip on the steering wheel tightened. "He's with some girl. This could be the perfect opportunity. She seems close to him. Let's move in," he instructed through the earpiece.

But just as he was about to make his move, his expression shifted. His targets had vanished.

"Damn it! I lost them!" he shouted into the phone, slamming his fist on the steering wheel. Frustration burned in his eyes as he reached for the door handle, but before he could step out, a black SUV suddenly blocked his path.

"Hey! Move your damn car!" he yelled, his temper flaring.

Before he could react further, the passenger door swung open. Someone slipped into the seat beside him. Simultaneously, another figure entered from the back.

"How are you, Kunal?" a voice asked smoothly.

Kunal - Once an undercover agent for the Mumbai Crime Branch, Kunal's career took a drastic turn when he was implicated in a drug consumption case. Branded as a suspect, he soon found himself hunted by his own department. However, the CID-Delhi stepped in, proving his innocence by uncovering and dismantling the fabricated evidence against him. Recognizing his exceptional detective skills, they recruited him as an undercover agent.

Now, Kunal operates under CID-Delhi, but his past with the Mumbai Crime Branch has created a deep rift between the two agencies. Old loyalties have turned into bitter rivalries, and Kunal finds himself caught in the

crossfire of a personal and professional battle that refuses to fade.

Kunal turned sharply, his eyes widening in disbelief. Sitting next to him was the very man he had been tailing all day.

"Inspector Sachin!" Kunal spat his name like a curse before lunging forward, his hands closing around the officer's throat with a forceful grip.

Sachin Singh – A Senior inspector in the Mumbai Crime Branch, known for his unwavering honesty and dedication. Feared by criminals and respected by his peers, he is one of the most formidable officers in the force. His sharp investigative instincts and exceptional shooting skills make him a role model for newcomers. Over the years, his relentless pursuit of justice has earned him numerous accolades, including an award from the Governor of Maharashtra. To the city's most notorious criminals, he is more than just a cop—he is their worst enemy.

"Easy there," Inspector Sachin chuckled, maintaining his calm demeanor despite Kunal's aggressive grip. "I'm not here to arrest you—yet."

Kunal released his hold, his breath hitching with a mix of frustration and confusion. "What are you doing in my car?" His mind raced as he grappled with the simultaneous shock of seeing the inspector and the loss of his targets.

Sachin leaned back in the seat, a bemused expression on his face. "Came to check on you. Your little hobby of stalking isn't exactly under the radar, Kunal. Thought I'd pay you a visit before you made another reckless move."

Kunal gritted his teeth, irritation clawing at him. "I was just about to make contact after waiting six months for the right moment. You didn't have to interrupt me!"

"And what? Get yourself into a mess that could cost you everything?" Sachin countered, folding his arms. "You think this is a game? You have no idea what these people are really up to. You're lucky I showed up when I did."

Kunal huffed and turned his eyes out the window, flaring his nostrils as if he could still catch a glimpse of the couple. "You don't get it. I need to know what they're planning. I've got connections I can leverage if I just—

"Leverage? You mean your vendetta?" Sachin interjected sharply. "This isn't about settling personal scores, Kunal. This is about staying alive. That guy you were following, he's not just some pretty boy flaunting his life. He's involved with some serious players in this city."

Kunal shifted uncomfortably, the thrill of his pursuit rapidly fading into the gravity of Sachin's warning. "But if I can just get close enough—"

"Close enough to what, Kunal? How far are you willing to go?" Sachin leaned in, voice calm but cutting. "These games have rules. You break them, and you won't just be a player anymore—you'll be the one hunted. We can't afford any mistakes."

A heavy silence settled between them, filled only by the distant hum of city traffic. Kunal clenched his fists, his mind now a tumultuous clash of ambition and caution.

After a moment, he finally spoke, his voice low and intense. "What now? I just let them disappear again?"

Sachin placed a firm hand on Kunal's arm, his voice steady but serious.

"I'm not asking you to drop it, Kunal," he said clearly, locking eyes with him. "But we have to do it differently. We need intel—good, solid, reliable intel. You can't just blow in there and hope for the best. This is going to take finesse."

Kunal paused, weighing his options. His heart was still racing. "So what? Do we work together?"

"Not exactly," Sachin said, his tone firm. "I'm doing my job—and you're going to assist me. Undercover. You'll get access like never before, but that means playing by my rules." He leaned back, eyes steady. "No more lone-wolf stunts, Kunal. Not this time."

"So I'm an informant now?" Kunal's voice was laced with skepticism, but there was a flicker of interest in his eyes.

"More like an operative—if you're up for it." Sachin's eyes narrowed, focusing on Kunal. "But it'll take dedication. Get too close to the fire, and you risk being burned. We'll move at my pace."

Kunal took a deep breath, the weight of the decision heavy on him. He glanced out the window, searching for the couple again but finding only the relentless tide of pedestrians and vehicles rushing by.

"Alright," he finally said, turning back to Sachin. "Let's do this. But I want updates on everything. I'm not sitting on the sidelines while you play your game."

"Deal," Sachin agreed, a hint of a smile breaking through his serious demeanor. "Just remember, Kunal—this is no longer just about you. We all have something at stake now."

As Kunal nodded, a new resolve settled in him. He wasn't just an observer anymore; he was about to plunge into a world where every decision could lead to fortunes or ruin.

Chapter 3

Family- Weight of Past, Tears

It was a pleasant evening in Mumbai. Ruhana sat on the balcony of her spacious, sea-facing apartment in Juhu, savoring the breathtaking view of the sun setting over the beach. The golden hues of dusk painted the sky, casting a warm glow over the waves as they gently kissed the shore.

With a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and a Durjoy Dutta novel in the other, she immersed herself in both the words on the page and the serenity of the moment. The cool breeze played with her hair, sending a delightful shiver down her spine, making her feel both at peace and alive.

Her me-time was disturbed by the sharp chime of the doorbell. She sighed deeply, irritation bubbling within her. She hated interruptions, especially during moments like these—quiet, peaceful, and just hers. Reluctantly, she placed her book on the side table and rose from her cozy spot, dragging her feet toward the door.

The annoyance lingered in her expression as she turned the knob, but the moment she saw who it was, a small smile tugged at her lips.

"Good evening, Bhaiya," she smirked, tilting her head slightly.

Her elder brother stepped inside with a tired sigh, running a hand through his disheveled hair before sinking into the couch like a man carrying the weight of the world.

His exhaustion was evident—shoulders slumped, eyes dull, and the usual liveliness drained from his face.

Ruhana didn't say anything immediately. Instead, she moved to the kitchen, letting him have a moment to himself. A few minutes later, she returned with a glass of water and held it out to him. He took it without a word, downing half of it in one go.

"So, how was the day, Bhaiya?" she asked, her voice softer now, knowing she didn't really need an answer. His face said it all.

He exhaled sharply, placing the glass on the table. "The same," he muttered. "Long, exhausting, and—" He paused, leaning his head back against the couch. "Never-ending."

Ruhana chuckled lightly, perching herself on the armrest beside him. "Sounds like a typical day in your world."

He glanced at her, a faint smile breaking through the exhaustion. "And how was yours?"

She shrugged. "Peaceful—until someone rudely interrupted it."

He scoffed. "Oh, I'm sorry, Your Highness. Should I have sent a letter announcing my arrival?"

Ruhana grinned. "That would have been nice."

Despite the fatigue in his body, her playful tone seemed to ease some of the tension in his shoulders. She had always been like this—a source of comfort wrapped in teasing remarks.

She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "Dinner's almost ready. Want to eat first, or complain about your life a little more?"

He chuckled, shaking his head. "Let's eat. I don't have the energy to rant right now."

She winked at her brother, standing up. "Good choice. Food first, drama later."

And with that, she walked off to the kitchen, leaving behind the echoes of her laughter.

She came out of the kitchen after almost fifteen minutes and started to serve food to her brother. He put a spoonful of rice into his mouth.

"So you already started eating, it's not even the time to have a full meal." A harsh tone just ruined the moment between these two.

Both turned towards the owner of the voice and found another handsome man looking at them with anger.

"Again! This arrogant man — why doesn't he just leave me alone?" Kunal muttered under his breath, disappointment evident in his tone as the other man entered. He didn't even spare him a glance, too irritated to engage, and instead focused on his meal, the tension clear in the air around him.

The man who had just arrived, Sachin, wasn't having it. His eyes narrowed as he locked onto Kunal. "Seriously? Are you just going to keep ignoring me?" His voice rose, sharp with frustration. That stare wasn't just anger—it was loaded with questions he hadn't even spoken aloud.

Kunal kept his eyes on his plate, stuffing rice into his mouth like it was the only thing that mattered. "I'm not ignoring you. Just focusing on my food," he mumbled between bites. His tone was flat, almost careless — and that quiet indifference hit harder than any insult. Sachin's jaw clenched. That one-liner, tossed so casually, only made his anger flare.

“Then tell me, what were you doing there? That was not your lawful place. You can’t just investigate like that,” he said, his voice laced with controlled anger, though his tone remained composed.

Kunal glanced up briefly, unfazed. “Stop trying to teach me, Sachin sir,” he retorted, his words matching Sachin’s tone, as he spoke with a hint of defiance.

“I’m not teaching you. I’m warning you,” Sachin snapped back, his anger barely contained. He took a seat across from Kunal, his eyes still burning with frustration.

Kunal’s temper flared, but he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “I don’t need any of your suggestions or warnings,” he shot back, his voice edged with sharpness, his patience thinning.

Sachin wasn’t done. “Just stay within your limits,” he warned, his voice growing more aggressive.

Kunal slammed his spoon down, his voice rising above Sachin’s. “Stay in your limits! You’re not my reporting officer anymore, so stop bothering me!”

Sachin smiled—painfully. “No, I’m not. But I’m still your elder brother. And you better take my advice seriously... before things go out of my control.” His voice was low, but the warning in it was sharp.

Kunal scoffed at the sarcasm in his voice, impossible to miss. “So now you remember you’re my brother? Amazing. Ruhana, did you hear that? He finally remembers we’re siblings.” He turned to Ruhana with a bitter laugh—one that carried more pain than humor.

Ruhana, sitting between them, had remained silent till now. Watching her brothers argue like this—it cut deep. She had so much to say. And she had waited almost a year for this argument to finally happen.

Sachin's voice cut back in, cold and tight. "I remember everything. Maybe you've forgotten your place."

Kunal's eyes narrowed. "I know exactly where I stand, Mr. Sachin. I've always stood by you—in every thin and thick. But you? You abandoned me for a whole year. Now I'm finally back to where I belong."

Their eyes locked—both stern, both broken. Something unspoken passed between them, something neither had wanted to drag into the light.

Sachin's voice dropped, raw and almost trembling. "You had drugs. It was your fault."

Kunal's lips parted, about to fire back—but Ruhana's voice cut through the room like a blade.

"Stop. Both of you." Her tone was firm and final leaving no room for argument.

Both brothers fell silent instantly, their anger evaporating into a heavy stillness. They turned to her—red-eyed, exhausted, and wavering on the edge of something none of them could name.

"Have your meal, and then go to your rooms. No more arguments in my house," she declared, making it clear she was in no mood for conflict.

Kunal and Sachin both turned their heads towards Ruhana, momentarily stunned by her interruption. Kunal clenched his jaw, still boiling with anger, but he knew better than to continue when Ruhana spoke in that tone. Sachin, though still visibly annoyed, reluctantly nodded and adjusted his posture.

Ruhana's voice was calm but firm. "I don't care what issues you have with each other. This is a place of peace, not

a battlefield. So, both of you—eat, and leave the nonsense behind."

Kunal shot a glance at Sachin, who was still glaring at him, but Kunal knew Ruhana's word was final. He let out a deep breath, forcing his anger down, and took a bite from his plate.

Sachin huffed but didn't say anything more, picking up his own meal. The tension in the air was thick, but neither of them spoke, both of them understanding that Ruhana had the final say in matters like this.

Ruhana, watching them both quietly, sighed. "Good," she muttered under her breath, as she settled down beside them.

"Bhaiya, I don't know everything," Ruhana said, looking at Sachin, "but you have to leave the past behind. Kunal Bhaiya made a mistake, yes—but you should forgive him. Accept him."

Sachin stayed silent, clearly not in the mood to hear anything that involved Kunal.

Kunal leaned back, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Of course he can't. He's perfect—never makes a mistake. How could someone like him stand a criminal like me?"

Ruhana's eyes snapped to Kunal. "Will you please shut up? I'm talking to him." Her tone was sharp, irritated by his constant interruptions.

Sachin scoffed. "How could he? He just loves jumping into other people's business."

Ruhana threw her spoon into the plate with a loud clink. "Why am I even trying? I knew from the start you both weren't ready to talk. Then why the hell am I forcing this?" She couldn't take the rift between them but she also

knew that making them understand was a difficult task, but she wanted to try.

She wanted both her brothers by her side but here, both of them were not ready to listen. She stood up abruptly, her face red with anger. She wasn't in the mood to speak anymore.

"Roo—" Sachin began, but she cut him off mid-syllable.

"Get lost. You two." She yelled, her voice cracking slightly, and stormed away from the table.

After finishing their meal, both men left for their respective rooms. The weight of the earlier tension still lingered in the air, but they didn't speak another word to each other.

In the solitude of his room, Sachin changed into his nightwear and walked over to his small bookshelf. The soft light from the lamp illuminated his fingers as he reached for one of his books. As he opened it, a photograph slipped out and fell onto the floor with a soft thud. Sachin picked it up slowly, his gaze softening as he looked at the picture—a family photograph, a memory from a time long past. His hand trembled slightly as he stared at the faces in the picture, each one a reminder of a life that now seemed so far away.

A crooked smile crept onto his lips—bitter, tired, more self-directed than anything else. "So, how are you after ruining everything?" he muttered under his breath, his words directed at the photograph in his hand. The bitterness in his voice was palpable, as though the memory itself was a weight too heavy to bear.

His gaze shifted to another photograph on the shelf, this one of a girl. A beautiful, innocent face with a chirpy

smile—her eyes sparkling with life. His heart ached as he stared at her, his mind drifting into a flood of memories.

The image of her running through the vast palace, her anklets softly jingling with every step, filled his mind. The sound of those anklets echoed in his memory, the sweet, melodic music filling the air as she danced through the halls. He could almost hear the laughter that once accompanied her carefree movements, the joy and innocence that had seemed endless back then.

But that time had passed. And the ache of that loss, the regret of what had been and could have been, weighed heavily on him. The photograph in his hand seemed to mock him now, a reminder of everything that had been broken, everything he couldn't undo.

Sachin snapped out of his memories, his thoughts interrupted by a gentle touch on his arm. He turned quickly, startled, only to find Kunal standing behind him. The moment their eyes met, Sachin's gaze softened, his eyes still glistening with unshed tears. Kunal could see the weight of his emotions—so much grief, so much pain—lurking behind that composed exterior.

Kunal remained quiet for a moment, his eyes searching Sachin's face before he spoke, his tone calm and steady. "You should move on, Sachin. It's already passed, and there's nothing we can do about it now," he said, his hand pressing firmly on Sachin's shoulder in an attempt to comfort him.

Sachin didn't respond immediately. Instead, he stood frozen, as if grappling with the words that had been spoken. His chest tightened, and for a brief moment, all the emotions he had been holding in for so long threatened to surface. Then, without warning, Sachin stepped forward and

hugged Kunal, his arms wrapping around him in a gesture that seemed to beg for release.

Kunal, taken aback by the sudden embrace, stood still, letting him hold on as tightly as he needed. Sachin tried to hold back the tears, pushing them down with every ounce of strength he had left. He hadn't cried since that day—since the day everything he had known, everything he had loved, was taken away. Yet, at that moment, with Kunal's quiet support, the floodgates seemed ready to open.

But he didn't let them. He pulled away after a few moments, forcing a small smile, his face still tight with unshed grief. He had learnt long ago to hide his emotions, to pretend everything was okay for the sake of his younger sister, the one person who had kept him going, the one person he had to stay strong for.

"I've got to lead a happy life," he said softly, almost to himself, his voice shaky but determined. "For her."

Kunal gave him a reassuring nod, understanding more than he let on. He didn't say anything more—there was nothing left to say. They stood in silence, the old photographs around them watching like ghosts—memories that refused to fade, no matter how much time had passed.

Chapter 4

The BFF's Conversation

The next morning was Saturday, and Ruhana was sleeping peacefully—it was her day off from college. Sachin and Kunal had already left for work. It was her phone that disturbed her peaceful sleep. She checked her messages and found a sweet good morning text from Vineet. Smiling, she replied to him. After a few moments of texting, she finally got out of bed and walked toward the washroom.

After taking a shower, she headed to the kitchen and made herself a cup of coffee. She sipped it slowly while reading a book. She was so engrossed in her coffee and book, she didn't notice someone quietly slip in and sit beside her.

“Hello, darling!” A girl about Ruhana's age waved cheerfully at her. Ruhana looked up with a gaze that wasn't entirely surprising. She smiled faintly at her no-nonsense friend Angel, who had finally shown up after being MIA for a whole week.

Angel Oberoi- the kind of girl who turned heads wherever she went — not just because of her sharp features or bubbly personality, but because she carried a certain quiet confidence that made people curious. She had always excelled in academics and was currently studying Forensic Sciences alongside Ruhana, her best friend since high school.

Despite her playful attitude, Angel was incredibly sharp and observant — a trait that often surprised those who underestimated her. She came from a wealthy, influential business family, though the details of her background remained elusive. No one, not even Ruhana, knew the full story about her family. Angel never talked about it, and people knew better than to ask.

Their friendship was an odd but perfect blend — Ruhana's calm, grounded nature paired with Angel's energetic chaos. Yet, beneath Angel's laughter and teasing, there was always something unreadable in her eyes. Something she wasn't saying.

"Hey Roo, I have something for you," Angel said quickly, not waiting for Ruhana to respond.

Ruhana sighed and placed her coffee mug on the side table. Angel gave her a sharp look, clearly expecting her to say something. When Ruhana remained silent, Angel plopped down beside her and grabbed the mug.

She took a sip, then instantly made a face. "Eww, Ruhana! You put cinnamon in your coffee?" she said with mock disgust.

"I like my coffee this way," Ruhana finally spoke, her tone calm.

"Finally! Her Highness decides to speak," Angel teased like any good best friend would.

Ruhana narrowed her eyes. "Where were you, idiot? It's been a week!" she asked, the irritation in her voice clear.

Angel smiled peacefully. "I was with my grandfather. He wanted to go to Haridwar, so I went along," she said cheerfully.

Ruhana gave her a stern look, still not entirely pleased with the explanation.

You should've told me at least," she pouted like a child whose only friend had left her without a word.

Angel smiled, touched by her innocence. "I'm sorry. Next time, we'll go together, promise. It was just... a sudden trip," she said, trying to explain.

Ruhana sighed and shook her head. She knew Angel – disappearing without a word was just her style. "Okay, leave it. Let's have breakfast," she said, tugging Angel gently toward the dining area.

Angel followed her, and they both sat down at the table where breakfast was already laid out, prepared by the family's house help. They took their seats, beginning to eat in a comfortable rhythm.

"I brought you prasad and a few other things from Haridwar," Angel said as she started chatting again. Ruhana listened with quiet patience, used to her friend's endless stories.

"By the way, how was the trip?" Ruhana asked, taking a bite of her French toast.

"Amazing... but tiring. It felt like we were always on the move – more traveling than actually staying anywhere," Angel replied between bites.

Ruhana smiled. Silence settled between them for a few moments, warm and familiar. Then Angel broke it.

"I think I'm in love."

Ruhana looked up at her sharply, disbelief written all over her face. She knew her friend too well – Angel couldn't stand being around a boy for more than thirty minutes. So how on earth could she be in love?

“Who’s the unlucky guy?” Ruhana teased, raising an eyebrow.

“Hey! Don’t say that,” Angel pouted, dramatically offended. “He’ll be the luckiest guy in the world. I mean, I chose him, didn’t I?” she added with a proud toss of her hair.

They both laughed, finishing up their breakfast before heading to Ruhana’s room. The morning sun was soft and golden as they settled into the small balcony just outside her window. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves, and the scent of fresh flowers floated in the air.

Now sitting in comfortable silence, Ruhana was still trying to wrap her head around Angel’s sudden confession. It wasn’t like her to say something so... serious. And Angel, for once, wasn’t bubbling with words – she seemed lost in thought, as if carefully choosing what to say next.

Ruhana finally broke the quiet. “So... who is this guy that made the heartbreaker herself fall in love?”

Angel looked at her, eyes twinkling but with an unusual softness. “It’s not what you think, Roo. It’s not just a crush or a fling. It’s... different.”

Ruhana leaned in, curious. “Different how?”

Angel sighed. “He drives me crazy with just one look. Time simply stops whenever he’s around. There’s something so special about him – the way he just looks at me.”

“Wow... you’re serious,” she said quietly. Angel nodded positively.

Ruhana smiled, still half in disbelief, but touched by her friend’s honesty. “Now I really need to meet this guy,” she said, folding her arms. “I need to see if he’s worthy of my best friend.”

“Let me meet him first. I just saw a glance of his.” Angel said sadly.

Ruhana looked at her in disbelief. She knew her friend was crazy, but this kind of stupidity was something she hadn't expected. She almost got angry at Angel's new confession.

“What a brat! You haven't even met him?” she asked, wide-eyed.

Angel shook her head, making a sad face. “Just saw him two or three times. He's got amazing fighting skills and so much charm. I'm literally drooling over him. Can you believe he's not even on social media?” she added in disbelief.

Ruhana let out a sarcastic smile. “Look who's talking about social media! You don't even use it, bro.”

“Don't be sarcastic, dude. I have my limitations. I can't use social media – my family won't allow it,” Angel said, pouting cutely.

“Your family is weird, Angie. They let you do anything except get famous. I mean, you can't use social media, you can't act even though you're so good, and you're an amazing pianist but you can't even apply to the music industry just because it might make you famous. I swear, it's like they're trying to keep you grounded because you're not really their daughter,” Ruhana said thoughtfully.

“Shut up, Roo. You don't know anything about them. Getting famous could be risky for me and my family,” Angel said simply.

“Why are you acting like you're some big shot's daughter?” Ruhana asked, frowning in confusion.

“No, it's not like that. My dad works with politicians, so we have to be careful,” Angel explained, clearing her doubt.

“Okay, whatever. So what are you going to do now?” Ruhana asked, leaning closer. Angel stared at her, confused.

“I mean, you’re totally head over heels for this mystery guy – how are you going to find him?”

Angel sighed deeply, sadness clouding her eyes. “I don’t know...” she mumbled, pouting.

“Hatt! Drama queen,” Ruhana teased, playfully pushing her. “If he’s the one for you, then God will find a way to bring him back.”

Angel simply nodded, a small smile tugging at her lips. With their light-hearted chit-chat, they spent the entire morning lost in each other's company.

Chapter 5

Fun Encounters

Angel and Ruhana were having the time of their lives. With loud, bizarre music blaring from the speakers—jumping around like monkeys to the song *'Yahoo! Chahe koi mujhe jungle kahe.'*

"I love you, bro, for making me this happy!" Angel shouted over the music. She knew Ruhana wasn't usually into this kind of wild fun, but she always went all out when Angel was around.

"Who needs therapy when I've got a friend like you, Angel?" Ruhana shouted back, laughing as they danced.

Angel hugged her, and they started jumping in the middle of the hug, wrapped in joy and loud music. The apartment buzzed with energy, echoing with their laughter and the carefree nostalgia of their bond.

Eventually, Angel felt thirsty and made her way to the table where they had kept the drinks. Her face twisted in disappointment when she realized all the cans were empty. Ruhana caught her expression, smiled, and signaled her to grab another from the fridge.

Angel returned the smile, dancing out of the room, still moving to the beat, the joy of the moment still clinging to her like sunshine. She opened the refrigerator to get more drinks but was interrupted by the sudden ring of the doorbell.

Frowning, she glanced at the clock—only 2:00 PM. Who the hell is here at this hour? The ringing came again, louder this time, breaking the rhythm of their fun.

Annoyed, Angel marched over to the door and yanked it open.

“Who’s that?” she snapped, not even looking at the person.

“I think I should be asking you that. Who are you, and what the hell are you doing in my house?” came the calm but sharp reply.

It was Kunal—Ruhana’s brother—home earlier than expected.

Angel sniffed, irritated. “So you’re the famous big brother?” Angel asked, finally looking at him with an unimpressed squint.

Kunal gave her a sharp look, eyes narrowing slightly. “And you are...?” he asked, taking in the sight of the stranger in his home.

Angel grinned mischievously, completely unfazed. “Hello, bhaiyaa!” Angel chirped, striking a pose. “I’m Angel—the gorgeous, chaotic best friend your sister never warned you about,” she said with an exaggerated wink, chuckling at her own dramatic introduction.

Kunal raised an eyebrow, and then cracked a small smile. “Oh great, just what I needed. Another mentally unstable person in the family.”

Angel gasped mock-offended, but played along. “Excuse me! Who’s the first mental one here, huh?”

Kunal laughed, clearly amused by how easily she rolled with his teasing. “Sachin—our eldest brother,” he said, chuckling. “He set the bar pretty high for craziness.”

Angel burst out laughing. “Well, at least your family sounds fun!”

For a brief second, the tension at the door dissolved into shared laughter. The chaos of the apartment, the loud music still faint in the background, and the two unexpected personalities clashing in the best way—it all felt oddly perfect.

“Ohho, my apologies!” Angel said dramatically, stepping aside. “Why are you standing at the door? Come on in and join our little party!”

Kunal chuckled and nodded. “Don’t mind if I do.”

Angel twirled her way to the refrigerator, grabbing more drinks for their newly arrived guest. Then, the two of them made their way back to Ruhana’s room, still buzzing with leftover energy and music.

The moment Ruhana saw her brother, she froze. Her eyes widened as she instinctively reached for the remote and turned off the music. She stood there in stunned silence, caught between confusion and embarrassment. Ruhana froze mid-spin. Her breath caught as she spotted Kunal by the doorway—watching amused. Her cheeks flushed crimson. Her brothers had never seen her like this: loose, loud, laughing. Unfiltered

“Bhaiya... what are you doing here at this hour?” she mumbled, brushing a strand of hair from her flushed face.

Kunal just smiled. “I came to have fun—with you,” he said casually, and before she could protest, he turned the music back on.

The speaker blared the next line of the song: *‘Raaste mein hum dono ghar kaise jaayenge?’*

Without hesitation, Kunal started dancing, shaking his shoulders to the beat. Then he reached out, pulling both Ruhana and Angel into the rhythm with him.

Laughter erupted again as the trio danced and shouted, spinning and hopping to the blaring music. The awkwardness dissolved, replaced by wild energy and the rare joy of being truly unfiltered—with the people who mattered most.

For the first time in a long while, Ruhana didn't care who was watching.

After two hours, the freshly formed trio lay sprawled across the bed, completely exhausted. The music was finally off, replaced by soft breaths and occasional chuckles. They were panting, their energy drained from all the dancing, jumping, and laughter.

"That was fun, dude," Angel said, chuckling as she gave Kunal a light smack on the shoulder.

Kunal laughed, still catching his breath. He had genuinely enjoyed her company. "All thanks to you, madam," he said, patting her hair in a playful gesture.

Angel smiled, giving him a quick side hug. "Well, since you called me mentally unstable and still welcomed me into your family, I guess I'll take full responsibility for all the madness and fun under this roof," she said, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

Ruhana, who had been lying silently beside them, watching the two bond, finally spoke up. "Ahem, hello? Guys? I'm still here, by the way," she said, pretending to be annoyed, her voice laced with mock jealousy.

Kunal wrinkled his nose and sniffed the air dramatically. "Hmm... I smell something."

Angel grinned and jumped in. “Ruhanaaa! You’re my best friend! How could you be jealous of me?” she teased, nudging her friend playfully.

Ruhana rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide her smile. “I’m not jealous, okay? I just... felt invisible for a second,” she said with a fake pout.

“Well,” Kunal smirked, “that’s what happens when your best friend steals the spotlight.”

The three of them burst into laughter again, the room echoing with that beautiful kind of joy that only comes from real, unfiltered connection.

It was evening. Ruhana was preparing dinner, and Kunal was helping her in the kitchen. He handed her a bowl of chopped vegetables.

“By the way, how do you know Angel? I mean, you’ve never mentioned her before,” he asked, watching his sister carefully.

“We were in school together and eventually became friends,” Ruhana replied with a grin. “If I’m water, she’s fire. Together, we’re a natural disaster. Everyone in college knows not to mess with us” She laughed loudly at her own words.

“She’s a nice girl,” Kunal said casually.

Ruhana glanced at him with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “So, my brother likes someone? If you want, I can play matchmaker for you two,” she teased.

Kunal slapped her arm playfully. “Shut up. She called me ‘brother,’ okay? Don’t get the wrong idea,” he scoffed.

Ruhana chuckled. “Just kidding, bhaiya.”

“Silly! Don’t you think she’s perfect for Sachin? I mean, she’s beautiful, values others, mature yet chirpy. If she came

into our house, Sachin's life would be full of chaos." He smirked and laughed at the thought.

Ruhana smiled, and then gave it a moment's thought. "Bhaiya, she's already in love with someone," she clarified.

"Sachin's bad luck!" Kunal said with mock pity.

"What are you two talking about?" Sachin asked as he walked into the kitchen.

Kunal gave a startled look at their elder brother, as if they had just been caught. "When did he come?" he whispered to Ruhana.

Ruhana shook her head silently, eyes wide.

"I came at four," Sachin said dryly, folding his arms. "Right around the time you two turned my house into a dance club-slash-mini bar.

Ruhana and Kunal froze, their eyes widening in shock. Ruhana opened her mouth to explain, but Sachin cut in.

"Did Angel come by today?" he asked abruptly.

Kunal smirked, mischievous;y. "Bro! You're asking about that girl? Something going on between you two?" he teased."

Sachin shot him a sharp look. "I've never met her. But unlike you, I actually know what's going on in my sister's life," he snapped

"Shut up, Sachin," Kunal snapped back, clearly irritated.

Sensing the brewing tension, Ruhana stepped between them, "Enough, both of you. Just stop!" she nearly shouted.

There was silence for a few moments. Then the trio of siblings got busy in the kitchen. Kunal was chopping

vegetables, Sachin was kneading dough, and Ruhana was simply instructing them like a boss.

Kunal groaned dramatically. "Sachin, for God's sake—get married already. Save us from this culinary torture," his face half-covered in flour.

Sachin glared at him. "You could do the same and save the world."

Kunal dropped the chopped vegetables into the pan. "Nah, you're the eldest, and I have a few suggestions for you." He winked, clearly thinking about Angel.

"No need for your sham suggestions," Sachin snapped, throwing a handful of flour at Kunal's face.

"Dude, I have a really good one. That An—" Kunal was about to mention Angel, but Ruhana interrupted him.

"Angel already has someone," she said with a wicked smile.

Sachin threw a carrot at Kunal. "She's fifteen years younger than me, you idiot!"

"But if there was a chance," Kunal said dreamily.

"You two would be even more tortured. She doesn't know the 'C' of cooking or anything domestic." Ruhana burst out laughing. "True! Angel always expects princess treatment—no exceptions."

Kunal sighed, still stuck in his fantasy. "Still, I feel she's a perfect match for Sachin."

Sachin frowned and this time hurled a griddle at him. Kunal dodged and retaliated. Within seconds, the kitchen turned into a war zone—graters flew, carrots whizzed through the air, and Kunal ducked a flying griddle like he was in an action film.

Ruhana groaned, grabbed her phone, and ordered food online. “Forget it. I’m not risking my stomach for these culinary clowns.”

Chapter 6

Blood, Tears and Emotions

Next Morning – Crime Branch Headquarters

Sachin and Kunal entered the crime branch headquarters together. Sachin had already informed his superiors about Kunal's involvement in the ongoing case. They made their way to the head of the special investigation team.

As Kunal stood in front of the superior officer, Sachin began outlining their plan.

“Sir,” Sachin said confidently, “Kunal has a strong network of informants. He'll be an asset to the team.”

He met the superior's eyes, silently assuring him of Kunal's reliability.

The superior turned to Kunal, his voice stern. “Kunal, this is your second chance to prove yourself. It might be your last. No mistakes.”

Kunal nodded determination in his eyes. “Understood, sir.”

Just then, the phone on the desk rang. A team member picked it up, listened, and then responded with urgency. “We're on it. We'll be there immediately.”

He hung up and turned to the group. “A call just came in—an unknown person reported a hostage situation at the city mall. Armed goons have taken control. They refuse to speak to anyone except Inspector Sachin.”

Within minutes, Sachin, Kunal, and the team were en route. They arrived outside the shopping mall, where chaos had already unfolded. A police officer was using a loudspeaker, trying to initiate contact.

“Listen! Sachin sir is here! If you want to talk, I’m handing over the phone to him. Over to him now.”

Sachin took the phone, his voice calm but firm. “I’m Inspector Sachin. What do you want?”

As the conversation began, a convoy of black SUVs pulled up. The Governor had arrived, flanked by security. His face was twisted in rage as he stormed up to the officers.

“What are you doing?” he shouted. “No negotiations—do whatever it takes. I don’t care if civilians die. Kill them all!”

His words sent a chill through those nearby. Sachin stared at him in disbelief.

“How can you say that?” Sachin replied, struggling to contain his anger. “Is that all civilians mean to you? Just collateral damage?”

The Governor didn’t flinch. “I said—no negotiation.”

Before Sachin could respond, his phone buzzed. A message from an unknown number lit up the screen. He read it silently:

“I am the Governor. My daughter is inside. No one knows who she is. Keep it secret. Save everyone.”

Sachin took a deep breath and slipped the phone into his pocket. The stakes had just changed.

The goons called again, this time stating their demands loud and clear.

“We want Sachin inside. Ten million dollars, a car to escape, and safe migration to another country.”

Every eye turned to Sachin with suspicion. Why did they want him specifically?

Kunal was hunched over his laptop, tapping away furiously. He glanced up and met Sachin’s eyes, giving a reassuring nod.

“I’ve accessed the security cameras,” Kunal said quickly. “Their leader—he’s Max. You arrested him seven years ago. He escaped three years back. He blames you for his wife’s death.”

Sachin’s face hardened. The past was catching up.

“I’m going in,” he said without hesitation. “Kunal, I’m leaving the rest to you.”

Kunal nodded. “Got it. I’ll guide you from here.”

As Sachin turned toward the mall, a storm was brewing—one that would test his instincts, his morality, and his courage.

Inside the Mall

Sachin stepped through the large glass doors of the mall, his senses sharp, and every muscle in his body tensed. The air inside was thick with fear and silence, broken only by the occasional muffled sobs of the hostages.

Two armed goons approached him and gestured wordlessly, forcing him to climb to the first floor. His eyes swept the surroundings. Dozens of hostages—men, women, and children—were huddled on the floor. Some held hands. Others trembled silently. A few stared blankly, too numb to react.

Sachin’s mind raced.

‘The Governor’s daughter is here... but who is she?’

She had never been in the public eye. There was no photo, no description. He was searching blindly. Then, his gaze locked onto a girl sitting in the far corner. She was different.

She wasn’t crying. Instead, she was fiddling subtly with something behind her back—perhaps a broken piece of glass, or a phone. Her defiance was buried beneath fear, but it was there.

Sachin noticed the red marks on her cheek—clear signs of a slap. Dried blood clung to a cut under her lower lip. She’d clearly put up a fight. Then, his eyes shifted to one of the kidnappers standing a few meters away. The man had a bandaged head. His expression was tight, angry.

Sachin’s eyes narrowed slightly.

They fought.

The girl had resisted. She might’ve struck that goon. That kind of courage wasn’t ordinary—not in a place like this. He took a mental note.

The kidnapper with the bandage noticed Sachin looking and gave a mocking smile, as if daring him to try something.

Sachin didn’t flinch. Instead, he allowed himself the briefest of smirks.

So that’s how things are...

He had to keep his cover and follow instructions for now. But in his mind, the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

The girl might be the one. And she had already made her first move.

"I'm already here. If you want the rest of the negotiation, then release everyone," Sachin said angrily.

Max, the leader, was irked. "You're in no position to negotiate," he almost shouted.

"I'm here. You can have your revenge on me. Let the others go if you want anything more," Sachin replied, now calm.

After a few tense moments of silence, Max considered the offer. "Fine," he said at last. "I'll let the others go. But that girl stays. She'll keep you weak. She stays with us until we board the flight."

Sachin hesitated, casting a glance at the girl. She was sitting on the floor, hands tied behind her back. He had a hunch—maybe she was the governor's daughter—but he wasn't sure. After a moment, he nodded.

"Let me talk to the team," he said and took the phone. "They've agreed to release the hostages, as long as I stay inside. But one girl will remain with them until they leave."

Kunal sighed on the other end and took command. A few minutes later, the door opened, and the hostages were released—everyone except Sachin and the girl.

The girl remained seated, her hands still tied behind her. She looked up at the terrorists with calm defiance.

"You really think you'll get away with this?" she said coldly. "This is India. Our defense forces are far stronger than you can imagine."

"Shut up, you bitch!" Max roared and raised his hand to strike her.

Sachin stepped in, grabbing his arm. "We agreed to stay as hostages, but you're not going to lay a hand on her," he said, voice firm but restrained.

Max glared at him. "Then you'll suffer in her place," he growled. He turned to strike Sachin instead, but before his hand could connect, the girl pushed him hard with her shoulder. Max stumbled back two steps, startled.

"Inspector, you can't do this. Goons like him can't crush our pride," she said, shielding Sachin with her body.

Sachin was stunned by her bravery and quick thinking. "Who are you?" He asked, almost breathless.

"Angel, I'm Angel," She replied

Before she could say anything more, Max fired a shot at her. Sachin reacted instantly, dragging her aside. The bullet grazed her shoulder, ripping through her flesh. Angel flinched, pain surging through her arm, but within seconds, she composed herself, veins tightening with resolve.

"That's okay. We have to do something, Sachin," she said through gritted teeth, pressing her hand against the wound.

Sachin was astounded. *How strong is she?*

"Alright, here's the plan," he whispered. "You distract them. I'll go for Max." They nodded in silent agreement and sat at the far corner of the room, preparing to act.

Suddenly, Angel began to cry out. "It's hurting! Hey, idiot! You shot me! I need a bandage... and a tetanus shot!" she screamed, making a scene.

A few of Max's men approached to check the commotion.

Sachin stood and snapped, "Why are you making such a fuss? It's just a scratch! The bullet barely touched you!"

Angel glared at him dramatically “How ungrateful can you be? I saved you—fought for you against these maniacs—and now you’re yelling at me? Selfish jerk!”

Sachin rolled his eyes and scowled. “What an annoying girl! Did I ask you to save me? Stop blaming me for everything. Hey Max, just make her shut up!”

Angel huffed and made a face. “How rude! I’m risking my life for you and you want me to be quiet?”

Their fake argument escalated into a full-blown shouting match, drawing Max into the scene. Just as he raised his gun at Angel to silence her, Sachin delivered a sharp kick to his gut, sending him reeling. He snatched Max’s gun just as the Crime Branch team stormed in with weapons drawn, surrounding the remaining terrorists.

“The struggle’s over, Max,” Sachin growled. “Now move. I swear you’ll rot in prison for the rest of your life.”

Max clenched his jaw, furious but cornered. He began to walk, but Sachin, briefly distracted, turned to Angel and gave her a grateful smile.

In that instant, Max lunged forward, snatching the gun from Sachin’s hand. Sachin fought back, but Max shoved him violently, knocking him aside. Max raised the weapon and aimed it straight at Sachin.

“You’re going to suffer, Sachin. It’s time to die,” Max sneered, his finger tightening on the trigger.

The gun fired. Angel threw herself in front of Sachin. The bullet struck her shoulder.

“Angel!” Kunal shouted, horrified.

Sachin was frozen for a moment, and then rushed to her side with Kunal. He caught her in his arms as she

collapsed, unconscious and bleeding. Kunal raised his weapon and fired—Max went down instantly.

“Angel! Stay awake!” Sachin cried, cradling her close as blood soaked her clothes, a sharp ache bloomed in his chest—an emotion he couldn’t name, or perhaps one he’d buried too deep to face.

The ambulance had already arrived. Sachin lifted Angel gently and ran outside with her, urgency in every step, not willing to let her slip away.

Chapter 7

Before I Know Her

Angel was in the emergency room, still being treated. Outside, Sachin paced the corridor anxiously, worry etched on his face. His eyes kept darting toward the swinging doors.

Kunal rushed in, spotted his brother, and ran up to him, grabbing his arm. "How is she?" he asked, breathless and worried.

Sachin shook his head, helpless. "They're still treating her. I don't know."

Kunal studied his brother closely. He could see the pain behind Sachin's eyes. He knew his brother too well—Sachin would never admit to what he was feeling. Without another word, Kunal guided him to a nearby chair, gently pressing him down. Then he handed him a glass of water.

Sachin drank it all in one go.

"You should get yourself checked. Your clothes are covered in blood," Kunal said softly, glancing at the crimson stains.

"It's Angel's blood," Sachin replied blankly. "I'm not hurt."

Kunal let out a deep sigh. "You told us you didn't know Angel. But today, she took a bullet for you. And now you're crying for her?" he said, noticing the dried tear marks on Sachin's cheeks.

"I didn't know she was Angel..." Sachin muttered, standing up slowly.

He walked toward the emergency room doors, peering through the small glass window. Inside, doctors moved around Angel, fighting to save her.

Sachin stood frozen, eyes fixed on her pale face. His mind drifted back... to the first time he saw her.

Flashback Begins

Sachin was out on an investigation with his subordinate. They were heading back to their car after an interrogation when his eyes caught something—something that made his blood boil.

A girl was being harassed by two men in a deserted alley. She cried out for help, but the men only laughed and kept touching her. Sachin clenched his fists and was about to intervene—when another girl appeared, fierce and unafraid.

She stormed up and slapped one of the men across the face. "Leave her alone, scumbag!" she shouted, then punched the other in the jaw.

Without hesitation, she pulled the frightened girl away from them. Sachin's eyes widened in admiration.

'The fearless girl... was Angel.'

One of the goons caught her from behind, locking her arms. "You want to act smart? Now you'll pay," he growled, raising his hand to strike her.

Before his hand could touch her, Angel twisted and kicked him square in the groin. The man crumpled to the ground, groaning.

Sachin couldn't help but laugh. "There's something about this girl..." he murmured.

But Angel wasn't done. With a powerful jerk, she threw the other attacker over her shoulder. He hit the ground with a thud. She pounced on him, slapping him repeatedly until his consciousness faded.

Sachin clapped softly, impressed beyond words. His subordinates exchanged confused looks—they had never seen their boss so captivated.

Angel stood up, clapped the dust off her hands, and looked around. Two constables had arrived on the scene.

"Hey," she said, smiling sweetly, "there's a free eye checkup camp nearby. You two should really go."

The constables frowned. "Our eyes are fine. Why are you saying that?"

Angel's expression turned fierce. "If your eyes are fine, how didn't you see these men harassing her in broad daylight?" Her voice was sharp, commanding. The constables shrank back.

"Watch your tone. Don't mess with the police," one of them warned.

"Oh? Can you repeat that?" Angel said, pulling out her phone. "Because I just recorded everything—and I'll post it online."

"Give me that phone!" the constable barked.

"Sure," Angel smirked, handing it over. "But what about the backup phone? Or the CCTV footage? Or the hidden cameras my team installed?"

The constables paled.

“We’re sorry, ma’am. We’ll take them to the station right now,” one stammered.

“You’d better,” Angel snapped. “Consider this your last warning.”

As the constables dragged the goons away, Angel sighed and walked to a nearby store. She bought a bottle of water, poured it over her face, and shook her head to clear the sweat.

Sachin stood, mesmerized. He had never seen anyone so strong, so fierce, so... unforgettable.

“Sir, shall we leave?” his subordinate asked, nudging him.

Sachin blinked out of his daze and nodded. “Let’s go.”

But even as they left, part of him stayed behind—with the girl who would later take a bullet for him.

Flashback Ends.

Sachin was pulled out of his memories as Kunal gently nudged him. The doctors had come out. Without wasting a second, both brothers rushed toward them.

“How is she?” Sachin asked voice tight with anxiety.

The doctor gave a reassuring smile. “She’s stable now. The bullet had already exited her shoulder, but the wounds were deep. She’ll need complete rest and a proper diet. We’ve immobilized her shoulder with a cast. No movement until her next review.”

Sachin nodded quickly. “Can we see her?”

The doctor shook his head. “Not yet. She’s still unconscious. We’ll shift her to a room soon, and she should regain consciousness in the next 3 to 4 hours. Then you can

meet her. And Inspector,” he added with a knowing smile, “Don’t interrogate her for a few days.”

With that, the doctor walked away. Kunal couldn’t help but laugh under his breath.

Sachin shot him a look. “What’s so funny?”

Kunal said quickly, trying to suppress his grin. “I’m just... going to the doctor for a follow-up.” He walked off in a hurry, chuckling to himself.

Sachin sighed, relief flooding through him. Angel was safe. He pulled out his phone and called headquarters to update them on her condition.

But his mind couldn’t rest. Why wasn’t anyone from Angel’s family at the hospital? Until now, he’d believed she was the Governor’s daughter—but if that were true, the hospital would be under Z-level security. There would be paparazzi outside; the media would be creating a frenzy. But none of that was happening.

‘So... who was she, really?’

‘Could it be that she didn’t have a family? Or worse, that she had one who didn’t care?’

His thoughts were interrupted by the shrill ring of his phone. It was a call from his team.

“Hello?” he answered sharply.

He listened in silence, his expression slowly hardening. When the call ended, he let the phone drop to his side, his fingers tightening around it.

They had found the information.

Angel’s family lived in the USA. She was their daughter by birth... but not by choice. She had been abandoned years

ago. The family had wanted a son to inherit their wealth, not a daughter. Angel was cast aside, forgotten.

Sachin stared blankly ahead, fury simmering just beneath the surface. *'How could anyone do that? How could a family abandon their own child... just because she was a girl?'*

He felt something twist painfully in his chest. Angel had risked her life to save his. And all her life, she'd been alone.

His fists clenched. *'She might have been abandoned once... but not anymore.'*

Kunal gently dragged Sachin to the checkup room, ignoring his brother's half-hearted protests. The doctor quickly examined him, cleaning the minor cuts and treating the bruises on his arms and knuckles.

"He's lucky," the doctor muttered, "no serious injuries. He just needs rest."

After the checkup, Kunal handed Sachin a fresh set of clothes. "Here, get cleaned up. You're a mess."

Sachin didn't argue. He stepped into the washroom, washed his face, and changed into clean clothes. As the dried blood and sweat washed away, a wave of exhaustion hit him.

"You should get some sleep," Kunal said when Sachin stepped out, looking slightly better. "You've been through a lot today."

Sachin gave a tired nod. They made their way to Angel's private ward. The room was quiet, the steady beeping of monitors the only sound. Angel lay on the bed, her face pale but peaceful, a stark contrast to the chaos that had led them here.

Sachin walked over and looked at her for a long moment. His fingers itched to brush a strand of hair from

her face, but he held back. Instead, he sat on the couch by the window.

Within minutes, the medicine started to work. His body relaxed, his breathing slowed, and he finally dozed off—his last waking thought was the image of Angel fighting for his life... and now lying there, silent, because of him.

Sachin stirred awake, blinking against the soft light filtering through the hospital room. A burst of laughter jolted him fully awake. He sat up abruptly, disoriented for a second—until his eyes landed on Angel and Kunal.

They were sitting near the bed, laughing about something he couldn't catch. Angel's smile lit up her face, and even with the bandage on her shoulder, she looked more alive than he had ever seen her. For a fleeting second, Sachin smiled too—relieved, comforted.

But the next moment, something twisted in his chest.

She was laughing with Kunal. *'So comfortably. So freely. So close.'*

His smile faded, replaced by a tight frown.

"This is a hospital, Kunal," he said, voice calm but stern. "She needs rest."

Kunal looked at him, confused. "What the...?" he muttered, and then leaned toward Angel and whispered, "He's definitely lost it. Must be mentally unstable."

Angel stifled a laugh, biting her lip. Her eyes twinkled with amusement.

Sachin's jaw tightened. He shot them both a cold look. "I'm just concerned about her health. But if caring makes me the villain, then do whatever you want."

His tone was sharp, but it was laced with something else—something Angel noticed before Kunal did. Not anger. Not jealousy, Worry, Anxiety. A kind of helplessness he was trying hard to mask behind stern words.

Angel's smile softened. Kunal, on the other hand, just blinked and shrugged.

Sachin turned away, pretending to busy himself with the curtain by the window. But inside, his mind was in turmoil—*'Why did it bother him so much to see her smile at someone else?'*

Sensing his brother's anger, Kunal quietly bid goodbye to Angel and walked out of the hospital ward, leaving behind an awkward silence.

Sachin remained inside; his back still turned toward Angel.

Angel, however, couldn't stop smiling. After all this time, she was finally face-to-face with the man she had admired from afar. A year ago, she had seen him for the first time—under the streetlight, in the middle of a chaotic brawl—and she'd fallen for him at first sight.

Flashback Begins

It was midnight. Angel was driving back to her apartment when she found the road ahead blocked. A group of men were fighting right in the middle of the street.

She frowned, muttered a curse, and slammed her hand on the horn. "Hey! Clear the road!" she shouted; growing impatient. But the men didn't even flinch. The road remained blocked.

Rolling her eyes, Angel decided to make the most of it. She always kept a stash of her favorite beer and chips in the car—midnight drives came with midnight cravings. She

cracked open a beer, tore open a packet of chips, and settled back to enjoy the street fight like it was a live-action movie.

One of the men, who looked like the gang leader, raised his hand to slap a girl—clearly from the opposing side.

Before his hand could connect, a sudden, powerful kick hit his lower abdomen. He doubled over and crashed to the ground.

And then, he appeared.

Sachin.

“Hurray!” Angel shouted, caught up in the moment, chips flying from her hand.

Sachin didn’t wait. He launched into a flurry of slaps, not giving the man a single chance to fight back or recover.

As the streetlight shifted, Angel got her first proper look at him.

His fair skin glistened with sweat, his hair slicked back with gel. He had a sharp, striking face and an effortless confidence that practically radiated power. She couldn’t look away.

His soaked shirt clung to his muscular body, showing off every line of his perfectly toned physique. Angel felt something stir inside her—a mix of admiration, desire, and curiosity she had never felt before.

She smiled like a lovesick fool, completely captivated.

Just as she was about to step out of the car and approach him, her phone rang. It was Ruhana—she had already reached home and was checking in.

Reluctantly, Angel ended the call, took a U-turn, and found another way home.

But Sachin had already taken a place in her heart.

Back to Present

Her thoughts were interrupted when Sachin finally spoke her name.

Angel turned to face him, her smile faltering into a shy, flustered expression when she caught him staring at her.

They stood there, hearts pounding, both eager to speak... yet both hesitant—unaware of the strange thread of fate that had already connected their lives.

Chapter 8

Closer than Expected

Sachin glared at Angel, his jaw tightening as he watched her laugh with Kunal. A sharp pang of jealousy pierced his chest. He couldn't understand why it bothered him so much—yet it did. Angel, meanwhile, was puzzled by Sachin's sudden coldness. She had no idea what she had done to upset him. Her heart, however, was racing with excitement. After all this time, she had finally found the man she'd been searching for. Now she knew his name. She had even risked her life to save him. Lost in the thrill of the moment, she smiled brightly—completely unaware of the storm brewing behind Sachin's eyes.

"Why are you smiling like an idiot?" Sachin's voice was calm, yet laced with a hint of anger.

Angel looked at him. "I'm watching a beautiful view," she replied, her eyes filled with love as they lingered on his face.

Sachin frowned slightly, confused, and gave her a questioning look.

She smiled softly. "Nothing. I just found you... amusing, the first time I saw you."

Sachin's lips curled into a faint smile. "When did you see me for the first time?"

Angel hesitated, unsure if she should reveal her feelings so easily. She decided to play it safe. "At the mall...when you were fighting those terrorists."

"Oh," Sachin said, smiling a little more. "You're so brave. I mean, you fought really well. Risked your life. Impressive," he praised sincerely.

"Not every hero wears a uniform, Mr. Sachin," she said with a brief, knowing smile.

Sachin didn't respond right away. His mind wandered back to that day—the chaos, the fear, the sound of gunfire. And Angel. The way she handled herself under pressure. While most people panicked, she stood her ground and fought without hesitation. And when a bullet was fired at him, she took the hit without a second thought, shielding him with her own body.

After a few minutes of silence, Sachin finally spoke, his voice low but steady. "Angel, I investigated you. You're from a wealthy family... but they abandoned you years ago."

There was a flicker of pity in his eyes, as if he couldn't believe how someone with so much could end up so alone.

Angel was momentarily stunned. *'He investigated me? She almost laughed. This filthy police officer needs to double-check his facts.'*

But she masked her amusement behind a melancholic expression, choosing to play along.

"Please don't tell anyone," she said, her voice trembling, eyes glistening with fake tears. "I don't want to be part of any sympathy session."

She covered her face with her hands, shoulders trembling as she pretended to cry. Sachin, moved by what he thought was raw vulnerability, gently patted her head.

Without warning, Angel wrapped her arms around his waist. Her voice was muffled as she buried her face against him. "Sachin, please... don't tell anyone. People will laugh at me. I'm supposed to be a wealthy heiress, but I live in a tiny one-BHK apartment. I take the bus and metro like everyone else. I only get fifteen thousand a month to survive... and I do odd jobs just to make ends meet."

She sobbed dramatically.

Sachin's arms instinctively tightened around her, pulling her close as he rested his chin lightly atop her head. He didn't say a word, but in that moment, he silently vowed to protect her—even if she didn't ask for it.

"I have a spare room in my house," Sachin said after a pause. His voice was calm, but there was something softer beneath it. "If you don't mind, you can stay with us. It's just me, my younger brother, and sister. She'd be glad to have someone around."

Angel's heart skipped a beat. *'He wants me to stay with him?'*

She was thrilled—but she masked it quickly, her expression carefully composed.

"I... I can't do that, Sachin," she said politely, shaking her head. "How could I be a burden to you? You've already done enough."

Inside, she was doing her best not to let her joy show. The offer was more than she could have hoped for, but she wasn't ready to appear eager or vulnerable.

"That's not an issue, Miss Angel," Sachin replied gently. "You risked your life for me. It's only fair I take care of you now... at least until you're discharged."

His words were practical, reasonable—but deep down; Sachin knew it wasn't just about returning a favor. He wanted her nearby. For reasons he wasn't ready to admit even to himself.

“But Sachin, how can I stay at your place? I barely even know you,” Angel protested again, her voice soft but firm.

Sachin sighed deeply. “You’re coming with me. That’s final. Period.” His tone was commanding—firms enough to shut down any further argument.

Angel blinked, caught off guard by the sudden authority in his voice. She opened her mouth, and then closed it again. There was no point in protesting.

“Fine,” she muttered.

“Now lie down and rest,” he added before walking out of the room to speak with the doctor.

The moment he was out of sight, Angel sprang up—grinning like a child. In her excitement, she accidentally jerked her injured side and winced in pain.

Ignoring it, she grabbed her phone and quickly dialed a number. Ruhana, her best friend, answered after a few rings.

“Hey, what’s up?” Angel asked, unable to contain the joy in her voice.

There was a pause on the other end, and then Ruhana gasped. “Wait a minute... Did you finally find the man of your dreams?”

Angel laughed, her voice bubbling with mischief. “I’m moving in with him.”

“What?!” Ruhana shrieked. “What the crap is happening here? You better tell me everything—unedited, unfiltered, no skipping details.”

Angel chuckled. "Relax. It's nothing like that. I got a small injury saving him, so he feels responsible. He wants to 'take care of me.' I played the whole independent, pitiful girl act and, well... he insisted."

Ruhana burst out laughing. "You're such a scammer!"

Angel grinned proudly, and then suddenly froze. She heard approaching footsteps outside the room.

"Someone's coming. I'll call you later," she whispered and quickly hung up. She lay back down on the bed, shut her eyes, and pretended to be resting just as the door opened.

Chapter 9

One Step Closer

Kunal reached home and found Ruhana sitting on the couch, deeply engrossed in a book. He sat beside her and gently patted her head. She looked up, smiled at him, and then returned to her reading.

Kunal smiled to himself and stood “Get the guest room ready. We might have a visitor,” he said with a mischievous grin before heading to his room.

Ruhana looked up, puzzled by his words. He hadn't mentioned who the guest was. Still, she put her book aside and went to prepare the guest room, wondering who the mystery guest could be.

“Bhaiya, who's coming?” Ruhana asked curiously as Kunal entered the room.

Kunal winked. “Maybe your future sister-in-law.” There was a teasing glint in his voice.

Ruhana gave him a suspicious look. “Wait, you found someone?” she asked, amused.

Kunal chuckled and nudged her lightly. “Silly! It's not me. Sachin has found someone.”

Ruhana almost squealed with delight. “So finally, he chose a girl for himself! Then why did you ask me to prepare the guest room? We should get *Bade Bhaiya's* room ready. I need to make space for her there!” She was already dreaming ahead.

Kunal tapped her forehead gently with his fingers. “Don’t rush things. It’s just the beginning,” he said, calming her down.

Ruhana giggled, her excitement bubbling over. “Sorry! But have you met her? Is she beautiful? What’s her name?”

Kunal smiled, clearly amused by her enthusiasm.

“Hold your horses. They’ll be here any moment now, I guess.” He carefully hid the truth—that the woman who was about to become her sister-in-law was none other than her own best friend. The thought of her excitement when she finally found out made his smile linger a little longer.

Ruhana beamed, unable to contain her joy. Finally, the eldest among them had someone in his life, and the thought of gaining a sister-in-law filled her with happiness.

At the hospital

Angel sat quietly on the bed while Sachin packed her belongings. The silence between them was heavy, not uncomfortable—but layered. Angel had so much to say, yet she stayed silent, her eyes fixed on Sachin’s every movement—his expressions, his body language.

‘Sometimes he was cold.

Sometimes warm.

And at other times, he felt like a stranger.

She couldn’t make sense of it.

Did he actually like me?

Or was he simply repaying me for saving his life?’

The confusion in her heart only made one thing clearer—she wanted to win Sachin’s heart and build a peaceful life with him.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Sachin's voice. "Let's head home."

She smiled faintly as he walked over and helped her off the bed. Her steps were slow, slightly awkward—her foot still sore from the fight with the goon, just before Sachin had arrived that day. But she said nothing, determined to match his pace.

Sachin glanced down, noticing the discomfort in her gait. He let out a sigh, then without saying a word, bent down and swept her into his arms.

They moved through the hospital corridor like that—her nestled in his arms, him walking with quiet purpose.

Angel blinked stunned. "What are you doing?" she asked, genuinely baffled.

"Helping you," he replied flatly. "You should've told me you were struggling to walk."

Angel couldn't help but smile. "Well.. If I had known you'd carry me like this, I definitely would've said something." She teased softly, eyes twinkling. Sachin didn't reply, but the corner of his mouth twitched—almost a smile.

After a thirty-minute drive, they finally reached Sachin's place. Without a word, Sachin lifted Angel into his arms once again and walked toward the front door. But instead of ringing the bell, he just stood there, staring at it.

Angel looked at him, puzzled. "What are you doing? Why aren't you ringing the bell?"

Sachin let out a sigh of frustration. "Do you think I have three hands?" he snapped a hint of teasing in his voice. Angel frowned, still confused.

"I'm already holding you with both hands. Press the doorbell," he almost ordered.

Rolling her eyes and clicking her tongue, Angel reached out and pressed the bell. Within moments, the door swung open, and Kunal appeared.

He gave a low whistle. "Love is in the air," he said, smirking. "I knew she was coming, but I didn't expect you to carry her in like a bride." He winked at Sachin.

Angel's eyes widened in shock. "Kunal Bhaiya! Why did Sachin bring me here?"

Kunal chuckled. "He's the first one," he said mysteriously, throwing a wink her way.

Angel suddenly remembered the last conversation she'd had with Kunal during her previous visit. He had joked that Sachin might be mentally unstable. The memory made her laugh, and Kunal joined in, the two of them sharing a high-five.

She was astonished to realize that Sachin was Ruhana's brother—the very man she had been searching for the past seven or eight months. He had been so close all along, and she hadn't even known. She laughed softly at her own foolishness.

"What are you laughing at?" Sachin asked sharply, eyeing them both.

He didn't like how comfortable they seemed with each other. A pang of jealousy stirred within him.

The laughter in the room faded instantly. Sachin guided Angel gently to the couch while Kunal handed them both glasses of water.

"Where's Ruhana?" Angel asked, glancing around curiously.

"Here I am, Angel!" Ruhana called out as she entered the living area, holding a bouquet. Angel's face lit up with a

broad smile. She immediately rose from her seat—despite her sore foot—and hurried toward Ruhana, embracing her tightly.

“I have something to tell you,” she whispered into Ruhana’s ear.

Ruhana grinned. “I have something to say too,” she replied softly.

Just then, Sachin interjected, his voice carrying a mix of concern and authority. “Angel, your foot is still sore. Don’t run around like a child.”

Ruhana’s attention shifted at the sound of his voice. “Where’s your girlfriend?” she asked, teasing her older brother.

Kunal let out an exaggerated cough and subtly gestured toward Angel. Ruhana blinked in confusion, about to respond, when Sachin cut in.

“What girlfriend?” he asked, genuinely puzzled.

Ruhana raised an eyebrow at Kunal’s expression and quickly changed the subject. “Just kidding. But I heard you were bringing a guest home.”

Sachin smiled at his younger sister. “Angel is our guest. She’ll be staying with us. Make sure you take good care of her,” he said, affectionately patting Ruhana’s head.

Ruhana gave him a puzzled look. The twisted smile on Sachin’s face and his tone left her more confused than ever. Kunal, who had been observing silently, finally stepped forward.

“Angel, I’ll escort you to your room. Come,” he offered, extending his hand.

Before Angel could respond, Sachin stepped in quickly. Without hesitation, he scooped her into his arms again.

“Her foot is sprained—she can’t walk properly. I’ll help her. You go bring her some juice,” he said sharply, his eyes flashing a silent warning at Kunal to back off.

Sachin entered the guest room, carrying Angel gently in his arms. He lowered her carefully onto the bed, making sure she was comfortable.

Angel gave him a soft smile, her eyes quietly conveying gratitude. Sachin returned the smile, and then knelt beside the bed, his gaze falling to her injured foot.

“This will take some time to heal,” he said thoughtfully. “I’ve arranged for a nurse to come during the day—she’ll take good care of you. At night, we’ll be here to look after you.”

His words were calm but firm, carrying that quiet protectiveness that always left Angel a little breathless. He reached out and gently patted her head, his touch lingering for a moment longer than necessary.

“Thank you, Sachin,” she whispered, her voice almost lost in the silence.

She didn’t know what else to say. His kindness, his care—it was too much. It made her heart ache in a way she wasn’t prepared for. Every small gesture from him only pulled her deeper into emotions she hadn’t planned on feeling.

She wanted to tell him. To pour it all out and let him know how much he meant to her. But she held it back. She couldn’t be that forward. Not yet.

So instead, she just looked at him with the quiet hope that somehow, he’d understand without her having to say a word.

Sachin sat at the edge of the bed, near her feet, his hands moving gently as he massaged the swollen area with care. Neither of them spoke. The room was quiet, filled only with the soft sound of his fingers gliding over her skin and the silent emotions building between them.

Angel's breath hitched slightly. His touch was tender, but it sent shivers through her. She flinched just a bit, caught off guard by the intimacy of it—the man she genuinely liked was touching her in the most delicate, caring way.

To hide her nervousness, she gripped the bedsheet tightly and locked her gaze onto his face, trying to stay grounded.

“Are you okay?” Sachin asked, his voice low and filled with concern as he noticed the flicker of unease on her face.

Angel took a deep breath. “It hurts a little,” she murmured, using the pain as an excuse to mask the emotions swirling within her.

Sachin's eyes didn't leave hers. He studied her expression for a moment, and then gently lifted her foot just a little. Her eyes widened slightly, caught between confusion and anticipation.

Before she could even process what he was doing, she felt the warm, soft sensation of his breath against her skin.

She blinked, stunned. He was blowing warm air over the sore area with such focused care, as if she were fragile porcelain.

A laugh escaped her—soft, surprised, and full of disbelief. The arrogant, tough officer was tending to her like she was a child, and she found it oddly adorable.

But even in the laughter, her mind drifted. *‘How can someone be so stern and yet so gentle? Is he like this with everyone,*

or... am I different? The question lingered in her heart like a sweet ache.

She watched him with quiet suspicion now—not the kind bred by doubt, but by longing.

‘Why is he doing all this?’

And more importantly... *‘Could he feel something too?’*

Sachin was still gently blowing over Angel’s sprained foot, trying to ease her pain with all the patience in the world. Angel, meanwhile, had stopped feeling the discomfort altogether—she was lost in admiring the man in front of her. The man she had once saved, who now looked nothing like a stranger. He was slowly becoming the center of her world.

She couldn’t stop watching him. The seriousness in his eyes, the softness of his touch— everything about him screamed the *man of my dreams*. Just then, the door flung open.

“Angel, tell me everything! And I mean *everything*, with all the spice!” Ruhana burst into the room, voice full of excitement and completely unaware of her brother’s presence.

Before Angel could react, Ruhana squealed again, “And tell me—are you my brother’s girlfriend?” Sachin’s head slowly turned toward his sister, his jaw tightening just slightly.

“Shall I tell you everything—with all the spices and no filters—about me and Angel?” he said, his voice calm but edged with authority.

Ruhana froze for a second, and then gave him a sheepish smile. “You’re still here?” she asked, trying to sound innocent, but the mischievous sparkle in her eyes gave her away.

Sachin let out a deep sigh and picked up the ointment from the side table. “I was massaging her foot,” he stated plainly, placing the tube down neatly.

Ruhana marched over, set the glass of juice beside the bed, and then planted her hands firmly on her hips.

“Well, we need girl time now. So... out,” she declared, looking at him like a strict teacher dismissing a naughty student.

Sachin narrowed his eyes slightly in mock annoyance, ready to respond, but just then his phone buzzed. He checked the screen and his expression shifted.

“I have to go,” he said, turning to Angel with softness in his voice that Ruhana didn’t miss. “Take care. Call me if you need anything.”

Angel nodded, a small smile playing on her lips. And with that, Sachin left the room—his presence lingering like a warm breeze, even after he was gone.

Chapter 10

Vineet's Fall, Angel Rise

Ruhana moved closer and sat beside Angel, still reeling from the shock.

Her brother had been indifferent just moments ago, and now here Angel was—smiling like she knew something no one else did.

With a playful slap to Angel's foot, Ruhana leaned in.

"Alright, spill it. With all the spice. How the hell did you end up with my brother?" she asked, curiosity bubbling over. She had never imagined her best friend would end up in his arms.

Angel grinned. "Well... I was held hostage at the mall, got shot by some goon, ended up in the hospital—and now, I'm here. In your brother's arms."

She winked.

Ruhana blinked, confused. "Wait—but you told me you already liked someone. That mystery man?" she asked, trying to piece it together.

Angel's smile deepened, her voice teasing. "Do you want the truth... or something dramatic?"

Ruhana narrowed her eyes playfully. "Everything, idiot. And don't hold back."

Angel's cheeks flushed, and she let out a small laugh before hiding her face behind her hands. "Sachin is the mystery man."

Ruhana froze. For a moment, silence. "What?!" she gasped, staring wide-eyed at Angel.

It was the last thing she expected—that her best friend had been falling for her brother all along.

"You said it was my brother you were searching for all along. When did you first see him?" she asked curiously.

"One night, I was on my way home when I saw him fighting with some goons on the road. That was the first time I saw him. He looked so hot while fighting—I fell in love with him right then and there." Angel smiled at the memory.

"It took me almost a year to find out he was your brother. Honestly, if you had just shown me his photo earlier, I would've found him much sooner!"

Ruhana playfully slapped Angel's arm. "Shut up! But seriously, this is actually a good thing. You and my brother make a great pair. I've never seen him with any other girl, but with you... he's different. He's so good to you," she said thoughtfully.

Angel smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "I saved him from that bullet. He's just being kind—nothing more," she said softly, the sadness creeping into her voice.

Ruhana paused, considering her words. "That might be true... but now that you're here with us, you've got time to make him fall for you. And don't worry," she added with a playful wink, "I'll help you."

"But I thought she doesn't need to do anything to win Sachin's heart," came a voice from the doorway.

Both girls turned their heads—Kunal stood at the doorway, arms crossed, a knowing smirk playing on his lips.

“What do you mean by that?” Angel asked with genuine confusion in her eyes.

Kunal smiled, just for a second. “I mean... he’s already fallen for you,” he said with quiet certainty.

Angel and Ruhana exchanged glances, clearly unconvinced. Angel was sure Sachin was only helping her out of gratitude, and Ruhana had begun to believe the same. But Kunal seemed to know something they didn’t.

He walked over and sat beside Ruhana, his tone softening. “I saw him cry for you, Angel. He was terrified. There was real fear in his eyes.”

His words hit like a wave, leaving both girls stunned.

“That fearless beast—Sachin—was scared. Scared to lose you.” He looked at Angel, his voice gentle now. “And if that’s not love... then it’s definitely the beginning of a beautiful story.”

Angel gave him a weird look, and then glanced at Ruhana. Ruhana understood the silent cue and turned to Kunal.

“Bhaiya, you need to leave. We need our girl time,” Ruhana said firmly, almost ordering him out of the room.

Kunal raised his eyebrows at both girls, clearly not ready to drop the subject. “I’m telling the truth. He definitely has feelings for you,” he insisted, trying once more to prove his point.

Angel let out a sigh—half in disbelief, half in exasperation. Ruhana waved a hand, signaling Kunal to leave. He gave them both a look of mock outrage, but

realizing he had lost this round, he turned and walked out of the room.

“Your brother has gone mad. He thinks Sachin has feelings for me. Useless guy,” Angel muttered, shaking her head.

Ruhana gave her a small, knowing smile. “Still, I think there’s something. He seems really concerned about you.”

Angel offered a faint smile. “I told you, he’s just repaying me for saving him. Nothing more. Now, hold your horses and get me something to eat—we have a lot to talk about.”

Ruhana nodded and stepped out. As soon as she left, Angel picked up her phone and dialed a number.

“You don’t care about me,” she said bitterly into the receiver. “No one even came to see me at the hospital. Is my identity such a burden that we have to keep it hidden?”

There was silence on the other end before she spoke again, her voice trembling.

“I don’t know... You never call me. I had to use a private number just to talk to you. I can’t even come home. And then you let those false rumors spread—that I was abandoned. Why?”

Her voice broke as tears welled up. “Dad... I am missing you.”

For a moment, she simply cried, the pain of isolation catching up to her.

“I’m at Sachin’s house,” she added quietly. “He’s taking good care of me. His sister Ruhana is my friend, so... you don’t need to worry.”

She suddenly smiled through her tears. "Okay. I'll meet him when he's back."

The moment she heard her father talk about someone dear to her, a broad smile bloomed on her face.

...

A sleek black SUV came to a halt outside a towering multi-story building located in the industrial district of the city. The name "Oberoi's" was etched in bold letters across the front.

Sachin stepped out, flanked by two of his subordinates. Without wasting time, he strode through the glass doors and stopped at the reception desk.

"Where is Vineet Oberoi?" Sachin asked firmly.

The receptionist glanced up at him and smiled politely. "Do you have an appointment, sir?"

Sachin returned her smile with a hint of sarcasm. "Do we need an appointment to arrest your boss?" he asked coolly, flashing his police ID.

The smile vanished from her face. "S-Sir... he's in a meeting. You can't go in," she stammered, clearly rattled.

Sachin's expression hardened. "Lock all the exits. No one leaves this building until the investigation is complete," he ordered. Then he turned to one of his men. "Rahul, you're with me."

Looking back at the receptionist, his tone sharpened. "Show me the way to Vineet's office—unless you want trouble."

Terrified, the receptionist nodded and quickly led them down the hallway.

Inside the boardroom, Vineet Oberoi was in a meeting with the senior management team, discussing progress on a major project. The room was filled with the hum of corporate jargon—until the door suddenly burst open.

Sachin entered with authority, flanked by his team.

“Stop the meeting. No one moves,” he commanded as he marched straight toward Vineet.

Vineet shot to his feet, clearly offended. “Who the hell are you?” he barked.

Sachin smiled and patted his shoulder lightly, almost mockingly. “Police.”

Vineet took a deep breath, trying to keep his composure. “And what brings you here, Officer?” he asked, voice tight with suppressed rage.

Sachin’s smile turned bitter. He held up a pair of handcuffs. “To arrest you.”

Vineet’s eyes narrowed in fury. “How dare you? Do you even know who I am?”

Sachin met his glare with calm defiance. “Yes. You’re a drug smuggler.”

The word drug hit Vineet like a slap. His face paled slightly, and the air in the room shifted. The board members stared in shocked silence as Vineet tried to process what had just been said.

Chapter 11

Coffees, Lies and Late Night

Vineet sank into the chair, the cold steel pressing into his back as he tried to absorb the weight of the accusation. ‘*Drug peddling? Him?*’ The very idea felt absurd. But Sachin didn’t look like a man here to joke.

Vineet straightened his blazer, regained his poise. “You’ve made a mistake, officer. I run a business—not a cartel.”

Sachin didn’t blink. He walked slowly around the desk, placing a sealed evidence bag on the table—a torn package with traces of white powder.

“Then maybe you can explain why your company’s truck was hauling this.”

Vineet’s face stiffened. He glanced at the packet, then back at Sachin with cool disdain. “I don’t micromanage logistics. I have people for that. You might want to check with them before throwing around accusations.”

Sachin chuckled dryly. “Right, blame the driver. The oldest trick in the book.” He leaned in, eyes sharp. “Let me be very clear, Mr. Oberoi. I don’t care about your suits, your boardrooms, or your PR team. I care about the law.”

Vineet’s eyes narrowed. “And I care about not being insulted in the middle of my office without proof.”

Sachin raised a brow, unimpressed. “Proof?” He tapped the table. “Your truck. Your name on the manifest. Your

laptop is now in our possession.”He turned to his subordinate.

“Take the devices. Full scan. Emails, documents, deleted files. Everything.”

The officer stepped forward. Vineet stood abruptly. “I said I’m cooperating. There’s no need to treat me like a criminal.”

“Then stop acting like one.” Sachin’s voice was low, lethal. For a moment, silence charged the room like static.

Vineet crossed his arms. “You think a uniform gives you power. But I’ve seen your kind come and go, officer. You want a scapegoat and I’m not it.”

Sachin stepped forward, closing the distance.”And I’ve been your kind too. The ones who hide behind empires built on shadows. But shadows disappear when the light is strong enough.”

The two men locked eyes—ego to ego, pride to pride. Neither blinked.

Sachin and his team collected every important document and all major devices — the accountant’s laptop, HR’s system, senior management’s files, and Vineet’s personal laptop. It was a complete sweep.

Once done, Sachin stood straight and looked around. “Summon every member of the board of directors. And Vineet too,” he said sharply to his team. “Everyone needs to be questioned.”

Vineet, who was still trying to process the chaos, shut his eyes for a moment and quietly picked up his phone. He started to type something, but just before he could send the message, Sachin grabbed the phone straight from his hand and slipped it into a sealed zipper bag.

Vineet looked at him furiously. “What the hell is this?” he shouted.

Sachin didn’t flinch. “You’re not allowed to contact anyone until the investigation is completed,” he replied, firmly.

Vineet tried to resist, but Sachin held his wrist and guided him toward the door without another word.

Outside, the office was silent. Employees stood frozen in shock, watching as their CEO and top executives were escorted out of the building by police. No one had ever imagined such a scene.

Meanwhile, Sachin turned to another officer. “Call the head of HR and the accountant to the Crime Branch. I want them in separate rooms.”

They reached the crime branch headquarters. Each member of the staff was escorted to individual interrogation rooms. Sachin began his questioning—first the HR head, then the Accounts officer, followed by other senior officials.

Meanwhile, Vineet sat alone in one of the holding cells, waiting. It was already past 11 p.m. when Sachin finally walked into his room, carrying two cups of coffee.

He placed one in front of Vineet and said calmly, “Let’s talk.”

Vineet grabbed the cup and took a cautious sip. “I told you already—I have nothing to do with drug smuggling. Someone is framing me,” he repeated, with the same steady conviction he’d shown all day.

Sachin gave a small, knowing smile. “I know.”

After fifteen grueling hours, Vineet finally felt a wave of relief. “Then I can go?” he asked, hope flickering in his eyes.

“No,” Sachin replied flatly.

Vineet shot him a sharp, frustrated look but didn’t argue.

Sachin exhaled and leaned back. “Don’t let anyone take advantage of you,” he said quietly—offering a piece of advice that cut deeper than Vineet expected.

Vineet studied him. “What do you mean?” he asked, genuinely confused. It was the first time Sachin’s tone had softened since this entire ordeal began.

“Your HR and Accountant are involved,” Sachin said directly.

Vineet’s eyes narrowed in fury. “Then arrest them!”

Sachin gave a faint, ironic smile. “Do you really think they had the guts to pull this off on their own? Someone higher up is backing them. Someone from your top management.”

Vineet sighed deeply, the weight of betrayal sinking in. “So what’s the plan?” he asked, his voice now steady and resolute.

Sachin nodded, placing a hand on Vineet’s shoulder. “Everyone’s been cleared out. You’re coming with me.”

“Why?” Vineet asked, confused.

“Let them think you’re already on remand. They might be watching your house and office. So tonight... you’ll have to put up with me,” Sachin said with a sly wink and a mischievous grin.

Vineet let out a tired sigh, equal parts irritated and resigned. But he didn’t resist.

Together, they walked out of the crime branch headquarters—two men, one night, and a truth still waiting to be uncovered.

After a 45-minute drive, Sachin pulled up outside his house. It was already 1:00 AM. Not wanting to disturb anyone, he quietly shut off the engine and stepped out. Retrieving his house keys from his pocket, he unlocked the door and slipped inside, motioning for Vineet to follow.

“Sit,” he said softly, pointing to the couch in the living room. Just as Sachin was about to head toward the kitchen, he stopped in surprise.

Kunal appeared, holding two glasses of water. “Sachin. Finally,” Kunal said, handing him one of the glasses.

Sachin raised an eyebrow. “Why aren’t you asleep yet?”

Kunal shrugged with a grin. “I was working on my case study. Heard your car and figured you’d be thirsty.”

Sachin smiled briefly, and then turned serious. “We’ve got a guest tonight. He’ll be staying over—and he’ll be sharing your room.” He nodded toward Vineet, who was now sitting stiffly on the couch.

Kunal turned to him, his smile fading slightly as he offered the second glass. “So you’re the guest. Looks like you’re stuck with me,” he said, clearly unimpressed.

Vineet took the glass with a forced smile and then turned to Sachin, clearly annoyed. “Don’t you have a guest room?”

Sachin chuckled. “We already have someone staying there. So either share with Kunal—or I can show you the garage. No bed. No AC.” He patted Vineet’s shoulder, amused.

Vineet looked at him, then at Kunal, and sighed. "Fine. I'll share the room."

"Lucky me," Kunal muttered, rolling his eyes. "Come on."

Vineet stood but paused, frowning. "Don't you people have a custom of eating dinner?" He looked first at Sachin, then at Kunal. Kunal smirked. "It's 1:30 in the morning, and now you want dinner?"

"I haven't eaten since morning!" Vineet complained. "Thanks to this guy's marathon interrogation." He gestured at Sachin.

Kunal burst out laughing. "Alright, alright. Come with me. At this hour, you're getting noodles and nothing more."

As Kunal led the grumbling Vineet toward the kitchen, Sachin shook his head with a faint smile and headed to his room. He changed into his nightwear, finally allowing himself a moment to breathe.

Sachin stepped out of his room and quietly made his way to his sister's. Opening the door just a crack, he saw her fast asleep—half-lying with a book resting on her chest, the lights still on. A gentle smile touched his face at the sight of her innocent slumber.

Carefully, he took the book from her and placed it on the side table. Then, brushing her hair softly to one side, he switched off the lights without making a sound and quietly shut the door behind him.

Next, he walked toward the guest room where Angel was staying. To his surprise, she was still awake, reading in bed. The book in her hand caught his attention—"I Am Missing You, Love" by C.N. Jaisansaria .

He knocked gently on the doorframe. Angel looked up and smiled.

“Oh, hi,” she greeted warmly as he stepped inside.

“You haven’t slept yet?” Sachin asked, his eyes instinctively scanning her injured arm.

“Just stole a book from Ruhana’s collection,” she said with a playful grin. “It’s really interesting—I couldn’t put it down.”

Sachin nodded and sat in the chair beside her bed. She glanced at him and, searching for words, asked, “Did you just get home?”

“I did,” he replied softly.

Angel tried to stay composed, but whenever he was near, something inside her stirred—awareness she was still learning to manage.

Sachin noticed her slight discomfort and stood to leave. “I think I should go. It’s late.”

Angel took a deep breath. “Wait... why did you come here at this hour?” she asked, trying to keep her tone light but genuinely curious.

He paused, and then smiled faintly. “Just a habit. I check on everyone before going to bed. But you were awake, so I knocked.”

Angel chuckled gently. “Am I rude to you?” she asked, raising an eyebrow mischievously.

Sachin looked surprised by the question.

“You always seem awkward around me,” she added, her tone suddenly more sincere. “Did I scare you or something?”

Sachin relaxed and let out a quiet laugh. “No. I just... didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. It’s not exactly ideal for a man to be in a young woman’s room this late.”

Angel grinned. “You’re not here with bad intentions... are you?” She winked playfully, catching him off guard.

He smiled, shaking his head. “Silly girl. Go to sleep now.”

He gently took the book from her hands and helped her lie back down, carefully adjusting the sling on her arm to make her comfortable.

Angel nodded, her eyes softening. “Goodnight, Sachin.”

“Goodnight,” he said, turning off the bedside lamp as he quietly exited the room.

Chapter 12

Echoes Before Dawn

It was 5 in the morning when Ruhana opened her eyes to the soft chime of a notification on her phone. She reached for it sleepily and glanced at the screen, her expression still a little gloomy. But her face lit up the moment she saw the sender's name — *Vineet*.

A gentle smile tugged at her lips as she opened the message: "I'm missing you. Will meet soon."

She smiled again this time with warmth, and quickly typed back: "I love you."

Placing the phone back on the bedside table, she sat up completely. A strange new energy flowed through her body. Without wasting a moment, she got out of bed and headed to the washroom. After freshening up, she made her way to the kitchen and prepared two mugs of coffee. She knew Sachin would be back any minute from his morning walk.

As expected, she found him already in the lawn, reading a book — part of his daily routine while waiting for his coffee. Ruhana smiled quietly and placed the tray on the table.

"Good morning, Bhaiya," she greeted, settling into the empty chair beside him.

Sachin looked up and smiled. "Finally, you have some time for your brother," he teased playfully.

She narrowed her eyes in mock anger. “You’re the one who’s always busy running around. Not me!” Her tone held a trace of accusation — the kind that only comes from someone who’s missed someone deeply.

Sachin chuckled at her expression. “Alright, alright. Then I owe my baby sister an apology.”

Ruhana laughed softly at that and handed him a coffee mug. “Bhaiya, how have you been all these days?” she asked gently.

He sighed deeply. “As usual, Ruhana. It’s never easy to get to the real culprit. All this investigation and interrogation—it gets tiring... and honestly, a little funny sometimes. But hopefully, we’ll catch the actual one today.”

“Hopefully you’ll wrap it up today. I’m missing our conversations,” Ruhana said, taking a slow sip of her coffee.

Sachin glanced at his sister and smiled. He knew they hadn’t spent much time together lately. She was his baby sister—someone who always relied on him emotionally—and clearly, she was missing him more than she let on.

“Tomorrow I’ll take a day off,” he said warmly. “We’ll spend some time together. Just the two of us.”

Ruhana chuckled at that. “A day off, huh? Are you planning to spend it with me... or Angel?” she teased, raising an eyebrow knowingly. She had always suspected that her friend held a special place in her brother’s heart.

Sachin was momentarily flustered. “Of course, with you!” he muttered, his voice suddenly a little shaky—like a thief caught red-handed.

Ruhana burst out laughing at his awkward response. “I have college tomorrow, Bhaiya,” she said, winking. “Only she will be home.”

Sachin stared at her, and then shook his head with a helpless smile. “You’re impossible.”

Ruhana burst into loud laughter but suddenly went quiet.

Sachin looked at her, puzzled by the sudden shift. “Is there something I should know?” he asked, his brow furrowing with concern.

Ruhana’s expression softened, her eyes clouding. “Bhaiya... sometimes I really miss our parents. I never even saw them.” Her voice trembled slightly, emotion creeping in as she touched a wound that never fully healed.

Sachin grew visibly uneasy. The topic of their parents always unsettled him — one he rarely allowed to surface. He shifted in his seat, trying to keep his voice steady.

“There’s nothing to miss, Roo. There was a fire at our home back in Kasauli. They... they didn’t survive. I had to move us here and start from scratch. You were just five — wouldn’t remember much.” His words came out like a rehearsed speech, crammed into the moment.

But Ruhana frowned. “I don’t have any memory of a fire, Bhaiya. None. But sometimes... I see flashes in my dreams. A big palace, some blurred faces... and a gunshot.” She looked at him, confused — part searching, and part afraid of what it might mean.

Sachin froze. For a brief second, his expression flickered—shock, worry, something deeper. But he quickly masked it with a casual smile, brushing his hand through her hair.

“Stop reading those creepy novels, Roo. They’re messing with your sleep and imagination. Try reading something light, something nice.”

Ruhana gave a small smile, but she wasn't convinced. She knew herself well — she never read thrillers or crime stories.

“Okay..” she said softly. But her thoughts lingered: *‘I know there’s something behind these flashes. And I know you’re hiding something from me. I’ll wait, bhayia. Until the day you finally tell me everything.’* She looked at her brother again and smiled — a quiet, knowing smile.

“Ruhana you go and sleep. I have to rush early.” Sachin said to Ruhana as it’s just 6 in the morning now. And he already knew Ruhana just woke up early just to have some time with him.

Ruhana smiled. “I made some sandwiches. Take them along with you. They are in your bedroom with your gun in the drawer of your dresser.”

Sachin smiled at his sister and nodded reassuringly. Ruhana yawned and returned to her room, curling back into bed. Meanwhile, Sachin called Kunal and instructed him to wake up Vineet. They had to leave for the Crime Branch Headquarters in just thirty minutes.

Half an hour later, the three men gathered in the living area, and Sachin and Vineet left the house in a hurry.

“What’s the plan?” Vineet asked, glancing sideways at Sachin, who was behind the wheel.

Sachin didn’t look at him. “The plan is—there is no plan,” he said, his tone serious.

Vineet frowned, clearly confused. “What the hell do you mean by that? Do you want me to rot in jail for the rest of my f***ing life?” he snapped, still groggy from sleep. The unfamiliar bed and having to share a room had left him irritable.

Sachin shot him a sharp glare—one that clearly said ‘*shut up*’. Vineet understood immediately and bit his tongue.

After a forty-five-minute drive, they arrived at headquarters. Inside, Vineet sat silently in a corner while Sachin got to work, reviewing files and gathering updates from his team. Everyone was focused, immersed in their tasks—except Vineet, who kept checking his phone.

Suddenly, it rang. The shrill sound cut through the room. Sachin looked up and shot Vineet another hard glare.

Vineet winched. “Excuse me,” he murmured and stepped out into the corridor. When he saw Ruhana’s name flashing on the screen, a faint smile curved his lips. He answered quickly.

“Why are you calling so early?” he asked, his voice softer now.

“Where are you, Vinnie?” Ruhana’s voice trembled with panic. News of his arrest had begun to ripple through the city.

“I’m at the Crime Branch Headquarters,” he replied calmly.

“What happened? Why are you there?” she cried, clearly shaken.

Vineet exhaled slowly, trying to keep his tone light. “Just some routine questioning. Nothing serious.”

But even as he spoke, he could feel her fear radiating through the phone. It made something twist painfully in his chest.

“Vineet... they’re saying you’re involved in some illegal business. Is it true?” she asked, her voice fragile. But deep inside, she knew Vinnie would never betray her trust.

He was silent for a moment, and then sighed deeply. “Do you trust me?” he asked, his voice low and steady, though laced with the fear that she might falter.

“More than anything,” she replied without hesitation, her voice firm and unwavering.

That made Vineet smile. “We’ll meet for lunch tomorrow. I promise.”

“Vinnie... I love you. No matter what happens, I’m always with you.”

He smiled wider at that, pressing a soft kiss to the phone’s speaker before ending the call. Then, he straightened his shoulders and stepped back into the interrogation room—ready for whatever came next.

Chapter 13

When the Mask Falls

Sachin and his team were still studying every detail thoroughly. By now, it was clear—Vineet wasn't the culprit. He was the victim. That realization only deepened their determination. After hours of relentless investigation and analysis, they finally found a lead—a clear path to the real culprit.

A calm smile appeared on Sachin's face. Vineet, still tense, noticed the shift. "Why are you smiling? Did you find something?" he asked, unable to hold back his curiosity.

Sachin patted his shoulder. "I need a break. Let's go clubbing tonight," he said casually, stretching as the exhaustion from the day caught up to him. It was already noon, and his stomach reminded him it was lunchtime.

Before Vineet could respond, Sachin continued, "Lunch first. We'll hit Rockstarzzz at 10 PM tonight, I'll bring you some clothes." Without waiting for an answer, he dragged Vineet toward the café.

Vineet remained confused the entire time. Sachin was behaving strangely—nothing like his usual self. He was known to be a ruthless and focused officer, but now, he seemed oddly relaxed, almost like a carefree boy from a different era, completely unbothered by the gravity of the situation.

While Sachin calmly enjoyed his lunch, Vineet sat across from him, barely touching his food. His mind was

flooded with questions, each one hitting harder than the last. Something felt off—but Sachin gave no space for discussion. He was clearly not in the mood for explanations.

So, despite the turmoil inside him, Vineet made a choice—to stay silent and trust Sachin. Without a word, he placed his faith in the man who had always followed the truth.

It was evening, and everyone was prepared with the plan. Sachin had already given Vineet a new outfit—something suitable for the club. The team was ready. Vineet, however, remained quiet the entire time, overwhelmed by anxiety.

He desperately wanted to know who had betrayed him—someone he had once considered family.

According to Sachin, the culprit could be someone from the higher management, possibly even one of the directors. That thought struck Vineet like a blade. He had trusted them blindly, placed them even before his own family. The idea that one of them could be behind the illegal activity—and had framed him for it—was unbearable.

He let out a heavy sigh. A part of him still refused to accept the possibility. The betrayal was too deep, too personal. But truths are often bitter, and always harsh. He was trying to prepare himself to face it—this truth that could shatter everything he once believed.

Just then, Sachin called out to him. It was time. They were leaving to execute their plan. It was 9:50 p.m. when they reached the club—**The Rockstarzz**. The lights were dim, music pulsed through the walls, and the crowd was just starting to build. Sachin and Vineet slipped into a corner table, deliberately choosing a spot with a good view of the entrance.

They ordered drinks and some food—just enough to blend in without drawing attention.

Vineet's eyes constantly scanned the room, his body tense, fingers twitching slightly. The weight of anticipation sat heavy on his chest. Tonight, he would finally uncover the face behind the betrayal that had shattered his trust.

Sachin, noticing the storm brewing inside his friend, gently placed a hand over Vineet's to steady him. "Breathe," he said softly. "We're close."

Vineet gave a faint nod, but the fire in his eyes burned fiercer than ever. Meanwhile, Sachin's phone buzzed. A discreet message flashed on the screen—it was a tip-off: the HR head and the company accountant had just arrived.

Both men entered the club moments later, their demeanor relaxed, unaware they were being watched. To Sachin and Vineet's surprise, they didn't sit at a random table—they walked straight toward the corner section, just a few tables away.

They settled in, laughing casually, and waved down a waiter. What happened next made Vineet stiffen. They ordered drinks—for four. But only two of them were there.

Sachin's eyes narrowed. Until now, they believed the conspiracy was the work of one person. This unexpected detail cracked that theory wide open. The circle was bigger. The betrayal ran deeper.

Vineet clenched his fists under the table, heart pounding louder than the club music. The pieces were moving—but the puzzle just got more complicated.

A few minutes later, Vineet's eyes widened in shock. He froze as he saw one of the company's directors—**Mr. Mehrotra**—enter the club, accompanied by **Amit**, Vineet's own Operational Head.

Both men headed straight to the table where the HR and accountant were seated. Vineet instinctively began to rise from his chair, rage flashing in his eyes, but Sachin immediately held him back, signaling him to stay put.

“Vineet, not now,” Sachin whispered firmly, almost like an order. “We need solid evidence. Wait.”

As per their plan, one of Sachin’s team members, disguised as a waiter, discreetly placed a hidden recording device on the suspects’ table—cleverly concealed under a platter. Cameras had already been installed to cover every angle of the club.

Now, it was time to gather proof.

The group at the table appeared relaxed, laughing and talking freely, convinced their plan had succeeded. In their minds, Vineet was already out of the picture. They were celebrating.

Mr. Mehrotra raised his glass with a smug grin. “I’m the second-largest shareholder in Oberoi Enterprises now. Once Vineet’s out, all his shares will come to me. I’ll become the chairperson, and his father will be thrown out too—after all, he already transferred his shares to Vineet,” he said, laughing darkly before taking a sip of his drink.

Amit sitting beside him, leaned in, his tone slightly worried. “But... What about his sister? She owns equal shares. If anything happens to Vineet, her claim is legitimate. She could become the CEO—the chairperson.”

Mehrotra’s expression twisted into a sneer. “Who knows where she even is? She’s a mystery. A ghost! She’s never been part of this company, and she never will be. She’s Vineet’s sister—the traitor’s blood. I’ll make sure she’s helpless and nowhere near the company. She’s just nobody.” He downed his drink, hatred burning in his eyes.

“This is my company now.”

Sachin walked confidently to their table and placed a firm hand on **Mr. Mehrotra’s** shoulder.

Mehrotra turned sharply, his face contorting with panic as he recognized the officer. “What do you want, Officer?” he stammered, trying to mask the tremble in his voice.

Sachin smiled with calm menace. “I heard you’re distributing shares tonight... so I thought I’d come collect mine,” he said with a teasing wink.

Mehrotra tried to regain control. “What do you mean, Officer?” he asked, attempting to sound firm but failing to hide his nerves.

Before Sachin could reply, a familiar voice cut through the air. “He means, let’s divide the shares,” Vineet said as he stepped out of the shadows. “Maybe I need some too.”

The blood drained from Mehrotra’s face. “Mr. Vineet?! You were in custody—what are you doing here?” he gasped, disbelief and fear etched across his face.

Vineet walked straight up to him and, without a word, slapped him hard across the face. The force of it silenced the table.

Everyone froze. Vineet’s eyes glistened with emotion. This man had been his most trusted advisor—someone he treated like family. The betrayal felt like a knife to the heart.

“Do you know, Sachin,” Vineet said quietly, voice trembling, “who’s most likely to betray you?”

Sachin looked at him, already knowing the answer. “The one you trust the most,” Vineet finished.

He looked shattered. Broken. Like the weight of truth had finally collapsed on his shoulders. Sachin, staying composed, signaled his team. "Take them away."

As Mehrotra and the others were arrested and led out, Sachin turned his eyes back to Vineet. He saw not the powerful executive everyone feared, but a man devastated—standing silently in the ruins of his trust.

A man who gave everything... and was still left betrayed. Sachin gently pressed a hand on Vineet's shoulder, offering silent support. No words were needed—just presence.

Vineet looked at him, eyes heavy with grief, and managed a weak smile. "I need some time to accept the reality," he said quietly. "We'll talk tomorrow."

Without waiting for a reply, Vineet turned and walked out of the club, his steps slow, heavy—like each one carried the weight of his shattered trust. He didn't look back—not at the people, not at the lies, not even at Sachin. Just kept walking, one step at a time, carrying the ruins of his faith.

Sachin remained where he was, watching him go. Then he exhaled, composed himself, and got back to work. He and his team carefully collected all the recording devices and secured the gathered evidence. The once vibrant club now felt hollow—its glamour stripped away by truth.

Soon, everyone departed the scene and headed back to the Crime Branch Headquarters, where the formalities and legal procedures awaited. The night was far from over—but the truth had finally seen the light.

Chapter 14

Silence Between Us

It was midnight. Angel was still up, working on an assignment Ruhana had asked her to complete. Her right hand was still in a cast, so she was carefully typing with her left hand, slower than usual but determined.

A few moments later, Ruhana walked in with two steaming mugs of coffee. Without a word, she sat beside Angel and handed her one.

Angel smiled warmly and took the mug. "I really needed this," she sighed, taking a sip. But something was off. Ruhana was unusually quiet, her eyes distant, clearly lost in thought.

Angel noticed instantly. A soft, knowing smile touched her lips. She nudged Ruana playfully. "What's bothering you?" she asked in a teasing tone.

Ruhana gave her a glance and shook her head. "Nothing," she murmured. But her expression said otherwise.

"Are you worried about something?" Angel asked, watching Ruhana closely.

Ruhana gave a weak smile. "Yes... I'm thinking about Bhaiya. He's been through so much lately. He survived that bullet—thanks to you. And now he's drowning in a high-profile case. He doesn't even have time to breathe, let alone

rest." Her eyes drifted to the family photograph hanging on the wall.

Angel returned the smile, understanding the depth behind Ruhana's words. It was more than just a sister's concern—it carried the weight of a mother's worry.

Ruhana was indeed worried about Sachin... but even more so, about Vineet. He was still in custody, falsely accused. The fear of what might happen to him gnawed at her constantly.

Angel said nothing—she simply hugged her friend, her only friend. In that quiet gesture, she conveyed everything: her need to be consoled, to be understood. She clung to Ruhana, to comfort Ruhana in her warmth, in the security only a true friend can offer.

Ruhana hugged her back. Tears brimmed in her eyes, stopping just at the edge of her lashes. She didn't want to cry. Instead, she held them back and let herself feel the embrace—the emotion, the care, the silent promise of support.

That one silent hug between two friends needed no words. The emotions they shared were deep, raw, and beyond description. In that moment, they felt seen, cared for, and healed.

They stayed in the embrace for a few more seconds, until a phone rang—Ruhana's. She glanced at the screen. It was Vineet. A small smile tugged at her lips as she picked up the phone and quietly stepped out.

She answered the call. On the other end, Vineet remained silent—too overwhelmed to speak. Though he was technically out of the mess, the storm inside him hadn't settled. The betrayal he had faced was something he never saw coming, and he was still struggling to accept it.

Ruhana could hear the heaviness in his breath, the quiet weight of emotions he wasn't ready to voice.

"Vineet," she spoke softly, "I trust you. Whatever it is, everything will be okay. It'll all be sorted soon."

"It's over," he replied in a low, flat voice. There was no relief in his tone—no joy, no triumph.

Ruhana, unaware at first, jumped in delight. "That's amazing news!" she chuckled, a wave of tension lifting off her chest. For the first time in days, she could breathe in happiness.

"You owe me a treat now!" she added playfully, genuinely happy for him and eager to celebrate. But then, her smile faded. Something felt off.

Vineet didn't sound like himself. He was unusually calm—and Vineet was never the calm one. He was expressive, vibrant, always wearing his heart on his sleeve. But now, there was stillness in his voice that felt unsettling.

"Aren't you happy?" she asked quietly, the cheer in her voice replaced by concern. His silence felt like standing in the middle of a graveyard—still, cold, and echoing something unspoken.

"I was betrayed by the man I trusted the most," Vineet said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "He was my father's best friend. Someone I looked up to all my life."

He paused, letting out a shaky breath. "He didn't need to do this. He was already a director... but still, he chose ambition over loyalty—for a higher position in the company. For power."

His voice cracked slightly, but he didn't try to hide it. For once, he wasn't masking his pain. He wanted it to be heard, to be felt. Maybe speaking it out loud would make it

easier to carry. Maybe letting it bleed out through words would help the wound ache a little less.

"These wounds... they can't be healed," he added quietly. "Not this kind."

Ruhana sighed softly, her voice firm yet compassionate. "Vineet, you have to stay strong. Life doesn't always go the way we expect, and the worst betrayal is when it comes from someone you trust the most. But you can't let this break you."

Ruhana swallowed the lump in her throat. Her voice came out firm, yet full of compassion. "You've already lost so much—your peace, your trust, your business... but there are still people depending on you. Your family, your employees—thousands of them. They believed in you. You owe it to them... but most importantly, you owe it to yourself to rise again."

Vineet remained silent, staring ahead, but she could imagine his jaw tightening slightly, as if her words were striking something inside.

Ruhana sighed and her tone was much calmer than before. "Vineet, this is life. It's harsh and unfair, but you can't run from it. You have to face it. Be brave. Accept both the good and the bad, because only then can you move forward." This time Vineet smiled a little.

"We'll meet tomorrow for lunch. I'll share the location." He said and this time he is calm and bit at peace. Ruhana was relieved finally when she heard his voice with calmness. They talked a bit for some more times shedding fears and stress away. Then they called the night and ended the call.

She picked the glass and moved towards the kitchen to refill the glass.

Sachin unlocked the door and stepped inside. The silence of his home greeted him like an old friend—it was nearly 1:00 a.m. He headed straight to the kitchen, parched and drained. When he opened the fridge, a faint smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

‘Ruhana... she never forgets.’

She had left him food again. A small gesture, but tonight, it felt like comfort. He warmed the meal and quietly walked to his room. The weight of the day still sat heavy on his shoulders. After changing into his nightwear, he sat down and ate in silence, lost in thought.

After finishing, he cleaned up, made himself a strong mug of coffee, and wandered back into the quiet of the house—until his feet unknowingly led him toward Angel's room.

Just the thought of her made his chest feel oddly light and heavy all at once. He tried to reason with himself. *‘She's young. Too young. Just a kid when I was already broken. And now... my sister's best friend.’* Still, that strange warmth in his chest didn't go away. But his thoughts shattered when a sharp, terrified scream echoed through the hallway.

His heart dropped.

Angel!

He bolted toward her room and pushed the door open in a panic. What he saw wrenched his heart—Angel lay on the floor, tangled in her blanket, her cheeks soaked with tears, her body trembling.

"Angel!" he gasped, rushing to her. He knelt beside her and carefully lifted her into his arms. She didn't resist. She clung to him like a frightened child, burying her face in his shoulder.

He helped her onto the bed, cradling her gently. "What happened, Angel?" he asked, brushing the hair from her tear-streaked face.

She sobbed, the words tumbling out between gasps, "I... I fell from the bed. I was dreaming... and in that dream... you were walking away. I kept calling you, running after you... and then... you disappeared into the darkness. You left me."

Her voice cracked on the last word. Sachin's heart ached at the raw fear in her eyes. He placed a comforting hand on her head, his voice soft and steady.

"Angel..."

She didn't let go. She wrapped her arms tighter around him, like he was the only thing anchoring her to reality. "Promise me..." she whispered, brokenly. "Promise me you won't leave me like everyone else did... Like my family did..."

The words hit him like a blade to the chest. He hesitated. He couldn't say it. Couldn't lie. Couldn't promise what his heart wasn't yet sure of.

Instead, he gently pulled away and made her sit upright. "It was just a dream, Angel. Nothing more," he said, his voice tender but distant.

He noticed her foot was swollen again. He fetched the balm and began massaging it gently, almost reverently.

"You saved my life," he murmured. "And I owe you for that. I'll be there whenever you ask. That's a promise I can keep."

But Angel suddenly pulled her foot away. "That's okay. I can manage. My brother called. I'm leaving tomorrow," she said coldly, wiping her tears as if nothing had happened.

Sachin froze. The words hung in the air like a slap.

'Leaving?' He looked at her—really looked. Her face was calm, lips firm, but her eyes... they had already left.

"What? But... you said you'd stay until you were better."

"I agreed because my brother was out of India. He's back now. So I'll go."

"I didn't know you had a brother," he said, trying to process the sudden shift.

Angel's lips curved into a tight smile. "You're a brilliant detective, Sachin. But even you can't see what I don't want anyone to. He's my cousin, actually."

She tried to lean back against the headboard, but pain shot through her arm and she winced. Sachin reached out instinctively, but she stopped him with a raised hand.

"You've done enough. More than enough," she said with a hollow smile. "Thank you for taking me in when I had no one. That was kind, and I'll always be grateful. But I don't want to be anyone's burden... not anymore."

Sachin stared at her, feeling like the ground beneath him had shifted. This wasn't the same Angel who used to light up the room with her presence. This was someone hurt... someone shielding herself behind walls he had unknowingly helped build.

"We had an understanding," he said, gently but firmly. "You were supposed to stay until you healed."

She nodded. "Yes. But that understanding ended when I realized... expecting anything from you was a mistake."

The words cut deep. He took a slow breath. "I can't make promises I'm not sure I can keep. But I'll try, Angel. I'll try to be there... for you."

Her lips trembled. She smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Don't force yourself to care. I don't want your guilt or your gratitude. I wanted something else... but that was my mistake. So let's not make this harder."

She took a deep breath, blinking back tears, and whispered, "Good night."

Sachin stood there, speechless. Her eyes were closed now, but a tear escaped the corner, tracing down her cheek.

He wanted to say something. Anything. But he didn't.

He turned and walked out, the guilt clawing at his chest. He hadn't meant to hurt her. Hadn't meant to break the fragile hope she had offered him. But he couldn't give what she wanted... not when his own heart was still shackled to a past that refused to let go.

And outside her room, in the hallway filled with silence, Sachin realized—

He wasn't the only one bleeding quietly inside. He directly moved to his room and threw himself on the bed. He wanted to cry, shout and pour his heart out. He wanted to heal himself and he found the medicine to heal in Angel but his past was still lingering around him. He could never forget the pain he experienced. He was in pain but unable to share it with anyone, especially Angel. He didn't want to be weak in front of the girl he liked the most or can say loved the most.

His eyes were shut tight but the tears still slipped through. Flashes from the past refused to fade — haunting him like ghosts that never left. The pain, the trauma... it never truly ended.

A sudden blur of memories surged through his mind. — *He was running along a beach, and a girl of his age was chasing him, laughing.*

He stood at an airport, surrounded by Z+ security, flanked by an older couple who looked both proud and cautious. –A grand palace loomed in the background, majestic but cold. – An argument. Raised voices. Fear – And then.. a gunshot

His eyes flew open with a jolt. His chest heaved as he struggled to catch his breath. He pressed a hand to his heart, as if to keep it from breaking open again.

He wanted to accept what he felt for Angel – the strange, warm pull in his chest that surfaced every time she smiled. But he couldn't. Not yet. Maybe never.

Years ago, he had lost someone he loved – and it had shattered him in ways no one truly saw. He couldn't afford to feel that again.

Not when he believed in loving someone... put them in danger. To him, love wasn't just fragile – it was fatal. He and Ruhana were still alive because they had followed one rule: *never get too close to anyone*. Because once you did, the consequences could be bloody.

So he denied it. Repressed it, locked it away because in his world— **Love was forbidden.**

Chapter 15

When the Silence Speaks

It was morning when Ruhana slowly opened her eyes, the golden rays of sunlight filtering through the curtains. She reached for her phone on the bedside table and smiled instantly—there was a message from Vineet.

“Lunch at this place today :)” — with a location pinned below.

Her heart lightened. She replied with a quick, warm confirmation before slipping out of bed and heading to the washroom.

After freshening up, she made her way to the kitchen, expecting her usual solo breakfast routine. But what she found left her momentarily amused and confused—both her brothers, Kunal and Sachin, were in the kitchen, fumbling with ingredients and utensils.

She blinked in surprise.

“What’s going on?” she asked with a half-laugh, leaning against the doorframe.

“Well, my brothers are cooking, of course with the help of house help. It feels great,” she chuckled, delighted by the rare sight. Nothing brought her more joy than seeing them like this—especially when she didn’t have to cook.

Kunal looked over his shoulder and groaned dramatically, shooting a glare at Sachin. “He dragged me into

this. I could still be in bed!" he grumbled, clearly cranky. "This is a crime against my sleep."

Sachin laughed, completely unfazed. It had been a while since he'd had the luxury of a morning like this—calm, warm, and surrounded by his siblings "I wanted to cook for you, Roo. I missed this," he said, softening as he turned toward her. "You know I've been buried in back-to-back cases. But today... Today I took the day off. It's just us."

He ruffled her hair lovingly. Ruhana smiled as a flicker of guilt in her eyes. "But... I have a class today," she admitted hesitantly. She didn't want to hurt him—he had taken time out just for her. But she'd already promised Vineet she'd meet him for lunch. And after all the pain he'd been through recently, she couldn't turn her back on him either.

Sachin paused for a moment and then smiled, understanding lighting his eyes. "It's okay, Roo. We'll have breakfast together, and after college, dinner is on me."

He didn't try to stop her, didn't even attempt to guilt her into staying. That wasn't his way. He valued her independence too much. And besides, this plan worked in his favor.

Earlier that morning, he had nudged Kunal to take on a new case, assigning him the preliminary investigation work—just to keep him occupied. Sachin had his own reason. He needed the house empty. He needed to finish a conversation he had left unfinished with Angel the night before. A conversation that still lingered in his mind.

"Bhaiya, where are you lost?" Ruhana asked, breaking his thoughts with a playful nudge.

Sachin shook his head with a sheepish grin. "Nowhere. Just thinking... if you're off to college and Kunal is going to

HQ, I'll finally get to sleep all day." He stretched theatrically, pretending to yawn.

Ruhana laughed "You? Resting? That's a headline-worthy event."

The kitchen filled with the sounds of soft laughter, clinking dishes, and the warmth of a family trying, in their own way, to make up for the time life kept stealing from them.

"Don't try to fool us, Sachin," Kunal smirked, flipping a paratha in the pan. "We know you're planning to spend time with our future sister-in-law."

He shot a mischievous wink at Ruhana. Ruhana gasped, her eyes lighting up with playful delight. "Ohhh! So that's the reason behind the surprise breakfast and sudden day off!" She grinned widely.

"Carry on, Bhaiya. But don't take too long. I'm waiting for the good news! I want our official bhabhi soon!"

Sachin rolled his eyes and gave them a half-hearted glare, but it lacked any real sharpness. He tried to hide his unease, but his silence said more than he intended.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Kunal narrowed his eyes on him. "That means we're right! So... you're finally going to confess to her, huh? Woohoo!" He threw his hands up in a dramatic cheer.

"Yes! That means—at dinner—she'll be sitting right beside you," Ruhana joined in, clapping her hands in excitement. "I'm so happy for you, Bhaiya. Even Angel loves you dearly."

That sudden sentence hit Sachin like a sharp gust of wind. He froze, staring at her. "What... Did you just say?"

Ruhana too caught up in her joy, didn't notice his change in tone. "That Angel loves you. For many months now! And just a few days ago, she realized you're my brother! Can you believe it?"

Sachin blinked. "Many months?" he echoed, stunned. His brows furrowed, confusion written all over his face.

He had never imagined... Not once. Angel had never said a word. Not a hint. Last night, all she asked from him was a promise. A promise that he would stand beside her.

'No confessions. No talk of love. Just a quiet, unspoken plea for support. And now this.'

Ruhana, bubbling with excitement, began sharing the whole story—how Angel would talk about him, how she used to hide her feelings, how shocked she was when she realized Sachin was Ruhana's brother. All while completely unaware that she was breaking the unspoken **BFF code**.

Sachin sighed deeply, running a hand through his hair, the weight of realization settling over him. So she loved him all along. And yet... Last night, she didn't want love. She just needed him there.

'She didn't ask for a confession... just a promise.' His thoughts circled back to that fragile moment from the night before, her eyes filled with pain and longing—not for romance, but for reassurance. For someone who wouldn't leave.

The teasing in the kitchen faded into a soft silence, as Sachin stood still, processing the truths he never saw coming.

"Food's ready. Ruhana, lay out the dishes," Kunal said, switching off the gas stove and wiping his hands on a kitchen towel.

Sachin snapped out of his thoughts at Kunal's voice, shaking his head slightly as if returning from a distant place.

Ruhana moved quickly, setting the plates and cutlery on the table. The two brothers brought over the breakfast and freshly brewed coffee. Within minutes, the table was filled with the comforting aroma of homemade food.

They all sat down, and Kunal began serving generously. Ruhana took her first bite—and her eyes widened instantly. She chewed slowly, savoring every flavor, and then closed her eyes in dramatic bliss.

“Muaaah! Bhai, you should definitely cook daily. This is divine!” she exclaimed, kissing her fingertips like a true food critic. Then she extended her hand toward Sachin with a wide grin.

Sachin chuckled a warm, amused look crossing his face. “Silly girl. I can’t cook daily! And I need Seema Didi’s help for cooking” he said, shaking his head.

“The kitchen is your kingdom.” He winked at her, and Ruhana groaned, sticking out her tongue in protest. “Ugh. You two just want to escape kitchen duty forever!”

Kunal laughed. “Guilty as charged.”

Despite the teasing and bickering, the room felt full. Full of warmth, of love, of the quiet kind of happiness that comes from having family around the table—even when life is messy, complicated, and full of secrets.

But as Sachin sipped his coffee, a part of his mind still lingered on Angel... and the unexpected truth that had come to light just minutes ago. Everyone left after breakfast—Ruhana to her class, Kunal to the headquarters. The house gradually fell into a comforting silence.

Sachin remained behind.

He quietly prepared a plate with breakfast and poured a fresh mug of coffee, placing everything neatly on a tray. Then, without rushing, he walked toward the guest room. His footsteps slowed as he approached the door. He hesitated for a second—then knocked gently and pushed it open.

Inside, Angel was busy packing.

Sachin paused in the doorway, surprised. He hadn't thought she meant it seriously when she mentioned leaving last night. But here she was—folding clothes, zipping bags, gathering her things like she truly meant to go.

He stepped inside, set the tray on the table, and walked toward her. Without a word, he reached out and gently took her hand, turning her to face him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, his voice low, laced with concern and disbelief.

Angel looked up at him. She seemed different from the night before—her skin no longer pale, the fear no longer clouding her eyes. Last night she looked broken. But now... she looked composed. Stronger. Almost determined.

"Packing my stuff," she said calmly. "My brother is sending his driver to pick me up."

Sachin's gaze searched her face, trying to read between her words. Something in her was still guarded—he could feel it. Like a door had closed overnight, slowly but intentionally.

He took a step closer, still holding her hand gently. "You don't have to go," he said quietly. "Not like this."

Angel took a deep breath to calm her. She glanced at Sachin with a smile. "I can't stay here forever," she repeated quietly.

She wanted to stay, but she was hurt — hurt because he didn't understand her fear last night. She had just asked for a promise — a simple promise to stay with her. She didn't ask for anything major. All she wanted was for him to be by her side. She didn't want to be abandoned by him like her family had abandoned her.

Yes, she was abandoned — that was true. But the reasons weren't cruel, as Sachin had assumed. It was for her safety. She couldn't reveal the truth about her family. Being the only daughter of a prestigious family came with its own burdens. It was better for her to stay hidden from the limelight.

Still, she had thought Sachin would be there for her — always. But he didn't answer. That silence hurt more than anything. And that was why she had made the decision to move out.

She grabbed the handle of her trolley bag and was about to walk away when Sachin reached out, his hand wrapping around hers on the handle. "Please.. Don't go," he almost pleaded. It wasn't a confession — not even close — but a desperate attempt to stop her. He still wanted her to stay, at least until she was fully recovered. He wanted to take care of her. But maybe she had expected too much from him... or maybe he had completely misunderstood her words.

"Sachin, I'm fine. Karan is on his way. I need to leave," she said softly, trying to pull away.

But he held her arm a little tighter and gently made her sit back on the bed. "Let's talk," he said, his tone calm and quiet. Angel gave a small nod and looked at him intently.

"I'm not who you think I am," he began, hesitating. "I might be dangerous. I have... things I haven't told you. He looked down. "It's not that simple. If all you want is

someone to be by your side, I'll be there — I promise. But if you expect something more... then I'm sorry."

His words were clear, but the truth behind them was anything but simple. Angel's expressions hardened. She gave him a light shove. "Something more?" she shot back, narrowing her eyes.

Sachin looked genuinely confused. "I mean you said things, and I thought you—"

"You thought I was proposing?" She cut him off. "Are you insane? It's way too early for that."

She stood up in frustration, pacing. "I only asked for your support. Yes, I like you. That's true. But that doesn't mean I want a relationship right now. You could've just been honest instead of acting like this."

Sachin shut his eyes, visibly embarrassed, unable to find the right words.

Angel walked back and grabbed his shoulders, shaking him lightly in frustration. "See? I was right — you were being delulu! I like you, but that doesn't mean I'm ready for... this." She paused. "I'm not even sure what kind of person you really are."

She exhaled deeply trying to steady her voice. "For any further steps, I need to know you. Your likes, your dislikes, your flaws, your strengths — all of it. I can't think of anything beyond friendship unless I truly understand you first."

Sachin looked at her again, this time with genuine amusement and a clearer head.

"I'm sorry," he said, finally admitting it. "I was really being delusional."

Angel cracked a smile. "You really made me mad, you know? For a moment, I thought I made you uncomfortable

with my behavior. Idiot — it was all about you and your weird, twisted assumptions about love!”

She let out a loud laugh, unable to hold back anymore. “God, I should leave — if I stay, I’ll start laughing every time I see your face.”

Sachin chuckled too, her laughter contagious. For the first time in days, he felt lighter — as if a weight had been lifted off his chest. “You can laugh at me all you want,” he said with a soft smile, “but please... don’t go. As you said — let’s get to know each other first.” He said and patted her head lovingly. Angel nodded, this time with a soft smile — a genuine one.

Sachin felt a wave of relief wash over him. Her smile, her agreement to stay... It felt like a quiet promise, a sign of something new, something better beginning between them.

He picked up the food tray from the side table and handed it to her gently. “Here, have your breakfast,” he said with a small grin. “Meanwhile, I’ll take care of your almirah. It’s a disaster zone.”

Angel chuckled and took the tray. “You’re still judging my wardrobe?”

“I have to,” he teased, lifting her bag and walking to the wardrobe. “It’s a matter of survival.”

As she quietly began eating her breakfast, peace settled in the room. He folded her clothes one by one; pretending to be focused — but every now and then, he stole a glance at her. And she noticed, hiding a shy smile behind a spoonful of food. For now, words weren’t needed. Their silence wasn’t empty — it was comforting.

Chapter 16

When the Worlds Collide

It was noon when Ruhana arrived at the location Vineet had shared earlier that morning. The place was quietly lavish – an elegant, tucked-away restaurant that whispered exclusivity and calm.

As she approached the entrance, her eyes found him. Vineet waiting. A rare sight. Usually, it was Karan – his overly serious, ever-annoying assistant and bodyguard – who showed up on his behalf. But today, he was here himself.

Without thinking, Ruhana quickened her pace and rushed into his arms. Her breath caught as she wrapped herself around him – familiar, solid, and safe.

Tears welled up and slipped down her cheeks. She had held them in too long. He had survived something terrifying... something that had shaken her more than she let on.

For weeks, she believed he was simply away in the U.S. on business. That was the story she was told – and the one she forced herself to believe. Until the headlines broke, the allegations, the arrest, the chaos.

He had made it through. Cleared, alive but changed. Now, in front of her – real, quiet, and warm – stood Vineet. The man she had worried about every single night.

Vineet held her gently, his palm on the back of her head. Steady. Soothing. He didn't say much. Just offered a quiet smile – one that carried both pain and peace.

“Roo,” he murmured, “the worst is over. There's nothing to worry about now.”

Ruhana nodded against him and slowly stepped back, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

“I'm famished,” she said, half-laughing, trying to steady her.

Vineet smiled. “Then let's fix that.”

He reached for her hand and led her inside.

Everything was already arranged – the table, the privacy, the soft lighting, the low hum of instrumental music. It wasn't grand for the sake of display. It was intentional. Intimate.

He wanted this moment for them – without the world.

Ruhana took it all in, smiling softly. She knew Vineet's style – extravagant, yes, but always thoughtful when it came to her. This wasn't to impress. It was to give her peace. A space where they could breathe.

He pulled out a chair for her and took the seat across. For a moment, he simply watched her – like just being near her allowed him to exhale.

And she understood. He didn't want to talk about the headlines or untangle what had already been burned down. He just wanted to be present.

“How are you?” she asked gently. Then corrected herself. “Actually... don't answer that. Just tell me what's next. After Mehrotra... after everything. I know it's not easy – being betrayed by someone you trusted.”

Vineet's expression stayed composed, but his eyes darkened.

"I don't know," he said quietly.

There was something hollow in his voice — not broken, but shaken. Being betrayed by someone he trusted like family had fractured something deeper than pride. It had left him doubting his own judgment.

Ruhana's heart ached. She had always seen him as composed, unshakable. But now, he sat in front of her, open and uncertain. "It's okay to feel like that," she said gently.

He reached across the table and took her hand — not just for comfort, but for something grounding. At that moment, she was his anchor.

"Whatever it is," Ruhana whispered, "I'm with you, always."

She didn't need to say more. Sometimes, love wasn't about grand declarations. Sometimes, it was simply showing up.

Vineet exhaled, took a sip of water, and leaned back. "I was in the U.S., yes," he began. "But I flew back the night before everything exploded. There were already whispers... we were mid-meeting when Sachin stormed in. Arrested me — right there. Said I was responsible for everything under my name."

He paused, the memory visibly weighing on him.

Ruhana listened carefully — until that name. "...Sachin?" she asked, her voice brittle. "Sachin arrested you?"

Vineet nodded slowly. Her stomach dropped.

Sachin — her brother, the man who had raised her., protected her. And now... the one who'd arrested the man she loved.

"Vinee... he's my brother," she said, barely able to get the words out. "If it was him... he'll never accept us." The warmth drained from her face. Reality hit hard.

Vineet scoffed under his breath. "That arrogant man is your brother? No wonder he doesn't like me."

Ruhana shot him a glare. "You were cleared, Vineet. You're not a criminal. Stop acting like a victim and start trying. If you really want this — want *us* — then try. He's my brother. That matters."

Her voice softened. "He may be rigid, yes. But he's a good man. If you put in the effort, he might come around."

Vineet sighed. He didn't want to deal with Sachin again — but for Ruhana, he would.

He looked at her and nodded. "Anything for you. I'll try. I'll convince him." But inside, he knew — this wouldn't be easy. Convincing Sachin might be one of the hardest things he'd ever attempt.

Ruhana smiled faintly, though her worry lingered. "Will he agree?" she asked; her voice barely audible.

Vineet took her hand again, enclosing it gently between both of his. His touch was warm, steady. "He has to," he said. "He's your brother. And if there's one thing I know... it's that your happiness means everything to him."

He paused; thumb brushing over the back of her hand.

"And I am your happiness," he added with quiet certainty. "He may resist. He may question me. But I'll make him see the truth — that I'm here for you, no matter what.

Earning his trust is my job now. And I will — because you're worth it."

Ruhana chuckled at his confidence. There was something so comforting in the way he spoke — sure, steady, and full of love. After her brothers and Angel, it was Vineet who felt like hers completely.

No matter what the world thought of him — the ruthless, arrogant businessman — to her, he was "loving." Soft, warm, and impossibly kind. But only for her.

Despite his towering success, he had never been part of scandal. Ruhana admired that about him — his dignity, his honesty, his humility. She hadn't met his family yet, but he often spoke of them with deep affection. He had promised to introduce her when the time was right. And she trusted him — not just with that, but with everything.

Vineet snapped his fingers in front of her eyes. "Lost in me again? I know I know... I'm handsome," he teased, grinning.

Ruhana rolled her eyes and slapped his arm playfully. "Stop teasing me." He only smiled and took her hand again, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. Lunch was served. They shifted to the steaming dishes in front of them, the space between them slowly filled with soft conversation and warm laughter. They talked about her studies, his business plans, silly memories, and everything in between.

And in that quiet dining room, wrapped in golden light and gentle music, it felt like the world had paused — just long enough for them to belong to each other.

For a few rare hours, there were no arrests, no betrayals, and no headlines. Just love — quiet and real — stitched together through shared meals, steady hands, and the promise that even after the storms, they still had each other.

Chapter 17

A Hug and A Wound

It was early evening when Ruhana stepped into her house, her heart lighter than it had been in days. Meeting Vineet and learning that he was safe—and finally cleared of all accusations—had lifted a heavy weight off her shoulders. For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt a sense of peace.

But as she entered the quiet home, a flicker of confusion crossed her face. The house was oddly silent. She had expected to find Angel, her brother Sachin, and the nurse inside. Instead, it was empty.

She set her bag down on the couch in the living room and walked into the kitchen, pouring herself a glass of water. As she sipped, the silence lingered—too quiet, almost eerie.

Just as she turned to leave the kitchen, the front door clicked open. She stepped out to see Sachin and Angel entering together, laughing about something she couldn't quite catch. Sachin had his hand gently on Angel's shoulder, steadying her as she walked. The two looked... unusually close.

Ruhana froze for a second, her eyes narrowing slightly. She wasn't surprised, exactly—but confused, deeply confused.

Sachin, her overly reserved brother who barely spoke to women outside of work or family, was smiling—actually smiling—and being soft-spoken around Angel? Holding her like that?

“Where were you?” Ruhana asked, her voice laced with suspicion as her gaze shifted between her brother and her best friend.

Both of them smiled, almost too casually, as if they had rehearsed it.

“We went for a walk,” Sachin replied, helping Angel ease onto the couch. “She was getting restless being stuck inside for days. Thought some fresh air might help, so I took her to the park.”

Ruhana didn’t respond immediately. Her arms folded tightly across her chest, eyes narrowing slightly. “And the nurse? Where is she?”

Sachin chuckled lightly, then reached out and tapped Angel on the forehead. “This silly girl sent her home. Said she was planning to leave anyway.”

Angel offered a sheepish smile, looking down briefly as if trying to avoid Ruhana’s intense gaze.

Ruhana shifted her eyes to Angel now, her tone a little sharper. “Why were you planning to leave? Is something wrong here?” Ruhana was still looking at her friend and demanding an answer.

Angel smiled instead of answering, and that only fueled Ruhana’s frustration. Planting her hands firmly on her waist, she repeated, more sternly this time, “I asked you—why are you planning to leave? Is something wrong here?”

Angel let out a long sigh, and then glanced at Sachin before replying, “I thought I was making your brother uncomfortable.”

She paused just long enough to watch Sachin’s reaction—and sure enough, his face flushed with

embarrassment. Angel couldn't help but crack up at the sight.

Ruhana blinked, now even more bewildered. Her eyebrows drew together as she looked from one to the other. "Did I miss something?"

"Yes," Angel said with a firm nod.

"No," Sachin answered at the same time, shaking his head vigorously.

Ruhana stared at them, one brow arched high. "Okay... someone better start talking, now."

Sachin muttered as he walked off into the kitchen, deliberately avoiding eye contact with either of them. Angel barely managed to suppress her laughter. "I'll tell you. BFF code," she said, winking mischievously at Ruhana.

Ruhana grinned and plopped down beside her on the couch. "Spill."

Angel leaned in slightly, her voice low and teasing. "Okay, so... last night I fell off the bed while dreaming. Your brother came rushing in, all panicked, and in that half-sleep, half-shock state, I told him to stay with me—like, 'stay by my side forever.'"

She paused dramatically, watching the growing confusion on Ruhana's face.

"And he thought I was proposing to him!" Angel finished with a triumphant giggle. "Now I have a lifetime story to tease him with."

She winked again, playfully nudging Ruhana, who burst out laughing. "Wait—are you serious?? No way! He really thought it was a love confession?" Ruhana doubled over with laughter. "OMG! This is gold!"

She wiped tears from her eyes, shaking her head in disbelief. "Sachin? Mister sensible, serious, emotionless Sachin? Misreading a panic request as a love proposal? This is the best thing I've heard all week!"

They both laughed harder, their laughter echoing through the house—while in the kitchen, Sachin likely pretended not to hear a word of it. Just then, the doorbell rang.

Ruhana stood up and went to answer it. When she opened the door, she found Kunal standing there, having just returned from work.

He looked at her, surprised—and then amused. His little sister had a huge, genuine smile on her face, practically glowing. "Wow," he said, raising an eyebrow. "My sister looks suspiciously happy. What's cooking?"

Kunal loved a good story—especially if it involved Sachin. Ruhana's beaming face gave him all the confirmation he needed.

"I'm in," he whispered in her ear, eyes twinkling with curiosity.

Ruhana gave him a mischievous grin and led him into the living room, where Angel was still chuckling to herself. The three of them sat together, and Ruhana wasted no time in sharing the latest scoop.

Angel, between giggles, told the story again—how Sachin misinterpreted her half-conscious plea as a romantic proposal.

"Wait—seriously? Sachin did that?" Kunal burst out laughing. "This is gold! I wish I'd seen his face!"

Just then, Sachin walked out of the kitchen, clearly having heard more than enough.

“Angel, are you planning to tell the whole world?” he snapped, his patience clearly running thin. “Go ahead—post it on social media, publish it in the newspaper, maybe even send it to a news channel while you’re at it!”

His voice was sharp, clearly annoyed, but not quite angry. The trio froze for a second, blinking at him with mock-serious faces... then immediately erupted into laughter again, louder than before.

Even Sachin, despite himself, looked like he was trying not to smile. “Kunal, come help me in the kitchen. We’re cooking tonight,” Sachin called out, already turning on his heels.

Kunal grinned and got up from the sofa. “Time to flaunt some culinary skills,” he said, giving the girls a wink before disappearing into the kitchen behind his brother.

Ruhana let out a deep sigh. She knew exactly where this was headed. “This won’t end well,” she muttered. “Give it twenty minutes and we’ll either have burnt offerings or completely raw vegetables on our plates.”

She turned to Angel. “What do you feel like eating? Let’s just order something.” Ruhana pulled her phone from her pocket and unlocked it.

Angel blinked at her in disbelief. “Wait—aren’t they cooking? Shouldn’t we at least try their food?”

Ruhana burst into laughter. “Oh, you trust them? That’s adorable. Trust them with a spreadsheet, maybe. Not with a frying pan.”

Still unconvinced, Angel glanced toward the kitchen as if expecting a miracle. Ruhana caught the look and smirked. “Alright, come with me,” she said, getting up and grabbing Angel’s hand.

Angel hesitated. "Where are we going?"

"To witness the disaster firsthand," Ruhana replied. "After that, I promise, you'll be the one hitting confirm on the food order."

Angel followed Ruhana into the kitchen—and stopped dead in her tracks.

No, this wasn't just messy. It was chaos.

The countertop was cluttered with spilled ingredients, dishes piled up in the sink, chopped vegetables scattered on the floor, and a pot dangerously close to boiling over. The air smelled like a confused mix of spices and... Sugar?

In the middle of it all, the two brothers were mid-argument.

"Kunal! I told you to add salt to this! And you dumped sugar instead! What kind of disaster are you?" Sachin barked, waving a ladle in frustration.

Kunal shot him a fierce glare. "Oh, hello? That this is rice pudding! It's supposed to be sweet, you forgotten bloody prince!"

His words cut through the air like a blade—and silence fell.

Sachin's expression shifted in an instant. His jaw clenched, and his shoulders stiffened. The grip on the griddle in his hand faltered, and it clattered to the floor with a loud clang.

Kunal blinked, realization dawning. He had just said something he shouldn't have—something that reopened an old wound.

Sachin turned to leave the kitchen, his face unreadable. But before he could take a step, Kunal reached out and

grabbed his wrist, then pulled him into a firm, unexpected hug.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I shouldn't have said that. I really am."

Sachin stood still for a moment, tense, as if deciding whether to pull away or lean in. He hadn't meant it—God, he hadn't. But the look on Sachin's face said the damage was done. Kunal's arms wrapped around his brother not just to comfort him, but to stop himself from falling apart too.

Angel and Ruhana stood quietly at the doorway, unmoving—almost as if they'd stepped into a scene they were never meant to witness. Neither of them spoke.

The warmth of the kitchen, the scent of spices, and the distant hum of the exhaust fan felt far away now. All that existed in that moment was the weight of Kunal's words—and the sudden, heavy silence that followed.

Angel glanced at Ruhana, her brows slightly furrowed. Her eyes asked the question she couldn't voice out loud: *Did you know?*

Ruhana shook her head subtly, eyes still fixed on the two brothers in front of them. *Was this something they weren't supposed to do to her? Or worse— was something they needed to know, but had never been told?*

Inside that quiet kitchen, a hug meant to console had instead peeled back a curtain—revealing a history neither of them truly understood.

Ruhana opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out. For once, even she didn't know what to ask.

Angel took a slow step forward, gently placing a hand on Ruhana's arm. "Should we...?" she whispered, unsure whether they should walk away or step in.

Ruhana gave a small shake of her head, her voice barely above a whisper. "Not yet."

They watched—waiting to see if Sachin would speak. Or break. Ruhana stepped forward, her voice firm and unwavering. "Is there something I need to know?"

Both her brothers turned sharply toward her, frustration flickering in their eyes. "There's nothing to know!" they snapped in unison, their raised voices echoing off the kitchen walls.

The sudden outburst hit Ruhana like a slap. She froze—shocked, hurt—and for a moment, her breath caught in her throat. Her eyes welled up, but she blinked quickly and turned away.

"He wasn't always like this," she whispered. "Something broke him. I just... never knew what?" Without another word, she rushed to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Angel stood rooted to the spot, stunned. She stared at the two brothers—especially at Sachin. The hurt in her eyes quickly turned into anger.

"Sachin," she said; her voice low and sharp. "Do we need to talk?"

Kunal ran a hand through his hair, sighing heavily. Sachin avoided her gaze.

"There's nothing to talk about, Angel," he muttered, forcing calm into his voice. "Just... go to your room. We'll order dinner."

Angel took a step forward. “No. You don’t get to shut people out when you’re hurting.”

But before she could say more, Sachin turned to her, his expression hardening.

“I said leave,” he barked, voice sharper now. “Stop interfering in things that don’t concern you. This is our family.”

The words hit her like a blade. She didn’t cry. Not here. Not in front of the boy who could break her with a few words. Angel didn’t say anything this time. Her lips parted slightly—perhaps to argue, perhaps to cry—but no words came out. Her eyes shimmered with unshed tears, but she held her ground, refusing to let them fall. Then, slowly, silently, she turned and walked out of the kitchen. And for the first time since she had come into their lives, she felt like an outsider.

Minutes ago, the house rang with laughter. Now, only silence remained—loud, bitter, and heavy as grief.

Chapter 18

Crack in the Story

Sachin looked around, the weight of his words settling on him like a sudden blow. He had just lashed out at both the girls—his little sister and her best friend—with a sharpness that even he hadn't intended. Yes, he had been hiding the truth from Ruhana for years, always telling himself it was to protect her. But now... he couldn't deny it—he had used anger as a shield to keep the truth buried.

And Angel... she was only trying to help, to ask what was wrong. Yet he'd snapped at her too. His words were harsher than his tone, and both had cut deeper than they should have.

Frustrated with himself, he clenched his fist and punched it into his other palm.

Kunal stood beside him, wide-eyed and silent. He knew it too. They had made a mistake. A big one. They had accidentally dug up the very topic they'd sworn to keep buried. And somehow, he had been the one to start it.

"You should be more careful, Kunal..." Sachin finally managed to say, his voice strained. Just speaking about it brought back the crushing anxiety, the panic that always came with the memories. His eyes turned red as he fought back tears threatening to spill over, holding them stubbornly at the corners.

He sank to the floor, shutting his eyes tightly. He clenched his jaw, trying to wrest the images away. But the

past—fifteen years ago—played out in his mind like a film on repeat.

He wanted to scream, to break something, anything but instead, his body betrayed him— shaking, trembling, drenched in sweat— as he fought to keep it all inside.

Kunal immediately knelt in front of him, his face filled with concern. He looked into Sachin's eyes, eyes that now held the ghosts of a past too painful to revisit.

He knew this topic wasn't just sensitive—it was tragic and every time it came up, it shattered his brother all over again.

"Sachin, be strong. It's been fifteen years," Kunal said, grabbing his shoulders. "You can't fall apart now. You can't ruin everything." He shook him—gently, but firmly—trying to pull him back from the edge of that memory.

Sachin said nothing. He was lost in memories from years ago—memories he didn't want to revisit.

'A big house.'

'His parents.'

'Laughter'

'Then a gunshot.'

His eyes snapped open with a jerk. Tears rolled silently down his cheeks.

"I've already lost too much," he said, voice shaking. "I can't lose you two. She needs to stay away from all this."

The raw tremble in his voice sent a chill through Kunal—it wasn't just fear. It was guilt, grief, and a quiet, desperate plea for control. They both knew exactly what he meant. They had lived through that nightmare. And even

though years had passed, the pain hadn't gone away. The trauma was still there—just buried deeper.

Kunal took a breath and tried to calm himself. This was hard for him too. They had both lost someone that night, and it had changed everything. He placed a hand on Sachin's shoulder. "Angel's a good girl. And I think she really likes you. Maybe it's time you try to move on."

He meant it sincerely. He wanted his brother to find some peace. But even as he said it, he knew the truth. That incident had left scars that weren't going anywhere. They went from a comfortable life to nothing overnight. And no matter how much time passed, neither of them had really recovered.

With Angel's name, Sachin lifted his eyes toward Kunal. He gave him a stern, disbelieving look—*'was he serious?'*

His chest was still tight from what almost felt like a panic attack, his sister was crying in the other room, he had just spoken too harshly to Angel... and now his younger brother wanted to talk about moving on with her?

"Are you serious?" Sachin's voice was cold. That look of disgust said it all. He couldn't believe Kunal was thinking like this—was he even processing what just happened?

"I can't betray her," Sachin added, his voice low but firm, staring at his brother like he was trying to read what was going on in his head.

"Betray...?" Kunal was confused. "Betray who? How? You're not even—"

"I won't keep her in the dark," Sachin cut him off. "And I can't tell her the truth—our truth. So what does that leave? If I let her in, without telling her everything, that's betrayal."

He dropped his gaze, not wanting Kunal—or anyone—to see his eyes. But his tears didn't care about pride or control. One slipped down his cheek anyway.

"At least start anew and if it's the right time then tell her the truth." Kunal said, looking at his brother. Sachin's eyes were shut, his words stuck somewhere in his throat.

"I think we should talk to Ruhana. It's time she knew," Kunal said hesitantly, finally voicing what had weighed on him for so long.

Sachin looked up sharply, his gaze locking onto his brother's face. "Are you serious, Kunal?" His voice was low but firm. "She should be kept away from this." He didn't say the rest—that he had never intended for Ruhana to know the truth they'd buried.

Kunal exhaled, frustration flickering across his features. "But she has to know. We can't keep it from her forever."

Sachin didn't respond. Without a word, he turned and walked away, heading straight to his room. Kunal followed a few steps behind, but before he could say more, Sachin shut the door—firmly, quietly—leaving him standing alone in the hallway.

Kunal sighed, knowing his brother needed time. So, he decided to talk to Ruhana instead.

Sachin entered his room and sank into the chair by the window. He reached for a photograph from the small table nearby—one he had hidden away long ago but could never bring himself to throw out. His fingers trembled as he held it, the image blurring through the tears welling in his eyes.

He stared at it in silence, lost in memories that refused to stay buried. Flashes from the past swirled in his mind—laughter, voices, the scent of home... and then, the gunshot

that shattered it all. That one sound that had torn everything apart.

A shiver ran down his spine. His body tensed as if reliving it all over again. “Why do the things I tried to leave behind keep finding their way back to me?” he whispered to himself, his voice barely audible, brittle with pain.

His face was drawn and pale. Fear, grief, and something deeper—guilt—etched themselves into every line. He clutched the photograph to his chest, shutting his eyes as though he could block the memories out. But they were there. Always there. No matter how many years passed.

On the other side, Kunal walked toward her room and gently knocked on the door. “Ruhana?” he called softly, waiting for a response. But the silence lingered.

“Hey, little sister... wassup?” he said, trying to sound casual, as if everything was normal.

Still, no reply.

He slowly opened the door and found her sitting on the edge of the bed, silent, tears clinging to her lashes. He let out a quiet sigh and walked in, settling down beside her.

“Roo... can you listen to me?” he asked gently. His voice was soft, uncertain—he was trying, but he could already feel the wall between them.

Ruhana looked at her brother with her wet red eyes. “If you can’t tell me the truth then I am not interested to listen.” She almost yelled at her brother.

Kunal took a deep breath. He wanted to tell her the truth—God, he really did—but he had promised to respect Sachin’s decision. After all, it had started with him... and it should end with him.

Until then, Kunal had no choice but to handle Ruhana's anger and relentless curiosity.

"There's nothing to say, Ruhana. You're overthinking it," he said firmly, hoping his tone would make it sound believable.

But Ruhana wasn't convinced. She glared at him, her voice sharp with accusation. "You and Sachin bhaiya have always lied to me," she said. "I knew something was off the day you told me about our parents. It never felt right."

Her words hit like a punch, but Kunal stayed calm. He reached out and gently held her hand.

"We're not lying, Roo. And if there's anything to be told, we'll tell you—when the time is right. Please, just... be patient," he said, almost pleading.

He wished she could see the weight he was carrying—the conflict between protecting her and keeping a promise. For now, he needed her to trust him... even if it meant leaving her questions unanswered a little longer.

Ruhana tried to hold back her anger, but it overwhelmed her. She broke down in tears. "You never tell me the truth!" she cried. "I have every right to know if it's about our family—whether it's you or Sachin bhaiya. But you never cared enough to tell me anything."

Her voice trembled with pain, each word soaked in anger, sadness, and deep disappointment. Kunal looked at his sister, his heart heavy. He understood her pain—truly—but he was helpless. There were some truths too tightly bound in the past... and not his to unravel.

Without saying a word, he pulled her into a hug. "Roo... you were just a child when that accident happened," he whispered gently. "Please, for now, stop asking. If there's anything to say, Sachin will tell you—when the time is right."

She didn't respond. She simply sobbed into his chest, her small frame shaking with the weight of emotions she could no longer carry alone.

And Kunal could only hold her tighter, silently wishing the truth wasn't as painful as the silence they were trapped in.

Ruhana pushed him away gently but firmly. "Why him?" she demanded, her voice cracking. "Why does it have to be him? Why didn't you ever tell me anything?"

Her eyes were burning now—not just with tears, but with the kind of hurt that comes from years of feeling left out, shut out. But Kunal remained silent, his lips pressed into a thin line. He still couldn't cross the line his brother had drawn.

"Everything comes at the right time," he said finally, his voice calm but distant. "So please, just wait. And there's nothing that serious to share. Stop torturing yourself with these thoughts."

Ruhana scoffed, wiping her tears angrily. "Your silence is torture, Kunal bhayia. He scolded me like I was a stranger... but the moment his name came up—that so-called forgotten prince—you called him by his name," she shot back. "Why? Who is he to us?"

Her voice echoed with bitterness. The questions had been buried inside her for too long, and now they were pouring out, one after another. She wasn't going to stop until she got the truth—not carefully crafted stories, not protective lies, but the real truth that they had been hiding all these years.

Kunal gave a pained smile. "Roo... that name—the *forgotten prince*—we gave it to him back in college. When we were in the UK," he said softly, his gaze drifting to memories

long buried. “He always carried himself like royalty back then. Our parents adored him... he was their favorite. Got the best of everything. So, naturally, he expected the same from us.”

He let out a soft, wistful laugh. “When we stopped pampering him over there, he sulked like a kid. So we started teasing him—calling him the ‘*forgotten prince*.’ It stuck.”

For a moment, he seemed lost in the past, but Ruhana’s shocked voice snapped him back. “UK!?” she repeated, emphasizing the word. Her brows drew together in confusion. “You both were in the UK?”

Kunal blinked, realizing too late what he had just revealed. He gave a slow nod, but before he could think of a way to explain, Ruhana shot another question, this one even sharper.

“But... Didn’t you tell me both of you graduated from Delhi?” Her eyes searched his face, confusion giving way to suspicion.

The silence that followed was heavier than before—because now, she knew. The cracks in their stories were widening.

“We did graduate from Delhi,” Kunal said quickly. “We went to the UK for a while but came back midway... there were some reasons.” He tried to piece together the version they had always told her, hoping it still held.

But Ruhana gave a cold smile—more of a smirk really. A hint of mockery flickered in her expression.

“Do you still think I’ll trust you after this?” she asked, her voice calm, but the anger simmering beneath was unmistakable. “Do one thing—just get out. Leave me alone.”

Kunal stood still for a moment, quietly absorbing her words. He didn't argue. He knew she needed time—time to process, to feel, to breathe through the cracks his words had just widened.

With a nod, he turned and silently walked out, gently closing the door behind him.

Ruhana sighed and buried her face into her pillow. The room was quiet, but her thoughts weren't.

The silence, the half-truths, the carefully crafted lies—they hurt more than anything else. She had asked for honesty and been handed fragments.

Tears slid down her cheeks, slow and steady, as her mind raced through years of memories, questions, and now... doubts.

Chapter 19

The One Who Never Cried

Kunal stepped out of Ruhana's room, quietly giving her the space she needed to heal.

His footsteps were heavy as he walked through the corridor, each one weighed down by emotions he had kept buried for too long. His eyes were wet. His brother was in pain. His sister was in pain. But no one had ever seen how deeply he had been hurting all these years.

This wasn't just about Sachin.

Kunal had survived the same tragedy. He had lost someone he loved just as dearly. But instead of grieving, he had chosen silence. He had chosen to leave behind the life he once knew—his home, his family—just to stand by Sachin.

It had been fifteen years.

He cried once, that day... and never again. Since then, he had worn a smile like armour—for Sachin, for Ruhana. He had buried every scream, every tear, deep inside himself for their sake.

His pain wasn't any less than Sachin's. But at the time, he knew what needed to be done. He handled it. He handled everyone—even Sachin—maturely. But no one had handled him. No one had asked how he was doing.

And so, he stopped relying on anyone. He had already lost the only person he could rely on.

Kunal had left his own blood behind to stay with Sachin and Ruhana—who weren't even his family by blood. He didn't regret that choice. He wasn't guilty of anything. He was simply the forgotten victim—one who carried more than his share of grief, but never showed it.

Still, he too wanted to cry, to scream. To punish the ones who had destroyed everything. He had lost someone connected to him by blood. And yet, he had stayed for Sachin, who wasn't related to him at all—bound only by a promise, made long ago, to stand by him through every storm.

They weren't brothers. Not by blood. Not even close friends at first. But they were tied together by her. And that was enough.

Kunal had never blurred the lines—profession was profession, personal was personal. Any conflict he had with Sachin was purely professional. It was Sachin who mixed the two, always arrogant, always bossy. But Kunal never minded. He had accepted him, flaws and all.

Now, alone in his room, Kunal sat heavily on the couch. He stretched out his legs and closed his eyes. And for the first time in fifteen years, he let the tears fall. Silently at first, and then uncontrollably.

Memories flooded him—scenes playing like a broken film reel.

'A girl, arguing with him playfully before running off to hug Sachin. The two of them gave him a thumbs down, laughing like children. An airport farewell— Kunal hugging an elderly man, his heart heavy. The same man later shouted at him, while the girl sobbed in a corner. A woman slapped him across the face. A violent argument between him and Sachin. And then... The gunshot.'

Kunal's eyes flew open. He bolted upright on the couch, heart racing, breath heavy. And then... he broke. A loud, guttural cry escaped him—raw, unfiltered. The cry of a man who had carried too much for too long.

He cried. Cried for her, Cried for the boy he used to be, cried for the years lost to silence. And for once, he didn't stop himself.

Angel sat alone in her room. Her eyes were wet, but no tears fell. Not yet.

That morning, they had talked—about being transparent with each other, about giving each other time and space to understand things better. She had believed it. 'I believed him.'

But now... He had suddenly shouted at her, without warning, without explanation. She didn't know the reason for his pain, or the burden he carried, or what exactly had cracked inside him. But he had turned his sorrow into rage—and flung it at her.

'Stay out of it. This is my family.'

His words echoed in her ears, sharp as needles. Each syllable pierced deeper than the last. Angel's chest ached. Her hands trembled slightly, but she didn't cry.

"He didn't even consider me his friend," she whispered to herself, voice hollow.

She wanted to cry—but stopped herself. He didn't deserve her tears. Not someone who could so easily push her away. Not someone who made her feel this small.

Night passed like this, with tears, grief, sorrows and misunderstanding. But no one slept that night.

It was early morning. The soft aroma of coffee filled the kitchen as Kunal stood by the counter, methodically

preparing mugs of coffee and slices of toast for everyone. The house was unusually quiet; none of the trio had stepped out of their rooms yet. His eyes kept drifting toward the hallway, glancing every few seconds in the hope of hearing footsteps, a door creak, any sign of movement.

At last, Sachin appeared – his hair ruffled, his face set in a grumpy frown. His gaze immediately swept the room, searching for Ruhana. But she wasn't there.

It was the first time she had ever been late.

Kunal saw the brief shadow cross his brother's face. Sachin didn't need to say it – he knew Ruhana was still hurt, still angry over what had happened. He wanted to tell her the truth, to explain himself, but something in him froze every time the thought came.

Their eyes met. Kunal's expression hardened with quiet disappointment, and he slowly shook his head.

Sachin walked toward Ruhana's room and knocked on the door. No response. He knocked again—still silence. With a quiet breath, he grasped the doorknob and turned it. The door creaked open.

The room was cloaked in darkness. Sachin's shoulders sank; he understood without a word. Ruhana wasn't angry—she was hurt. Hurt by him.

He wanted to tell her everything, but he was waiting for the “right” time... a time he secretly wished would never come. Yet, he could feel that moment drawing closer. Love had found its way back into his life, and news of it had already reached the ears of their loyal circle. Soon, Angel—and his connection with her—would be a subject of scrutiny. And he couldn't let her become a target.

He had once sworn to protect Ruhana from the shadows of his past. Now, he had a second vow—to protect

Angel from the same devils. Fear knotted in his chest. He couldn't bear to see history repeat itself. Whatever pain he carried, he wanted it far away from both of them.

Sachin stood at the doorway, his voice low. "Ruhana..."

She didn't respond. Curled on the couch by the window, her gaze was lost somewhere beyond the glass.

He walked toward her slowly and sat beside her. "Ruhana, listen..."

Her eyes fluttered open as he switched on the light. "Stop bothering me," she said quietly, though the sharp edge in her tone betrayed her anger.

"You should give me a chance to explain," he said, gently patting her head. His voice was soft enough to melt her, but she wasn't ready to believe any more lies.

She sat up, meeting his eyes. "Do you really think you can tell me more lies?"

He sighed. "Don't you think, if I'm not telling you something, there might be a reason?"

Her lips curved into a bitter smile. "It's about our parents, isn't it? And you still say you can't tell me?" Tears shimmered in her eyes.

Sachin's chest tightened. He'd been carrying wounds for fifteen years, ones he never wanted her to see. "It's not about our parents," he said at last. "It's about me. And I don't want to discuss the life I left behind—with anyone. Not you. Not Angel."

Ruhana's eyes brimmed with tears. "You're my brother, Bhayia. Don't compare me to Angel. Your relationship with her just started, but we're blood. I have the right to know everything about you."

Sachin stared at her, disbelief flickering across his face. "Are you serious? You're actually comparing yourself to Angel?" His voice stayed calm, but the disappointment in it was unmistakable. "You both have your own place in my life. But if I ever decide to tell you this, then I'd have to tell her too. If our relationship moves forward, she might have even more right to know."

"Am I a joke to you, Bhaiya? Why didn't you tell me the truth?" she shouted. Usually patient, Ruhana had finally lost her cool.

Sachin reached out and patted her head gently. "Ruhana, if I tell you... it will bring back everything I've buried. Do you really want to see me in the pain I suffered fifteen years ago?" His tone was heavy, his grip on her hand firm yet trembling.

She looked at him closely. For the first time, she saw her brother's eyes glisten with tears. The strong, unshakable Sachin she knew looked fragile, almost broken.

"Bhaiya," she pleaded softly, "can't you just tell me what you went through?"

Sachin caressed her head again, his voice low. "I've already moved on. I don't want to discuss anything about my past." The smile he gave her didn't reach his eyes—it was forced, almost painful.

Ruhana exhaled sharply. "So... you still want to keep your secrets. Fine. Go on. I'll never ask again." She turned her face away, unwilling to let him see the hurt in her eyes.

Sachin closed his eyes for a moment, gathering himself. "Please... never bring up this topic again." His voice was soft but firm. Then, with a faint smile, he added, "If there ever comes a time you need to know, I promise I'll tell you."

Ruhana nodded, though her agreement was only half-hearted. She didn't want to push further—at least not now. She understood the weight of the moment and stepped back, but inside, she made up her mind to uncover the truth on her own someday.

Seeing the faint curve of a smile return to her face, Sachin felt a wave of relief. "Come on," he said, gently pulling her to her feet. "Kunal cooked breakfast today. Let's go before it gets cold."

As they headed toward the door, Ruhana threw him a pointed look. "Talk to Angel," she said firmly. "She must be hurt after what you said to her."

Sachin exhaled heavily, a reluctant nod following. "I will," he promised.

Chapter 20

Promises, Not Truths

Sachin stood at the door of the guest room, his hand halfway raised to knock. But at the last second, he let it fall back to his side. He knew he'd been wrong. He wanted to talk, to explain—but the memory of last evening burned in his mind. He'd promised they would give each other time, to understand and be transparent. And yet, the very next evening, he had lost his temper and shouted at her.

For a moment, he hesitated. Facing her wasn't easy. Still, he drew in a deep breath, gathered what courage he had left, and finally knocked.

"Come in," came the harsh reply. It was her voice. He exhaled slowly, and then stepped inside.

His eyes scanned the room until he found Angel, sitting by the bed, struggling with a hair dryer in her right hand—her left hand still trapped in a plaster cast. Without a word, he moved toward her.

"Angel," he said quietly, the tone slow but steady, enough to reach her. She didn't respond.

Closing the distance, he stopped just behind her. She was still battling with the dryer and her damp hair. Without asking, Sachin took the dryer from her hand and gently guided her toward the chair in front of the dressing table.

Angel didn't resist, didn't turn to face him. She simply sat, silent, her eyes occasionally flicking toward him in the mirror.

He switched the dryer on, letting the warm air run through her hair. The hum filled the space between them. A few minutes passed, neither of them speaking—just the steady rhythm of the dryer and the quiet tension in the room.

"I'm sorry." Finally, he managed to say something.

Angel didn't respond. She simply fixed her gaze on him through the mirror. Sachin noticed—and matched it, locking eyes with her reflection.

"Angel, I didn't mean what I said. There are things you don't know... and this isn't the time to talk about them." His voice dipped lower. "I'm not ready to open up about those parts of my life."

He placed his hands gently on her shoulders, urging her to turn toward him. "I'll tell you when the time is right," he said again, when she still gave no reply.

Angel's eyes stayed on him—steady, unreadable. No flicker of anger, no sign of forgiveness.

"Angel, talk to me," he pleaded, his voice cracking ever so slightly. He looked straight into her eyes, searching for something—anything.

She dropped her gaze under the weight of his. Her hands trembled faintly, a nervousness she tried to mask. But her heart had already betrayed her, thudding harder at his nearness.

Sachin, still inches away, kept waiting—hoping—for a single word from her.

“I know you’re angry, but I didn’t mean it like that. Sorry, Angel.”

Sachin reached out, his hand gently cupping her chin, tilting her face upward so she would look at him. Still, she said nothing—her expression an unreadable mask.

“Say something,” he pleaded again, his eyes searching hers.

This time, Angel jerked his hands away from her shoulders. His brows knitted in confusion. She exhaled slowly, as if preparing to speak—but instead, a small, sarcastic smile curved her lips.

“What do you want me to say?” she asked, her tone laced with quiet mockery.

Sachin parted his lips to reply, but she cut him off.

“Why do you feel the need to tell me about your life?” Her question was soft, yet each word struck him like a needle.

“Angel...” was all he could manage.

“What am I to you? Who am I to you?” Her voice was low, but sharp enough to leave him momentarily speechless.

“I’m just a guest here, Sachin. Soon, I’ll be going back to my home. You don’t need to tell me anything.” She smiled again—this time with a painful edge, though her stubborn pride kept the ache hidden.

Sachin let out a short, frustrated scoff. “There will be a day when I tell you everything,” he said, the weight of an unspoken promise hanging in his words.

Angel’s lips twisted into a teasing smirk. “Did I ever ask? I don’t know a thing about your past, and I don’t even

want to know. So, please... stop bothering me. I'm not interested in anything."

With a final sigh, she turned and walked out, her hurried steps leaving him standing there—baffled, unsettled, and alone with the silence she left behind.

Ruhana and Kunal sat at the dining table, quietly sipping coffee and eating toast. Both had plenty to say, but neither dared break the silence. The air in the house was thick, bitter, and no one could escape its taste.

"You're going to college today?" Kunal finally asked, trying to sound casual.

Ruhana only nodded.

"Ruhana... we should give him some more time," Kunal muttered, eyes fixed on his coffee mug.

She shot him a hard glare but said nothing. Before the silence could grow heavier, Angel breezed in.

"Good morning!" she said brightly, her cheerfulness jarringly out of place. Sitting beside Kunal, she poured herself some coffee. But beneath that practiced smile, her eyes seemed tired.

"Where is he?" Ruhana asked, nodding toward the guest room.

Angel smirked faintly. "Just savoring the taste of truth. He'll be out soon." Her chuckle was light, but there was steel beneath it—the kind of steel forged from years of hiding pain.

"What truth?" Ruhana and Kunal blurted together; equally confused.

“Not-so-compatible couple things.” She winked, leaving them even more bewildered. Before they could press further, Sachin appeared uniform neat, expression cold.

“I’m leaving for headquarters. Kunal, be on time,” he said without looking at anyone.

Angel’s smile vanished. She fixed him with a steady stare. “I have a doctor’s appointment today. You promised you’d take me. Once this cast comes off, I’ll leave.” Her tone was clipped, more command than request.

Sachin finally looked at her, eyes narrowing. “Can’t you call your brother?” His voice dripped with suppressed anger. Last night’s words from her still rang in his ears.

“Oh, look—Inspector Sachin breaking promises again.” Angel’s tone was sharp, mocking, stripped of her usual playfulness.

Ruhana and Kunal exchanged baffled looks. Whatever this was, they were clearly missing a chapter.

“It was you who made me break my promise,” Sachin shot back, voice low, defensive, almost wounded.

Angel stepped closer, meeting his glare without flinching. “It’s always easier to blame me, isn’t it? To pretend you’re not the one running away from the truth. At least I have the courage to face it.” Her voice trembled—not with fear, but with emotion she refused to show. The tension between them crackled.

Kunal leaned toward Ruhana with a mischievous grin, whispering, “First fight.” He winked, and they both edged back, silently deciding not to interfere.

“Alright then, stay where you are. I’ll ask Kunal instead,” Angel said; her voice calm but laced with fury beneath the surface.

But Sachin's jaw clenched at the mention of Kunal's name. "I'm not going to headquarters. Get ready—we're going to the hospital," he barked, throwing himself onto the couch with finality.

Angel's eyes flashed with hurt more than anger. "No need," she said; her voice cold. Then, without waiting for a reply, she turned sharply and marched into her room, slamming the door behind her. For a long moment, silence returned. Only this time, it wasn't bitter. It was charged.

Choosing to avoid the situation, Kunal and Ruhana quietly walked away. They headed into the kitchen, deciding it was best not to interfere between Sachin and Angel. A few moments later, the two of them were peeking through the window, watching sparks fly between Sachin and Angel. They exchanged amused looks, soft laughter slipping out as they nudged each other playfully.

"Bhaiya, now I can be at peace," Ruhana chuckled, high-fiving her brother. "She's perfect for bade bhaiya. Both have the same ego and the same anger—they match perfectly."

It wasn't that she had forgiven Sachin for everything—her hurt still lingered—but seeing a glimpse of his happiness mattered more.

Kunal forced a smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. He had wanted this for years—for Sachin to finally have someone, to not be alone anymore. But now that it was happening right in front of him, it hurt more than he had ever imagined.

"Hopefully... she can heal his wounds," he murmured, the words heavy with both hope and pain.

Ruhana turned to him, brows furrowed. "Heal his wounds?" Her suspicion grew. Maybe Sachin had been

telling the truth all along—that it wasn't about their parents, but about something else entirely.

Kunal quickly placed his hands on her shoulders, steadying her. "He'll tell you one day," he assured softly.

Ruhana only nodded, though her curiosity deepened. "Bhaiya... do you have any idea what they were talking about in the room?"

Kunal grimaced, irritation flickering. "How would I know?" But then his expression relaxed into a teasing grin. "Though I'm sure your friend gave him a hard time with her arrogance."

Ruhana laughed. "That's Angel. Even our dean couldn't stand her."

Kunal's brows shot up. "What do you mean? Didn't he try to expel her once?"

Ruhana sighed, leaning back. "She has connections. Hidden ones. People are afraid of her. She never talks about it, but I know."

Kunal tilted his head, frowning. "But she lives in a small apartment... middle-class neighborhood... no car. Nothing about her screams 'influence.'"

Ruhana shook her head. "Her family has a strong political background. She never flaunts it, but trust me, Angel's more powerful than she lets on." She patted her brother's cheek lightly, then walked out, leaving him with his thoughts.

Kunal stayed behind, unease tightening in his chest. Part of him wanted to dig into Angel's past to protect Sachin—her secrets could mean trouble for their family. But another part, the one he buried deepest, was rawer. He had prayed for years to see Sachin find love again. Yet now that it

was happening, he felt the sting of being left behind—of Sachin’s world slowly shifting away from him.

That ache was his alone to carry. But his decision was clear. He would find out the truth about Angel—no matter what it cost.

Angel stormed into her room, slamming the door shut. She tossed her phone onto the bed and muttered through clenched teeth, “What does he think of himself?”

She yanked open her wardrobe and began pulling out dresses one by one, throwing them carelessly onto the floor. Each neatly folded piece felt like another reminder of him—his co troll, his broken promises. “How dare he touch my wardrobe? This is mine. I’ll keep it my way.”

By the time she slipped into a denim midi, the floor was littered with clothes. That was the moment Sachin walked in. His eyes widened. The neat order he had created only yesterday morning was now chaos.

Without a word, he bent down and began picking up the scattered clothes, quietly trying to fold them back into the wardrobe. He knew she was angry; he thought silence might calm her.

But Angel’s glare cut through him. “What are you doing in my room?” she snapped.

He flinched, the clothes slipping from his hands. For a second, her fury made him look like a boy caught trespassing. “Just... cleaning your mess,” he answered, his voice calm, though his jaw was tight.

“My mess,” she repeated bitterly, shutting her eyes. “It’s none of your business.”

That was the last thread of his patience. He straightened up, his eyes burning through his tone and

stayed level. "I'm sorry, Angel. But do you really expect me to sit across from someone on a date and tell them everything? To admit that my past... my love... has haunted me for fifteen years? Is that what you want from me?"

The silence hung heavy.

Angel didn't look surprised. In fact, she almost looked ready for this. "Do you really think only you can investigate?" Her voice was low, edged with mystery.

Sachin's lips curved in a small, almost dangerous smile. "So you did?" His gaze locked with hers. "Then tell me—what do you know?"

She drew in a deep breath, meeting his stare without flinching. "I couldn't uncover the whole truth. But one thing is certain—this Kasauli story you've been feeding everyone all these years... it's a lie."

For the first time, Sachin faltered. A flicker of surprise crossed his face before he masked it with a smile. "I'm impressed," he admitted. His voice softened, but there was a quiet warning in it. "But don't dig further into my past, Angel. One day... I'll tell you myself."

He reached for her hand, and for a moment she almost pulled away. But then she let him hold it, her anger slowly loosening its grip. "I never wanted your past," she whispered. "I only wanted your honesty in the present... and your promise for the future. That's all."

Sachin pressed her hand between both of his, his voice steady now. "Then I promise you this—whatever my past holds, I will protect you. And I will give you all my loyalty and honesty."

Angel's lips finally curved into a real smile. "Remember that promise."

She turned and walked out, her shoulders lighter than when she entered. Sachin followed; a faint smile on his face—though deep inside, a shadow of unease lingered.

Chapter 21

Two Worlds, One Collision

Angel was inside with the doctor when Sachin stepped out, finishing a call from work. He slipped his phone into his pocket—only to bump shoulders with someone.

“Inspector.”

Sachin looked up to find Vineet standing there. For a moment, both men regarded each other in surprise. Then Vineet’s lips curved into a polite smile, though it looked more rehearsed than natural.

“Hello, Mr. Oberoi,” Sachin said evenly, shaking the hand Vineet offered. “How have you been?”

“I’m perfectly fine,” Vineet replied quickly, almost too quickly, as if the words had been prepared in advance. Sachin remembered the last time he had seen the young man—shaken; broken during the case—and something about this bright composure didn’t quite sit right.

“Good to hear,” Sachin said, though his eyes lingered a second longer, assessing. “Are you here for consultations?”

Vineet chuckled lightly, shaking his head. “No. Just came to check on my grandfather.”

“Ah.” Sachin’s nod carried nothing but courtesy, but the faint shift in Vineet’s expression—was it relief?

Hesitation?—didn't escape him. Years of instinct taught him that people often revealed more in what they tried to hide.

"And you? What brings you here?" Vineet asked, his voice steady, though his fingers tightened slightly around the strap of his watch.

"One of my family members had a routine check-up," Sachin replied, calm and clipped. He left it at that, unwilling to share more.

The conversation trailed off into silence. Both men stood in the corridor, polite but uneasy. Sachin let it go for now, yet a flicker of instinct stayed with him—something about Vineet Oberoi didn't quite add up. He didn't know why, not yet, but he would soon have reason to.

After a silence that stretched a little too long, Vineet cleared his throat and offered quickly, "Coffee?" His tone carried more hope than casualness.

Sachin gave a small smile, polite but firm. "I'm with someone. Next time."

The rejection, though gentle, landed heavy. Vineet's lips pressed into a thin smile as he sighed. "Oh... then what about dinner tonight?" The question came out almost hurriedly, as if he couldn't let the chance slip away.

Sachin hesitated a moment, scratching his forehead as though weighing courtesy against instinct. Finally, he nodded. "Ping me the location. I'll be there." His smile was brief, more habit than warmth, before he turned away and walked back inside.

Angel was perched on the stool in the doctor's cabin, her arm stretched out as the doctor examined her freshly removed plaster. X-rays were displayed on the lightboard, the faint lines of healing bone visible.

"You are fine now," the doctor said, adjusting his spectacles. "The plaster is off, but the arm is still weak. No stretching or sudden strain." He scribbled a prescription as he spoke.

Sachin stood beside her chair, arms crossed, listening intently. "What do the reports say, doctor?" His tone was firm, almost official, though his eyes didn't leave Angel's bandaged arm.

The doctor handed over the file. "Nothing serious, Inspector. Just care and patience."

Sachin glanced at Angel, a faint smile curving his lips, as if reassuring her—and himself—that she was safe.

They stepped out of the hospital, Sachin carrying her reports in one hand while striding ahead. Angel quickened her pace to keep up, irritation flashing across her face.

"Hello, Mr. Six-foot-two!" she snapped.

Sachin halted and turned. She stood a few feet behind, breathing heavily, one hand on her waist. "I'm still recovering, and you've got me running laps around you!" she complained.

Sachin cursed himself silently for not noticing her discomfort. A sheepish smile tugged at his lips. "Okay, fair enough. I'll slow down," he offered, then added with a teasing glint in his eyes, "Or better—I could just carry you." He winked.

Angel shot him a glare sharp enough to cut glass. "My foot was injured then, not now. Just walk slowly, Inspector." She brushed past him toward the car.

Her flustered cheeks, however, betrayed her irritation. Sachin caught the faint blush and grinned. In two quick

strides, he wrapped an arm around her waist and swept her off her feet.

“At your service, madam,” he declared, voice playful, his earlier morning promise echoing in his mind.

Angel gasped and caught off guard. She smacked his chest lightly. “Sachin! We’re in public!” she hissed, her tone half-pleading.

“I want to cherish this time with you,” he murmured, gaze fixed on her.

Her eyes softened but confusion lingered. “But... you said we’d take things slow,” she reminded him, recalling their heated argument earlier.

“I am being slow. Just helping an injured friend,” he countered quickly, tone shifting to casual care.

She arched her brow. “My foot is healed. And last I checked, I don’t use my arms to walk.”

“I know.” His voice grew quieter, more earnest. “But I like this.”

Angel’s lips twitched into a reluctant smile. “I’d still rather walk myself.”

His patience thinned. “Can’t you just enjoy the way I’m pampering you?” His words were calm, but the subtle edge of frustration didn’t escape her.

She exhaled deeply, and then surrendered with a teasing grin. “Fine, but don’t spoil me too much, or you won’t be able to handle me.” She winked.

A broad smile broke on his face. “That’ll be my problem. And I’ll pamper you however I wish.”

By the time they reached his car, their playful banter lingered in the air. He set her gently into the passenger seat

and circled to his side. As soon as he slid behind the wheel, he noticed her immersed in her phone.

Without a word, he plucked it from her hands.

“Hey!” she protested, glaring.

He shot her a stern look. “No phone policy when we’re together.” He slipped it into the dashboard.

Angel’s jaw dropped. “Excuse me? What policies? We’re not even dating, and you’re already laying down rules?”

His lips curved into a mischievous smirk. “Are we not?”

Heat rushed to her cheeks. For once, Angel—the fearless, sharp-tongued Angel—was caught off guard. She turned her face toward the window to hide her blush.

“What a sweet talker,” she muttered under her breath.

Sachin leaned closer, fastening her seat belt with careful hands since her arm was still healing. He started the engine, keeping his eyes fixed on the road. “It’s lunch time. What about burgers? Heard you’re a fan,” he said casually.

“That’s for midnight cravings,” she replied, amused. “Right now I want a proper Indian lunch. I skipped breakfast.”

“Indian it is.” He nodded, steering toward a nearby restaurant.

Angel sat back, her thoughts tangled. They had agreed to spend time together to understand each other better, but Sachin seemed intent on going further—taking liberties she wasn’t prepared for. And yet... between their laughter, irritation, and awkward silences, she realized she didn’t entirely mind.

At the other end of the city, Vineet’s car rolled past the iron gates of **Raj Bhawan**, the official residence of the

Governor of Maharashtra. Security was tight—police, commandos, and armed guards patrolled the lawns. As soon as his car approached, a guard saluted and opened the gates.

The sleek car glided down the driveway and stopped before the grand bungalow. Another guard rushed forward to open Vineet's door. He stepped out, ignored the salutes around him, and strode inside with his usual air of impatience.

In the living area, **Mr. Vikas Oberoi**, the Governor of the state, sat surrounded by ministers and a few media persons. At the sight of Vineet, he rose.

Vineet walked straight to him and bent down to touch his feet.

"How are you, son?" Vikas asked warmly, hugging him tightly. To the world, Vineet was his nephew. But to Vineet, he was "*Dad*"—the elder brother of his late father, the man who had raised him.

"I'm fine, Dad," Vineet replied, though his tone carried a hint of sulkiness.

Vikas studied his face carefully. Something was wrong. With a subtle signal, he dismissed the gathering. His PA ushered the ministers and reporters out of the hall. The moment the room cleared, Vineet wrapped his arms around his father in another tight hug.

"What happened?" Vikas asked gently, his voice laced with fatherly concern.

"Dad..." Vineet muttered, sounding almost like a child. "That Inspector... he's Ruhana's brother. I can't handle this."

A faint smile tugged at Vikas's lips. It amused him to see his usually arrogant, sharp-tongued son reduced to this.

“Kaveri,” he called, teasing, “Your son is behaving like a toddler.” From the hallway, **Mrs. Kaveri Oberoi** appeared, wiping her hands. Vineet clung tighter to his father.

“He hates me after that case! He’ll never agree,” Vineet whined, voice breaking into complaint. To the world, he was a ruthless businessman, but here, with his parents, he was nothing more than a boy sulking over a broken toy.

“Be a man, Vineet. Go straight to him and talk,” Kaveri scolded lightly, though her tone was affectionate.

Vineet pulled away from his father and turned to his mother, eyes wide. “Mumma, he’ll kill me! That arrogant man will never accept me.” His despair was almost dramatic.

“Then forget him,” Vikas teased, chuckling. “Go to the registrar’s office, get the certificate, and bring Ruhana home yourself. Be adventurous—like your sister. If she liked someone, she’d walk hand-in-hand without waiting for anyone’s permission.”

“Dad, stop teasing me!” Vineet groaned, exasperated. “I don’t even know where she is right now!” His irritation boiled over.

Vikas sighed, realizing he had touched a nerve. “Enough of this fuss, Vineet. You need to talk to him properly. The first time you met was during that case, in unfortunate circumstances. Now meet him again—not as a suspect, but as the man who loves his sister.”

Vineet slumped on the couch, running a hand through his hair. “I invited him for dinner at a fancy place... but honestly, I don’t even want to see his face.”

“Vinu,” Kaveri said softly, sitting beside him. She patted his head, and he immediately leaned into her lap like a sulky child. “First make yourself interested. Only then can you convince him.”

“Mumma,” Vineet mumbled, eyes shut, “that man nearly made me a criminal during the investigation. I swore I’d never face him again. But for Ruhana’s sake. I’ll have to.” His voice was heavy with helplessness.

Kaveri studied Vineet’s sulking face and sighed. “Don’t be so grumpy, Vinu. Give your hundred percent. If you want, I’ll go and meet her brother myself.”

Vineet’s head shot up, eyes wide. “Are you serious, Mumma? That’s the worst idea! He’ll refuse immediately if he finds out Dad is the Governor.” He rubbed his forehead, exasperated. “I know at least this much about Sachin Singh—he hates the spotlight. My case was all over the media, but not one photo, not one interview of him. He keeps himself invisible.”

“Then you’ll have to be brave,” Kaveri insisted softly. “Show him your strength, but also your heart. If he sees the real you, he’ll agree.”

Vikas, who had been listening quietly, spoke in a firmer, authoritative tone. “He must like you not as Oberoi Enterprises’ CEO, not as my nephew, but as the man you are.”

Vineet swallowed hard, nodding slowly. “Dad, I’m nervous,” he admitted, crossing his fingers as though clinging to hope. “I can’t tell him anything until I earn his trust.”

Vikas patted his son’s back while Kaveri kept ruffling his hair like he was still her little boy.

“Go win his trust, Vineet. We trust you,” Vikas said with quiet conviction.

Encouraged, Vineet stood and headed to his room to get ready for the dinner. His parents exchanged a smile at the sight of their desperate, lovesick son.

“Who would say he’s the CEO of Oberoi Enterprises?” Kaveri chuckled, shaking her head. “He can handle hundreds of delegates and billions in business, but look at him—nervous like a schoolboy before his first exam.”

Vikas laughed softly. “That’s love, Kaveri. I was even nervous when I asked your father for your hand. But one thing is certain—I want only Ruhana as my daughter-in-law.” His smile carried genuine affection, even though he had never met the girl.

For a moment, Kaveri smiled too. But the warmth in her eyes dimmed, replaced by a shadow of sadness. “I’m missing my daughter,” she whispered. “She should be here... but she never wanted to.” Her voice broke slightly, the ache of absence slipping through.

Vikas’s smile faded. He stood, steady but weary. “I miss her too. But if this is the life she wants, let her be. Don’t disturb her.” With that, he walked out, leaving the air heavy behind him.

Kaveri lingered, her heart heavy. After a deep sigh, she turned and made her way toward Vineet’s room, the echo of her daughter’s absence following her steps.

Chapter 22

Between Suspicion and Silence

After dropping Angel home, Sachin changed quickly and set out for the dinner Vineet had invited him to. The city lights blurred past as he drove, but his mind refused to settle.

‘Why had Vineet asked him?’

They were not friends. Not even acquaintances outside of necessity. Their paths had crossed because of a case, nothing more. In fact, Vineet had every reason to dislike him—and Sachin had never gone out of his way to hide his own dislike either. So what kind of man extends an invitation for an expensive dinner under those circumstances?

The memory of their run-in at the hospital flashed in his head. Vineet had seemed nervous, too deliberate, as though hiding something beneath his carefully measured words. Eager to talk, yes—but almost too eager.

Sachin’s hands tightened around the steering wheel. This wasn’t about courtesy. It wasn’t about making peace. Something else was at play, and until he found out what, he couldn’t let his guard down.

Moreover, his thoughts drifted to Angel. Somewhere along the way, he had turned into a lover boy with her—pampering her in ways he had never imagined himself doing.

He knew it might spoil her, but he did it gladly. He liked Angel; whether it was love, he wasn't sure yet. But for the first time in years, he wanted to give someone—and himself—a chance. A chance to step out of the pain that had chained him for the past fifteen years. Angel had walked into his wounded, storm-ridden life like a cool breeze. Perhaps her love could heal him. He was ready to embrace a new beginning with her.

And yet, fear lingered. His past.

The life he had buried was still breathing somewhere in the shadows, following him silently. They knew every scar, every secret he carried. For years, they had left him alone because he had cut himself off from every tie and affection. But now, as he dared to build something new with Angel, he knew they would come back—fiercer than ever. Not to hurt him. To hurt her.

This time, however, he was prepared. Content. Determined to protect her, to protect what they had. History would not repeat itself. He would not lose someone he loved again.

His resolve was shattered by the sudden ring of his phone. The screen flashed: **Private Number.**

His breath caught. His expression hardened, though beneath it, a flicker of fear surfaced. That number. After all these years.

With a deep breath, he pressed Answer.

“How are you, son?” The voice was female, smooth, almost dripping with familiarity.

He stayed silent. “Cut the crap you’re pulling,” she snapped, her tone sharp, warning-laced.

His concentration faltered; his car veered dangerously toward an oncoming truck. With a swift jerk of the wheel and a harsh slam on the brakes, he narrowly avoided a disaster.

“Still scared of me?” Her amused tone slithered through the line.

“Why did you call me?” he ground out, his voice low, bitter.

A playful laugh echoed in response. No words. Just laughter.

“Stay away from me—and the people I love,” he warned, his voice ironclad now.

“How could you say that?” she spat. “Do you want her to die?”

His grip on the steering tightened until his knuckles turned white. Rage simmered. “Last time, I failed to protect,” he roared into the receiver, “but this time—I’ll burn everything to the ground if you touch them so much as touch them. Especially her.”

Without waiting for a reply, he ended the call. His chest heaved as silence filled the car. He knew this day would come. Just... not so soon.

Forcing himself to breathe deeply, he steadied his racing heart. Normalcy slipped back into his expression as he restarted the engine and drove off. Twenty-five minutes later, he reached his destination.

Vineet was already waiting at the reserved table when Sachin arrived. Sachin offered him an awkward smile and extended his hand for a handshake. Vineet clasped it warmly, his smile more practiced. They sat across from each other, and a waiter promptly set down coolers on the table.

The silence between them was thick. Vineet had arranged this dinner to befriend Sachin—for Ruhana's sake—while Sachin himself had no idea what Vineet truly wanted.

"How have you been, Mr. Oberoi?" Sachin finally broke the ice.

"Doing great, Inspector. And please, call me Vineet. No need for formalities," he replied with an easy smile.

Sachin nodded politely. Both men were clearly uncomfortable, caught in a situation where civility was necessary despite the undercurrent of dislike.

"Such a nice place," Sachin remarked, glancing around.

"Actually," Vineet leaned forward slightly, "I invited you to thank you. You did a great job. I'm free now from all the false accusations."

Sachin's shoulders loosened at the words. "That was my job—to find the real culprit," he said simply, taking a sip of his drink.

The conversation stalled again, slipping into silence. Then Vineet noticed Sachin's eyes fixed on the big screen nearby, where a polo match was playing. There was a spark in his gaze—genuine interest.

"You like polo?" Vineet asked, seizing the chance.

"Yes," Sachin's voice lifted with excitement, almost boyish. "It's my favorite sport. I even played during my college days."

Vineet's smile widened. "I'm a huge fan of Ulloa Hilario."

Sachin turned to him, eyes gleaming. "He's good, but my favorite is Cambiaso Adolfo."

And just like that, the air shifted. The two men leaned into a spirited discussion about polo, their earlier awkwardness fading. Vineet couldn't help but notice the rare happiness in Sachin's voice as he spoke about the sport.

"So that means you're good at horse riding too?" Vineet asked, half-curious, half-suspicious.

Sachin nodded with quiet confidence. "I started training at four. Riding, skating, polo, golf, basketball—even rifle shooting. I've done them all."

Vineet blinked, momentarily thrown. *'A mere police officer, with the skills and tastes of the elite... strange!'*

"Let's have a match this Sunday," Vineet proposed eagerly.

Sachin hesitated, realizing he had revealed too much. He smiled faintly. "I left all that behind years ago."

"This will just be a friendly game," Vineet pressed. "A warm-up, nothing more."

Sachin considered for a moment, and then gave a reluctant nod. By then, dinner had been served, and they carried on talking, their conversation circling back to sports and the surprising common ground they'd found.

Afterward, Vineet suggested, "Let's go up to the terrace for drinks."

Sachin chuckled at his enthusiasm and agreed. Soon they were seated by the open-air bar, city lights sprawling around them.

"One craft Irish whiskey for me," Sachin ordered, then turned to Vineet. "And you?"

Vineet gave him a sharp look before replying, "Isabella Islay whiskey."

Sachin raised a brow but said nothing, only offering a calm smile. “Drinks are on me.”

They clinked glasses, the tension between them softened but not gone—like two men testing the edges of a fragile truce.

Vineet gave Sachin a long look when he insisted on paying. That single glass of whiskey cost a small fortune—something a middle-class officer wasn’t expected to casually cover.

“Sachin, I invited you tonight. I’ll pay,” Vineet said out of courtesy, though a trace of disbelief lingered in his voice.

Sachin pressed a firm hand on his shoulder. “I can pay. Don’t worry about it.” His calm assurance left no room for argument.

Vineet nodded, though inwardly puzzled. Soon, the rounds of drinks began. By the third round, Vineet was tipsy, the polish of the businessman giving way to something lighter. With a laugh, he ran toward the dance bar, throwing himself into the music. His polished image melted into that of a carefree teenager, dancing without restraint.

Sachin sat back with his glass, a small smile tugging at his lips. It amused him to see Vineet like this—an elite, respected businessman, suddenly reckless and boyish. Vineet waved him over to join the dance floor. Sachin shook his head firmly, choosing instead to sip quietly.

But then, the DJ shifted tracks. A familiar beat filled the room—*“Hookah Bar”* by Himesh Reshammiya.

Sachin’s head snapped up. A spark lit in his eyes. Setting his glass aside, he strode onto the dance floor, his body already moving to the rhythm. Vineet froze for a second, astonished at the sudden transformation, then quickly fell in step with him.

Two men, so different in every way, now moved in sync, commanding the floor.

Girls began to gather around, cheering, swaying closer. The crowd was drawn in by their energy—two handsome hunks, matching beats, setting the floor ablaze. For that brief moment, the awkwardness of the evening was gone. All that existed was music, rhythm, and fire.

It was well past midnight when they finally stumbled out of the bar—tipsy, leaning on each other for balance, still mumbling the lyrics under their breath.

“Teraaa pyaaarr... hookah barrr...” Vineet slurred loudly, his arm hooked around Sachin’s shoulder.

Sachin clung to him with equal drunken loyalty. “I’ll drink more. I still have stamina!” he declared proudly, as if it were a badge of honor.

Vineet made a pitiful face. “Me too! But they escorted us out. Don’t they know me? Don’t they know who I am?” His words tumbled out in a drunken whine.

Sachin twisted his neck to glare back at the club’s door. “They don’t know the consequences... I’ll hang them till death!” he announced with a sloppy, kiddish growl.

Vineet suddenly hugged him tight. “Don’t worry, bhai! Your younger brother has lots of money. I’ll open a bar just for us!”

Sachin squinted, shoved him back a little, and narrowed his eyes as if studying him through fog. “I have more money than you, little brother. I’ll buy every single bar in the city. Only for the two of us!” He hugged Vineet again, even tighter this time.

Dragging Sachin along, Vineet waved dramatically toward the parking area. "Come! We'll go to my bar. My private bar at my mansion!"

Sachin caught sight of Vineet's Porsche and scoffed. "Stupid car. I'll buy you a better one. Latest model. New generation! I have moneyyy!" His shout echoed through the driveway.

Vineet just grinned foolishly and pulled the keys from his pocket—only for Sachin to snatch them away.

"Today, your elder brother will drive!" Sachin yelled with drunken triumph.

Vineet pouted like a sulky child. "But I'm the better driver..."

Sachin flicked his forehead with his thumb and finger. "But I am older."

Vineet leaned closer, stubborn. "But this is my car!"

Just then, Vineet's ever-serious PA, Karan, arrived. With a long-suffering sigh, he took the keys from Sachin, bundled both men into the backseat, and slid behind the wheel himself.

"Hey Karan, stop the car! Let's go back for more drinks!" Vineet shouted, bouncing like a kid.

"Shut up," Sachin scolded, smacking him lightly. "You're already drunk. No more drinks. Only I'll drink!" He pulled a puppy face, holding up both hands in a clumsy victory sign.

Karan tightened his grip on the wheel and muttered under his breath. He had never seen Vineet like this—let alone Vineet and a guest. By the time they reached Vineet's mansion, Karan was half-convinced he'd aged a decade. He

barely managed to herd the two inside, where Vineet immediately switched on the music system.

The opening beats of *Billo Rani* filled the hall. Vineet whooped, throwing himself into wild dance moves. Sachin, after a moment's hesitation, joined in—copying Vineet's ridiculous steps with equal gusto.

Two powerful men—one the city's most feared inspector, the other its richest tycoon—were now spinning, stomping, and shaking like overgrown teenagers.

Karan stood aside, arms folded, shaking his head. But he couldn't hide his smile. These two, who were supposed to be untouchable and intimidating, looked human... almost boyish. On impulse, he pulled out his phone and recorded the madness—Vineet's failed attempt at a moonwalk, Sachin's overzealous bhangra moves, and both of them collapsing in laughter mid-song.

Two hours later, the “dance battle” ended in a draw. Exhausted, they stumbled into Vineet's bedroom, dropped onto the bed without even changing, and were snoring within minutes.

Karan glanced at them once before turning off the lights. He muttered under his breath, “Tomorrow morning, they'll kill me for this video. But tonight...” He smirked. “...I've seen legends become idiots.”

Chapter 23

Tangled Sheets, Tangled Hearts

It was morning. Vineet and Sachin were still asleep, tangled together on the same bed. Vineet's arm rested snugly around Sachin's waist, while Sachin's leg had found its way over Vineet's.

Karan entered quietly to wake them up. The sight froze him for a moment – then a mischievous smile tugged at his lips. They looked like an inseparable couple. He couldn't resist. Silently, he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture before slipping it back into his pocket and sending it to Ruhana as he sent last night home video to her.

Suppressing a laugh, he walked closer and gently shook Vineet's shoulder. Vineet stirred, eyes blinking open groggily. The movement woke Sachin too.

And then it hit them.

Vineet's eyes went wide as he realized where his arm was. Sachin, equally horrified, noticed his leg wrapped around Vineet. In an instant, they both sprang apart, sitting upright on the bed like guilty teenagers caught red-handed.

Neither dared look at the other. They stared in opposite directions, their ears burning, before finally sneaking a glance at one another – confusion, embarrassment, and an awkward apology flickering all at once in their eyes.

Karan stood watching the entire scene, biting his lip to keep his laughter from bursting out. Finally, he exhaled loudly, putting on an exaggeratedly polite tone.

“Good morning, Sir,” he greeted them, flashing a broad grin. Both men nodded stiffly without meeting his gaze.

“I... I need to use the washroom,” Sachin blurted and bolted inside.

“I need water,” Vineet muttered, rushing out of the room.

The door slammed shut behind them one after another.

That was it — Karan couldn’t hold it anymore. He doubled over, laughing out loud at the sight of two of the most serious men he knew fleeing like embarrassed schoolboys.

Sachin stood under the shower, letting the water wash over him. His mind drifted back to the chaos of last night — the drinks, the reckless dancing on the floor, the silly conversations on the way back, and finally, their wild “*climax dance*” at home.

A swift smile tugged at his lips. After so many years, he had felt like himself again. For a fleeting night, the weight he carried had lifted. After years of suffering, it almost felt like things were finally settling in his life. But then—

A flash of memory cut through his thoughts.

‘*The payment.*’ He had paid the bar bill with the black card. The very card he hadn’t touched in years.

His stomach dropped. Fear gripped him. In a rush, he turned off the shower, threw on his clothes, and hurried out. He had to find Vineet — had to make sure Vineet hadn’t noticed.

Meanwhile, Vineet was in the kitchen, heating water. A smile lingered on his face as he replayed the night's madness in his head. For once, everything had felt light, carefree.

He casually checked his phone. No message. No alert about the bar payment. His brows furrowed. *Strange.*

If he hadn't paid... then whose black card had Sachin handed over?

A flicker of surprise crossed his face, but it quickly gave way to suspicion. Sachin's actions, his guarded silences — something didn't add up.

After all, how could a man from a middle-class background know about the latest generation Porsche? A model not even launched in India yet — sold only through private channels to the elite.

Vineet sat on the couch, nursing his hangover with a glass of lemon water. His posture was relaxed, his face unreadable — but his mind was elsewhere, still circling around last night.

Sachin entered, slightly hurried, his expression unsettled. For a moment, he froze, watching Vineet's calm demeanor. Relief flickered in his chest. *Maybe he didn't notice.*

He sat down beside him quietly, clutching the warm cup Vineet offered. They sipped in silence, each man stealing glances at the other, trying to decipher what lay behind those calm expressions.

"Last night was... great," Sachin finally said, breaking the silence, testing the waters.

Vineet smiled faintly. "You have quite the appetite for drinking. And your dancing—impressive." His tone was smooth, casual. Almost too casual.

Sachin let out a small laugh, masking his unease. "You're great company. Polo match this Sunday—don't forget." He rose to leave, as if eager to cut the moment short.

"Breakfast is almost ready," Vineet said, looking up at him, voice calm but inviting.

Sachin shook his head with a polite smile. "My sister and... girlfriend are waiting at home. They must be worried, I didn't return last night, and I missed their calls. I should go."

He had barely turned when Vineet's teasing voice stopped him.

"So, the arrogant officer has a girlfriend too... and a funny side," Vineet said with a sly smile.

Sachin turned back, caught between defensiveness and amusement, but before he could answer, Vineet's tone softened.

"You're a good man, Sachin. A sweet one, actually. If someday you need a friend to rely on..." Vineet reached out, patting his shoulder. "...remember me."

For the first time that morning, Sachin's guarded expression melted. A genuine smile flickered across his face. He gave a small nod. Then, without overthinking, he stepped forward and pulled Vineet into a brief hug before hurrying out the door.

Vineet stood still for a moment, watching him leave. The smile on his face lingered — but his eyes, sharp and calculating, told another story.

"You're full of surprises, Sachin. A man wrapped in layers." Vineet gave him a half-smile. "I won't chase the truth. I'll wait for you to drop the mask on your own." He let the words hang in the air before moving inside.

Sachin unlocked the door and stepped inside, the faint aroma of fresh coffee wafting through the house. Laughter – loud, careless, and echoing – reached his ears.

In the living area, Ruhana, Angel, and Kunal were curled together on the sofa, shoulders brushing as they bent over Kunal's phone. Cups of coffee rested on the center table, half-forgotten as they howled at something on the screen. The sight was so rare, so carefree, that Sachin paused for half a heartbeat. Then his suspicion returned.

He moved forward quietly, stopping just behind Kunal. His deep voice broke their bubble. "What's going on?"

All three stiffened. The laughter died instantly. They turned to him, faces guilty, like children caught red-handed.

Sachin arched his brow. "Why do you all look like you've seen a ghost?"

Angel bit her lip to smother a laugh, but her eyes gleamed mischievously. "Nothing much... just a video that's been going around. We were laughing at that."

Before Sachin could probe further, Ruhana suddenly began humming – then belting – the *Hookah Bar* song. Kunal slapped his knee, laughing again.

A cold weight sank into Sachin's chest. He snatched the phone from Kunal's hand with the reflex of a trained officer.

The blood drained from his face.

There it was—Sachin and Vineet, tipsy and reckless at the bar, shouting and dancing like college boys. The bar footage had already made its way online for everyone to laugh at, while the outrageous "climax dance" from Vineet's home had been shared only with Ruhana by Karan. The three musketeers—Ruhana, Angel, and Kunal—were now doubled over with laughter.

His knees gave in and he dropped onto the couch, phone in hand. His voice came out rough, almost to himself. "If the officials see this... if an enquiry begins... what the hell do I even say?"

The room grew still. Then Angel, composed as ever, slid closer and placed her hand over his. Her grip was steady, reassuring. "Don't worry. There won't be any enquiry. The video's already gone."

Sachin turned his head sharply, searching her face. Her smile was calm, but her voice carried a quiet authority that didn't invite doubt.

"That's easy?" he asked, skeptical.

Ruhana frowned, equally curious. "You mean... you actually got it removed?"

Angel's lips curved into a sly, almost conspiratorial smile. "For me? Yes." She winked.

Immediately, Ruhana grabbed her phone, scrolling frantically. "It's gone."

"It's deleted!" Kunal added, thrusting his own screen forward as proof.

Relief washed over Sachin like a tide. He leaned back, finally allowing himself a breath. Across the room, Angel's eyes met his. Without words, he gave her a small wink — gratitude, and something unspoken.

Ruhana stood, brushing her kurti. "Bade Bhaiya, go get changed. I'll lay out breakfast." Kunal followed her into the kitchen, still chuckling.

Now the room was quieter. Sachin shifted to the other couch, next to Angel. For the first time that morning his tone softened. "How's the arm?" His gaze lingered, concerned.

Angel chuckled at his seriousness. "It's fine now. Stop worrying, Inspector." Her smile was teasing, but her eyes warmed.

Sachin let out a long sigh, leaning back against the cushions. His next words slipped out almost carelessly, though the weight behind them was unmistakable. "I shouldn't worry, I know... but I do. And the more you heal, the sooner you'll leave." He hesitated, his voice dipping low. "I don't want that, Angel. I want you to stay."

Angel looked at him, her breath catching at his sudden confession. She wasn't prepared for this—certainly not from him. Confusion flickered in her eyes as she let out a long sigh. "I'll stay... if you stop me rightfully."

Sachin finally met her gaze, and for the first time, there was no wall between them. His eyes softened, brimming with an affection he rarely allowed himself to show. A tender smile curved his lips as he reached for her hand, holding it gently. "Then stay with me. Forever."

Angel's heart skipped, but instead of answering, she slipped her hand free from his. Her voice dropped almost trembling though she kept it steady. "There's a lot about me you still don't know, Sachin." Her eyes lingered on him, heavy with unspoken truths her words refused to carry.

Sachin studied her in silence before exhaling deeply. "If there's something, you'll tell me when the time is right. I trust you."

With a boyish smile, he reached out to ruffle her hair lightly, as if easing the weight of the moment, and then walked away.

Angel sat frozen, her cheeks burning, her heart pounding against secrets she wasn't ready to reveal—left behind with nothing but the echo of his words.

Ruhana and Kunal were setting the breakfast table, but their ears had been glued to the conversation in the living room. By the time Sachin left, both of them were grinning like conspirators. Ruhana pressed a hand to her mouth, trying not to squeal.

“How cute, na?” she whispered, her voice brimming with awe. Her eyes were shining—she could hardly believe her usually cold, unreadable brother had just confessed something so openly. “Our emotionless inspector bhaiya... finally showing feelings.”

Kunal shook his head and flicked her forehead, making her flinch. “Cute? That wasn’t a confession, that was a hangover speaking. Just wait—he’ll wake up and regret it.”

Ruhana rubbed her forehead, scowling. “Nonsense. That wasn’t alcohol, that was real. He meant it.” She pushed a stack of plates onto the table with stubborn finality.

Kunal placed the cutlery down with a scoff. “Even if he did mean it... Angel didn’t accept.”

Ruhana smirked, her voice dropping into a mischievous lilt. “Didn’t deny either.” She tilted her head and winked, as if she’d just won the argument.

Before Kunal could retort, a low voice came from behind them. “Had enough of your little gossip session?”

Both froze. Their heads turned slowly—Sachin was standing there, arms folded, watching them with that sharp, unreadable gaze that always made them feel like kids caught stealing cookies.

But this time, instead of fear, matching naughty grins spread across their faces.

“So you did confess!” Ruhana sang, her tone wickedly triumphant.

Sachin arched an eyebrow, dropping into a chair with deliberate calm. “Confess? Was that even a confession?” His lips curved slightly, but there was genuine curiosity in his voice.

Ruhana leaned on the table, eyes twinkling. “Of course it was.”

Sachin let out a small hum. “Then why didn’t she say yes?” His tone softened, almost thoughtful, as if he wasn’t speaking to them but mulling it over himself.

Ruhana didn’t miss a beat. “Because she didn’t say no either.” She gave him a sly wink.

Kunal groaned, running a hand down his face. “Oye, hello, Romeo—come back to earth before you float away.”

Ruhana giggled, nudging her other brother. “Why so irritated, bhaiya? If Sachin bhaiya finally finds someone, isn’t it a good thing? You should be happy. In fact—you should find someone too.”

Kunal’s movements still. His jaw tightened just slightly as he adjusted the spoons on the table, avoiding her gaze.

Sachin’s eyes lingered on him for a moment. He didn’t speak, but he reached out and pressed a steady hand on Kunal’s shoulder. The gesture was quiet, almost casual—but it carried weight, a silent reassurance only brothers could understand.

Chapter 24

When the Past Knocks Softly

Angel sat curled on her bed, phone pressed to her ear. Her voice trembled with a mixture of anxiety, fury, and sadness. “Do I really need to tell him?” she whispered.

“You must—if you want to build trust between you two,” came the calm reply from the other end.

She exhaled sharply and nodded to herself. “I managed the incident you caused this time... but it can’t happen every time. You need to be careful around him.”

“I know... I didn’t mean for it to happen. It just slipped,” the voice on the line admitted, embarrassed.

“That’s fine,” Angel murmured, though her tone carried fatigue. After a pause, she asked hesitantly, “When will you come pick me up?”

The person chuckled softly. “You were the one who insisted on staying.”

Angel’s lips trembled into a sad smile. “I want to stay... but not with lies.” She closed her eyes, the weight of her words heavy.

“Cherish what you have, Angie. If he’s truly meant for you, he’ll understand the situation—and the secrets. In time, he’ll know everything. Until then, give each other space,” the voice advised gently.

Angel's eyes softened. "Okay, Bhai. I should go—someone's at the door." She ended the call with a faint smile.

Turning, she found Ruhana leaning against the doorway, her eyes glinting with a teasing smile.

"Why are you here?" Angel asked, raising a brow, genuinely confused.

"For your breakfast," Ruhana grinned. "And today, you're coming with me to college. My drawing competition is today—you better be there to cheer me on."

Angel's lips curved into a smile, but a shadow of sadness flickered in her eyes. "I wish I could dance too... I had to miss my competition because of this stupid injury."

Without hesitation, Ruhana pulled her into a warm, sisterly hug. "That's okay. This time let Priya win." She pulled back just enough to roll her eyes dramatically. "We both know how much she'll brag about it anyway."

Angel finally laughed, the heaviness in her voice easing a little.

When they pulled apart, Angel instantly noticed that spark in Ruhana's eyes—mischief, trouble, and that all-too-familiar *I-know-something-you-don't-want-me-to-say* look.

"What's cooking?" Angel arched her brow, arms crossing in mock suspicion.

"You didn't deny." Ruhana's lips curved into a wicked grin, followed by a playful wink.

Angel blinked, confused. "Means?" she asked, though nervousness flickered in her eyes.

Ruhana looped her arm through Angel's and leaned in closer, lowering her voice to a dramatic whisper. Mimicking her brother's tone, she said, "I want you to stay."

The words struck Angel like fire to dry wood. Heat rushed to her face and she immediately shut her eyes, trying to hide the obvious blush. For someone bold, sharp-tongued, and never at a loss for words, it was ridiculous how the slightest trace of Sachin in the air could undo her so completely.

Ruhana giggled triumphantly and bumped her shoulder. "Ohho, blushing queen! Don't even try to deny it. The way he said it—so raw, so unguarded, like he couldn't even look at you—uff, straight out of a romance novel. How could you not melt?"

Angel groaned and flicked Ruhana's forehead lightly. "Stop it, yaar! Fine, I like him. Happy?" She sighed, her voice softening with something heavier. "I accept everything about him. But..." Her tone dropped to a quiet guilt. "...I don't want to bother him with my mess. Things I can't reveal yet."

Ruhana's teasing smile softened. She squeezed Angel's hand. "Angel... if you can accept all of him, don't you think he deserves the same chance to accept all of you?"

Angel gave a small, wistful nod. "But I can't force anyone."

For a moment, Ruhana just looked at her. Angel—the same girl she always thought of as carefree, reckless, nonsense-talking—was speaking with a maturity that surprised her.

"But Bhaiya genuinely likes you. I've noticed the way he treats you—he's different from you."

Ruhana smiled softly, trying to make Angel understand what Sachin's heart had been saying all along.

Angel smiled at Ruhana, but the smile never reached her eyes. “I know he likes me,” she said softly, “but things aren’t that simple. He’s hiding something... and so am I.” Her voice wavered. “I’m scared—what if he can’t accept my truth? I don’t want to become a burden on him.”

Angel fell silent, lost in thought, painfully aware of the truth she had been hiding from everyone—and the weight it carried in her heart.

Smiling gently, Ruhana ruffled her friend’s hair. “Breakfast is ready.” She tugged Angel toward the dining room.

They joined the table where Sachin and Kunal were already halfway through their meal. Angel sat quietly, focusing on her food, while Sachin’s sharp eyes noticed his siblings exchanging not-so-subtle glances, like they were holding a full-blown conversation without words.

Finally, Sachin set down his spoon. “What’s cooking around here?” he asked, looking from Ruhana to Kunal.

Kunal froze, clearly too nervous to speak. But Ruhana—always the straightforward one—grinned shamelessly. “So... Do I consider Angel as my sister-in-law from now on?”

The question landed like a bomb. Sachin’s jaw dropped, Angel nearly choked on her food, and the entire table scrambled at once. Ruhana thrust a glass of water into Angel’s hand, Sachin patted her back firmly, and Kunal kept blurting, “Breathe, breathe!”

After a few tense minutes, Angel finally calmed down, though her face was still flushed—partly from coughing, partly from embarrassment.

Silence hung over the table. Ruhana leaned back in her chair, still smiling slyly at her brother, her eyes asking the question all over again.

“Shut up,” Sachin snapped at his sister, though the faint pink on his cheeks betrayed him.

“What? If not, then I’m putting your profile on a matrimonial site. I need my sister-in-law,” Ruhana declared dramatically, her tone half-joking, half-serious.

Angel shot her friend a glare. “No need to upload his profile anywhere. He has me,” she said casually, eyes fixed on her plate as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

Sachin’s lips curved into a smile, his cheeks burning with warmth.

Ruhana let out a scream of joy, while Kunal quickly wrapped his arms around Sachin. “I’m happy for you,” he whispered into his brother’s ear.

Sachin patted his back in return, a silent gesture of understanding. He knew the state of Kunal’s heart—how he wanted to be happy for him, but how another part of him still struggled to accept Angel. Kunal had his reasons, and Sachin respected that.

“Excuse me!” Ruhana suddenly complained, her lips turning into a pout. “Am I not family? How dare you two hug without me?”

Both brothe

rs chuckled, then opened their arms wide for her. With a grin, Ruhana ran into their embrace. Now the three siblings stood in a tight group hug, laughter bubbling between them.

From her seat, Angel’s lips curved into a faint smile. She quietly picked up her phone and clicked a picture of them—a picture of something she longed for deeply. The bond, the warmth, the easy love of a family. And just like that, a sharp ache pierced her chest.

She missed her family. Missed belonging like this.

Her thoughts were broken when Ruhana called out, waving her into the group hug. Angel shook her head quickly, smiling faintly, hiding the hesitation in her eyes. But Sachin wasn't taking no for an answer. He reached out, tugged her forward, and pulled her into the embrace.

It was warm. Safe. Overwhelming.

Angel shut her eyes, biting back the sting in her throat. But her disobedient tears betrayed her, sliding down her cheeks before she could stop them. She wiped them away in haste, but the family of cops around her were sharp enough to notice. None of them said a word. They simply held her tighter.

Kunal dropped Ruhana and Angel off at the college gates. As Angel stepped out of the car, she drew in a deep breath, savoring the familiar air. *Her college*. After twenty-five long days away, even the smell of the campus felt comforting. A smile tugged at her lips—she hadn't realized how much she'd missed this place.

Together, the two friends made their way toward the open area where the sketch competition was being held.

Ruhana quickly settled into her designated spot, neatly arranging her colors, paintbrushes, and sheets with practiced care. Angel slipped into the audience section, her eyes sparkling with pride as she waved and cheered her best friend on.

The competition began, and soon the courtyard filled with the quiet rustle of paper, the scratch of pencils, and the strokes of brushes moving across canvas. Angel leaned forward eagerly, watching Ruhana's concentration—the way her hands moved with precision and confidence.

Fifty minutes passed in what felt like moments. Finally, the judge began making rounds, examining each sketch with

a critical eye. When he reached Ruhana's work, his expression shifted—impressed, surprised. Angel's heart thudded with anticipation.

Minutes later, the announcement came. "First prize goes to... Ruhana Singh!"

Angel shot up from her seat, clapping wildly, her cheers echoing louder than anyone else's. Ruhana collected her prize, beaming, and the moment she stepped down from the stage, the two of them rushed out together—laughing, breathless, exhilarated.

They didn't stop until they reached the canteen. Sitting down with snacks and drinks, they started their own little victory party, just the two of them, the room filled with laughter and the buzz of celebration.

Both friends sat in the canteen, chatting over lunch. Angel was unusually quiet, while Ruhana's curiosity burned brighter with every passing second. She couldn't hold back anymore.

"Angel..." Ruhana said softly, leaning closer.

"Hmmm?" Angel mumbled, still chewing her food.

"Is that true?" Ruhana's voice carried a blend of confusion, excitement, and joy.

Angel glanced up, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean... are you officially with my brother now? This morning you said he 'has you'... but I still don't get what that means." Ruhana tilted her head, her eyes sparkling with half-serious suspicion.

Angel let out a chuckle and playfully tweaked Ruhana's nose. "Why are you sounding so doubtful? Look, we're not exactly into anything serious right now. But... we're figuring things out." Her cheeks flushed crimson as she smiled shyly.

Ruhana instantly caught it. She held Angel's chin dramatically. "Aha! Saying there's nothing, but the mere mention of my brother turns your face into a tomato. Just admit it already!" she teased with a mischievous grin.

Angel swatted her hand away, pretending to be annoyed. "Excuse me! I never said there's nothing. I just said we don't have an official label yet. But mind you—if anyone's going to be your sister-in-law, it's me." She ended with a cheeky wink.

"So confident!" Ruhana laughed; her heart light with happiness. The thought of her brother finally finding someone—and that someone being her best friend, the person she trusted the most—wrapped her in a quiet, comforting warmth.

Sachin reached the headquarters and went straight to his senior's cabin, as he had been called in urgently. Inside, he found his superior seated with an elderly man.

Sachin paused for a moment, then greeted them both respectfully. "You called me, sir?" he asked.

"Have a seat, Sachin," his senior gestured.

Sachin settled into the chair, his sharp eyes observing the unfamiliar man. The old gentleman leaned forward, his voice heavy with worry. "Officer... My granddaughter is missing. Please, find her."

He pulled out a photograph, but just as he was about to hand it to Sachin, the cabin door swung open. Another man entered briskly and snatched the photo from his hand.

"Forgive the intrusion," the newcomer said smoothly. "I know her whereabouts."

Sachin froze. The man standing before him was none other than the Governor of the state, Mr. Vikas Oberoi.

Without a word, the Governor tucked the photograph into his pocket.

“Come, Dad. You shouldn’t have come here. I told you—she’s safe,” Vikas said firmly, guiding the elderly man to his feet. Then, turning briefly to Sachin’s superior, he offered a polite bow. “Apologies for disturbing your time, gentlemen.”

The two Oberois walked out together, their low argument carrying faintly into the corridor. Sachin’s instincts stirred; something wasn’t right. “Sir,” he said cautiously, his brows furrowed. “There’s more to this. We should investigate. Why would the Governor himself interfere like that?”

But the commissioner leaned back in his chair, unconcerned. “Sachin, you’re overthinking. The Governor seemed calm. Perhaps Mr. Oberoi Senior is just being anxious. And frankly—no one even knows about this girl. She’s a mystery in herself.”

The Commissioner’s words were meant to reassure, but Sachin couldn’t shake the unease gnawing at him. His mind kept circling back to the photograph he never got to see.

Outside the Headquarters

Vikas Oberoi helped his father into the backseat of a sleek black car. His tone, however, was edged with frustration. “Dad, this reckless behavior of yours will only put her in danger. You were about to reveal her identity in front of the police. Do you understand what that means?” He kept his voice controlled, but his anger simmered.

Mr. Pankaj Oberoi, his voice trembling with both fury and desperation, shot back, “Vikas! Enough riddles. Where is my granddaughter?”

Vikas exhaled, steadying himself. He placed a hand on his father's shoulder, softening his tone. "She's safe. I know exactly where she is. Trust me. When the time is right, I'll take you to her. But until then... you must not create a scene like this again."

His father's eyes narrowed, unconvinced, but he said nothing. The driver started the engine, and the car glided away into the city streets—leaving behind more questions than answers.

It was evening when Kunal picked up Sachin. The drive home was unusually quiet. The brothers, who usually filled every ride with arguments or light-hearted banter, sat in heavy silence.

After fifteen minutes, Sachin finally exhaled and broke the ice. "Let's grab a coffee," he suggested, pointing toward a roadside café.

Kunal nodded silently and pulled the car over. Inside, the café was warm and dimly lit, the aroma of roasted beans hanging in the air. They ordered two coffees and chose a corner table away from the crowd. Sachin sat with his back against the wall, while Kunal slid into the chair opposite him.

The silence lingered. Kunal's eyes stayed down, thoughts swirling, but he didn't voice them. He didn't want to say something that might cut into Sachin's already burdened heart.

Sachin drew in a long breath, resting his elbows on the table. "Kunal.. I know what's on your mind. But don't you think it's time I moved on from the past?" His voice wavered slightly. "I know Payal..."

He stopped. The words stuck in his throat.

Kunal leaned forward, cutting him off gently. “Bhai, I’m not worried about that. Payal is gone. You grieved her for years, and you’ll always carry her, but... she’s your past.” He paused, his tone sharpening with protectiveness. “Angel is your present. Maybe even your future. The question is—will you be able to protect her?”

Sachin’s hands came up to cover his face. He breathed heavily, fighting the weight pressing against his chest. This was a topic he had avoided for too long, a fear he had buried deep.

“Kunal... I haven’t told Angel anything yet. And as for her safety...” he lowered his hands, meeting his brother’s eyes with quiet resolve. “We’ll protect her. Together.”

Kunal’s jaw tightened. His usual carefree demeanor gave way to something rawer, more dangerous. “She calls me ‘bhaiya.’ That makes her family. And family is not left unprotected. If anyone dares to come after her...” Kunal’s eyes burned as he lifted his cup, his voice steady with promise. “...I’ll ruin them this time.”

For a moment, silence returned. But this silence was no longer empty—it carried the weight of shared burden and unspoken vows.

Sachin reached across the table and pressed Kunal’s hand firmly. “We’ll ruin them. They can’t snatch our happiness this time.” A faint, weary smile tugged at his lips.

Kunal nodded, his gaze softening. “There’s no need to tell Angel anything about your past right now. If the time comes, then we’ll say it. Until then... let her stay untouched by it.”

Sachin lowered his eyes, conflicted but resolute. “I’ll tell her someday. She deserves to know the truth—when the time is right.”

Kunal gave a small sigh and leaned back in his chair. “Then at least cherish what you have with her now. None of us know when the storm will hit. And when it does, we need to be ready.”

Sachin nodded, his jaw tightening at the warning beneath his brother’s words. For a while, they talked of lighter things, sipping their coffee slowly, as though trying to stretch the peace before it slipped away.

When they finally left the café and headed home, both carried the same thought in their hearts— the past was not finished with them yet.

Chapter 25

The Silence Between Us

Ruhana and Angel were backing home after college. Ruhana busied herself in the kitchen, chopping vegetables, while Angel sat sprawled in the living area, her eyes flicking impatiently toward the front door every few seconds.

“Ruhana, where is he?” Angel asked, tapping her foot.

Ruhana smiled knowingly. “He’ll come. He’s an officer, Angel—no fixed working hours. Now stop staring at the door and come here. Help me with dinner.”

Angel made a face but obeyed, dragging herself to the kitchen. Just as she started handing over the spices, Ruhana’s phone rang. She excused herself and hurried to her room—it was Vineet calling. Finally, after the whole video scandal, he had reached out.

The moment she picked up, Ruhana couldn’t resist teasing. “So... someone’s getting along with my brother, hmm? Ahaan!” she smirked, referencing the leaked clip.

Vineet groaned, embarrassed. “Ruhana, please... I’m really sorry about that. I didn’t mean for it to happen. Someone recorded us and posted it online. It wasn’t intentional.”

Ruhana chuckled, though her tone carried a sister’s scolding. “Then who told you to get drunk like that? My brother never drinks. But you—you made him drink!”

Vineet's jaw dropped. "What? Excuse me—he was the one who suggested it! He even ordered the most expensive whiskey himself." His voice rose, frustration creeping in. "And guess what?"

Ruhana, suspicious now, asked calmly, "What?"

"He paid the entire bill—three lakh sixty-seven thousand. Just for drinks!" Vineet exclaimed.

Ruhana froze. The knife in her hand nearly slipped. "He spent his savings on a few drinks? Bhaiya needs a serious lesson!" Anger flared in her eyes at the thought of Sachin's reckless spending.

But Vineet shook his head. His voice dropped lower and hesitant. "No... he didn't use savings. He paid with a black card."

Ruhana blinked, stunned. "A... black card? Vineet, are you serious? In India, there are hardly three of those in circulation. And you're telling me my brother—a police officer—has one?"

"I saw it myself," Vineet insisted. "The card was matte black. Unlimited. No doubt about it."

For a second, Ruhana just stared at the wall in disbelief. Then suddenly she burst out laughing. "Shut up, Vineet! You both were drunk out of your minds. He must've had some random black-colored debit card. Don't start building mysteries around my brother."

But Vineet didn't laugh. His silence on the other end was louder than words.

"Vineet, focus on my brother. This drunken drama already puts you and him in an awkward situation," Ruhana said firmly, giving him a reality check.

Vineet let out a long sigh. "I know... but what can I do now?" His tone carried both regret and helplessness.

Ruhana thought for a moment, then replied calmly, "I'll think it through and tell you what to do."

That was enough to bring a smile to Vineet's face. "Yes, madam," he said cheerfully, as if her word alone had lifted a weight off his chest.

Ruhana rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the grin tugging at her lips. "Vinnie, when will you meet me next?" she asked, feigning annoyance, though her voice carried a hint of eagerness.

"This Sunday. Lunch again?" Vineet suggested without hesitation.

Ruhana chuckled at his quick answer. "Done. I'm in." She ended up bouncing slightly on her bed, her excitement betraying her attempt at grumpiness.

Ruhana's excited chatter with Vineet came to an abrupt stop when the doorbell rang. She quickly disconnected the call and ran toward the door—but Angel had already beaten her to it.

Sachin and Kunal stepped inside. Angel, who had been sulking all evening, crossed her arms and shot Sachin a grumpy look before turning away. Kunal noticed instantly and had to bite back a smile.

Sachin frowned as he walked into the living room and dropped onto the sofa beside Kunal. "What did I do? Why is she avoiding me?"

Ruhana emerged from the kitchen, shaking her head with a teasing smile. "You're two hours late, bhaiya. She was waiting for you the whole time."

Sachin blinked, genuinely puzzled. “Waiting for me? But... why?”

At that, Kunal and Ruhana couldn’t hold it anymore—they burst out laughing. Kunal leaned in and whispered loudly, “She said you’re hers. Now deal with the girlfriend syndrome, bhaiya.” He winked playfully, and Sachin’s jaw dropped.

“What nonsense—” He began, but Ruhana cut him off with a mischievous grin.

“Stop overthinking and go talk to her!” She gave him a push toward the kitchen where Angel was sulking with the utensils.

Sachin shot Ruhana a glare so sharp it could slice through steel. She, unfazed, only widened her eyes and tilted her chin toward the kitchen. Kunal joined in, waving him forward like a coach pushing a nervous player into the field. Sachin exhaled heavily, his shoulders sagging. He could march into a crime den without hesitation, but walking into the kitchen right now felt like stepping into a trap.

Angel stood at the counter, ladling food into serving bowls. The warm light fell across her hair, making it shine like strands of silk. She didn’t notice him at first, too absorbed in her task. Sachin turned his head slightly—only to catch Ruhana and Kunal peeking from behind the doorway, their faces half-hidden and mischievous. They gestured wildly: *Say something!*

His throat suddenly felt dry. He squared his shoulders, tried to summon the same authority he used in interrogation rooms. It failed him. “Angel...” His voice came out hesitant, almost boyish.

She turned, her eyes narrowing into a glare sharp enough to match his own from earlier, then went back to her

task as if he didn't exist. He made a helpless face at his siblings. Kunal twirled a finger, motioning a hug. Sachin's jaw tightened. Was his brother insane? Ruhana slapped her forehead and mouthed dramatically: *'Just do it!'*

Before he could decide, Angel spun back around—straight into him. She stumbled, her hand jerking to steady the bowl. He caught her instinctively, his arm slipping around her waist. For a heartbeat, she froze against him, her eyes flicking up to his face. His lips tugged into an awkward smile, half-pleading, half-amused.

Her expression hardened again. "Is it a crime to hold your own girlfriend?" she asked, tone dripping with mockery, her gaze darting toward the doorway.

Behind them, a muffled snicker gave away Ruhana and Kunal.

Sachin frowned, genuinely confused. "A man has every right to hold his girlfriend." His voice carried the seriousness of a legal statement, which only made it funnier.

"Then hold me properly, otherwise I'll fall," she retorted sharply.

Realization finally clicked. His lips curved into a small, sheepish grin as he tightened his grip, pulling her a little closer. "At your service, madam." With a playful jerk, he brought her flush against his chest.

From the corner of his eye, he caught Ruhana and Kunal grinning like children watching a movie scene unfold.

"You're making me uncomfortable," Angel muttered, shifting slightly in his arms.

He leaned down a little, smirking. "Is it a crime to hold your own girlfriend?" he repeated, raising one brow deliberately.

Her hand flew to his chest in a light slap. "Not a crime. But you can't do things like this in front of your siblings." She nodded toward the doorway.

The two culprits panicked, throwing their hands over their eyes. "We didn't see anything! You guys continue!" they babbled, tripping over each other as they retreated with nervous laughter.

Angel sighed in exasperation. "Now will you let me go?"

But Sachin didn't loosen his hold. His eyes softened, searching hers. "Are you upset with me?"

Her irritation sparked again, visible in the wrinkle of her nose. "You told me you'd pick me up from college and take me out. And then you forgot."

He winced, guilt flickering across his face. "I know. Something urgent came up. I couldn't make it." His tone was gentle, almost apologetic—something he rarely allowed himself to be.

She tilted her chin up and lifted his face with a finger, her expression mock-serious. "Then you need to be punished."

"Whatever you say," he murmured, his grin returning, boyish and teasing.

"After dinner, you're buying me ice cream."

The corners of his mouth lifted wider as he finally let her go. "Done."

He glanced at the counter, sniffing the air. "What's for dinner?"

"Ruhana made everything. Seema didi wasn't here today," Angel replied, handing him a bowl.

He carried it out and set it carefully on the dining table, where Kunal and Ruhana were already seated, both giggling like children hiding a secret.

“Shut up and eat,” Angel scolded, rolling her eyes.

Ruhana leaned toward Kunal with mock outrage. “See, bhaiya? The moment someone gets the official SIL tag, she starts bossing us around. How rude!”

Angel turned, glaring playfully. “So what? Bear with me.”

Ruhana clutched her chest, pretending to be heartbroken, before breaking into laughter. With a grin, she hopped up to help Angel with the rest of the serving, while Sachin sank into his chair, trying—and failing—to hide his small smile.

After dinner, the clinking of plates faded into silence as Kunal slipped into the kitchen to help Ruhana with the chores. Angel had already claimed her spot on the living room couch, curled into one corner with her phone in hand. The soft glow of the screen lit her face, but her eyes looked distant, more distracted than engaged.

By the time Kunal and Ruhana finished in the kitchen and joined her, Sachin was still nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s bhaiya?” Kunal asked, glancing around the empty hall.

Angel’s thumb paused mid-scroll. She looked up briefly, her tone flat. “He didn’t tell me.”

Ruhana raised a brow. “Weren’t you two supposed to go for ice cream?” Her voice carried an edge of curiosity and a hint of suspicion.

Angel gave the slightest shrug, her shoulders rising and falling lazily. “Maybe he fell asleep,” she said, eyes dropping

back to the phone. Her face betrayed no irritation—too calm, unnaturally calm.

Ruhana leaned closer to Kunal, her whisper barely audible. “Why is Angel so calm?”

Kunal studied Angel for a moment—the blank expression, the forced indifference, the little sigh she tried to hide. Then he bent down to whisper back, “Don’t you think it’s the peace before the storm?”

Before Ruhana could reply, the front door creaked open. Sachin walked in, carrying a large bag. His face was lit with boyish pride, as if he’d solved the world’s biggest problem.

“Angel,” he announced cheerfully, “I brought ice cream for you. Then I thought—why not for everyone?” He placed the box on the table with a flourish, distributing tubs like a generous host.

Angel took hers without looking at him, her lips pressing into a thin line. Her thoughts flared as she peeled the lid open. *‘Can’t he think straight for once—like a boyfriend, not a big brother?’*

Sachin dropped onto the couch beside her, his knee brushing hers, and gave her a grin that begged for appreciation. “I thought everyone would love this.”

Ruhana bit her lip, trying to smother a laugh. “Bhaiya... you went alone? Why didn’t you take her with you?”

Kunal quickly nudged her with his elbow, shooting her a warning glare. She only smiled innocently, though her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Trying to rescue the moment, Kunal added smoothly, “I mean... Sachin, maybe you should’ve spent some time alone with her.” His tone carried a hint of emphasis.

Sachin frowned slightly, his brows knitting. “Why? Isn’t this better? We’re together as a family, bonding. That’s important too.” His voice was steady, matter-of-fact—like he was delivering a line straight out of a lecture hall.

Angel finally lifted her gaze, her lips curving into a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah. I’m really enjoying this.” Her tone dripped with sarcasm.

Sachin brightened at her words, completely missing the edge in her voice. “See?” He motioned toward her, grinning at his siblings. “She’s happy.”

Angel shook her head slowly, the disappointment written all over her face. She set her tub of ice cream down, stood up quietly, and without another word walked to her room.

Ruhana pressed her fist against her lips, her shoulders shaking. Kunal tried, but within seconds both of them erupted in loud laughter, clutching their stomachs.

Sachin stared at them, baffled. His tone turned firm, edged with impatience. “What’s happening? Why are you laughing?”

Ruhana tried to control herself, wiping her eyes, but her voice cracked with giggles. “Bhaiya... she wanted you to take her out. Just the two of you. Some quality time. And you—” she burst into another fit of laughter “—you turned it into a family picnic.”

Sachin’s expression faltered, realization dawning slowly, like a late sunrise. He glanced toward Angel’s closed door, the weight of his mistake finally sinking in.

“Go,” Ruhana and Kunal urged, half-shoving Sachin toward Angel’s room.

He let out a long breath. The weight of his mistake sat heavy in his chest, and the only thing he wanted now was to set things right. Gathering his courage, he walked to her door and gave it a tentative knock. The wood creaked slightly as he pushed it open — it wasn't locked.

The room was dim and cozy, lit only by the faint glow of a bedside lamp and the bluish flicker of the iPad screen. Angel sat curled up on the floor, wrapped in a thick blanket like a little cocoon. Her legs were tucked beneath her, and her wide eyes were fixed on the antics of *Tom and Jerry*. She looked almost childlike in that moment, so carefree and completely absorbed, as if the earlier tension hadn't touched her at all.

A small smile tugged at Sachin's lips. For a moment, he just stood there, watching her. Then he quietly lowered himself beside her, nudging her shoulder. "Hey."

Without tearing her eyes from the screen, Angel slapped her palm over his mouth, shushing out, paused the Ipad, and gently moved her hand away. "I'm sorry," he said softly, sincerity etched in his voice.

Angel finally looked at him, eyebrows raised in playful confusion. "What for?"

Instead of answering, he pulled her into his arms. The warmth of the blanket pressed between them as he held her tightly. His voice dropped, almost a whisper against her hair.

She pushed him back with a stubborn pout, crossing her arms. "Stop. I'm still upset." Her lips jutted out, and she turned her head away dramatically.

Sachin couldn't help but laugh at her act. "You're impossible. And adorable."

"You're so bad," she shot back, still refusing to meet his eyes.

“Yes, I am,” he admitted with a crooked smile. “A terrible boyfriend on day one. But I’ll make it up to you. I’ll be the kind of boyfriend people envy you for.”

Her pout wavered, but she clutched her blanket tighter, pressing play on the iPad again as though to ignore him.

Sachin leaned in and paused it once more, turning her chin gently toward him. “I’m talking to you,” he murmured, voice teasing yet firm.

Angel made a face. “I need to watch my show before sleeping.”

He chuckled, brushing the back of his hand against her cheek in a soft, lingering touch. Her skin warmed instantly under his palm. “From today,” he whispered, eyes glinting with mischief, “replace this show with me. With our time.”

Then he winked, boyish and daring. Angel’s composure cracked; color rushed into her cheeks, and though she tried to hold onto her annoyance, her blush betrayed her completely.

“How’s your arm?” Sachin asked, his gaze dropping to the bandaged spot with concern.

Angel gave him a small smile, though her eyes rolled slightly. “It’s fine, Inspector,” she replied, her tone laced with mild irritation.

Sachin raised an eyebrow at the title. “Inspector? Really?” he teased, leaning closer. “You should be calling me baby, babu, honey... something sweet like that.” He winked, deliberately exaggerating the cheesiness to annoy her.

Angel scrunched up her nose in mock disgust. “Ewww! Never. I’m not saying those cringey things.” A mischievous grin tugged her lips as she added, “I’ll just call you Sachu.”

Before he could react, she leaned in, planted a quick playful peck on his cheek, and darted toward her bed. With a giggle, she flopped down, burying herself under the blanket like a child hiding from a game.

Sachin froze for a second, his hand instinctively brushing the spot where she had kissed him. A shy smile crept over his face, softening his usual sternness. "Okay... good night, Angie," he murmured warmly.

Still smiling, he turned to walk away—but something struck his mind. He paused, spun back toward her, and in one swift move pushed her to the other side of the bed. Sliding onto it himself, he tugged half the blanket over.

"What are you doing?" Angel sat up quickly, her voice insistent.

"Sleeping," Sachin replied with a lazy grin, stretching his legs before shutting his eyes.

Angel slapped his chest lightly. "You can't just sleep here!" she protested, her tone flustered.

"Why not?" he murmured, cracking one eye open to look at her. She was sitting right beside him, hands pressed against his chest as she tried to push him away. With a sudden playful move, he caught her wrists, pulled her closer, and rolled her beneath him. He hovered above, careful to keep a respectful gap.

Angel's breath caught. "W-what are you doing?" Her face flushed crimson.

"Just making you comfortable with me," he teased, leaning in slightly.

She squeezed her eyes shut, nervous and blushing. "You can't steal my first kiss like that," she whispered, voice trembling.

Instead of kissing her, Sachin shifted onto his side and guided her head onto his arm. "Silly girl," he said with a half-smile, a little embarrassed himself. "Shameless—what were you thinking? I only meant sleeping." Angel buried her face in his arm, hiding her embarrassment. She said nothing, and he didn't press further. The two of them lay quietly under the same blanket, their silence heavy with unspoken warmth. Both could feel it—the nearness, the comfort, the strange sweetness of being so close. Too awkward to speak, yet too content to move away.

Chapter 26

Dinner before the Storm

The morning light streamed faintly through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the room. Angel was still asleep, her face serene, lips parted slightly as she breathed softly. Her body rested snugly in the circle of Sachin's arm, her hair spilling messily over his chest. She looked so peaceful that for a moment, Sachin simply watched her, caught between the calm of the moment and the urgency of the world waiting outside.

The sudden buzz of his phone broke the stillness. He reached toward the side table, careful not to jostle her, and glanced at the screen. A message from his senior officer: a fresh case had been reported in the city. Duty was calling.

Sachin sighed softly, then turned his gaze back to Angel. She shifted slightly but didn't wake, her head still resting on his arm. A tenderness flickered in his eyes. He leaned forward and placed the lightest kiss on her forehead—so delicate she didn't stir. Slowly, he slipped his arm free, easing himself out of the bed with the practiced silence of a man who knew how to move without waking anyone.

The sound of running water filled the washroom as he showered quickly. When he stepped back into the room, droplets still clung to his hair, sliding down to his jawline and trailing to the open collar of his black bathrobe. The faint scent of his shaving foam still lingered in the air.

Angel was awake now, sitting on the bed with the blanket gathered around her. She blinked against the morning light, her eyes searching until they landed on him.

“Good morning,” Sachin said, standing in the doorway with a small smile, toweling the ends of his wet hair.

Angel returned the smile, though hers was softer, tinged with shyness. “You should’ve woken me up.”

“That’s alright. I’m in a hurry,” he said, moving closer to sit beside her on the edge of the bed. His voice carried that steady seriousness she had come to know. “There’s a case reported.”

Angel bit her lip, then nodded. “Okay... then at least let me make you a coffee. That’s the only thing I can do for you right now.”

Her eyes lingered on him longer than she meant to. His freshly shaven skin gleamed faintly, water still dripping from his damp hair onto the hollow of his collarbone. The loosely tied robe revealed the broad line of his chest, each detail making her heart thud faster, louder, betraying her calm façade. She quickly looked away, embarrassed by the heat rising in her cheeks.

Sachin noticed the way her gaze lingered and a mischievous smile tugged at his lips. Reaching forward, he caught her hands gently. “So... taking advantage of the situation?” he teased, winking at her.

Angel’s eyes widened, her cheeks flushing hot. “Shut up. Go get ready, I’ll make you coffee,” she muttered, trying to pull her hands free.

But Sachin only chuckled, tightening his hold slightly. Leaning closer, his voice dropped to a husky whisper. “Don’t you give me some kind of good morning... thing?” His eyes flicked deliberately to her lips.

Angel's breath hitched, though she tried to mask her nervousness with composure. She inhaled deeply, then—gathering courage—leaned forward and pressed the faintest brush of her lips against the corner of his.

The touch sent a jolt through him. His heartbeat quickened, a smile breaking across his face. Without thinking, he slipped an arm around her waist and drew her closer, lifting her effortlessly into his lap.

Angel gasped softly, caught off guard, her confusion mixing with the warmth surging through her chest. Before she could protest, Sachin tilted his head and captured her lips with his—softly at first, but with unmistakable intent.

While Sachin's lips moved gently over hers, Angel clutched his shoulder with one hand and slid the other into his damp hair. Their hearts pounded wildly, galloping faster than they could control. The air in the room seemed to shift—warm, intoxicating, filled with the fragrance of freshly bloomed love.

And then—

The door flung open.

“Cofeeeeeeee—” Ruhana's voice rang out as she barged in without knocking. Her cheerful tone cut short mid-word, freezing into stunned silence. She stood rooted to the spot, jaw dropped, eyes wide, staring at her brother passionately kissing her best friend.

Angel and Sachin both froze, their lips still barely touching. Slowly, their eyes snapped open, widening in mutual horror. The realization struck, and in a split second Angel pushed Sachin away so hard that she tumbled off the bed with a squeak.

Sachin blinked at her, then at his sister, utterly thrown off. "Ohh, I'm sorry!" Angel blurted, her voice a mix of guilt and mortification as she scrambled up from the floor.

Ruhana remained frozen, eyes darting between the two of them like she had just witnessed a crime scene.

Recovering first, Sachin stood up straight, tugged at his robe, and fixed his sister with a firm look. "Stop staring. We're a couple now," he announced flatly, as if ripping off a bandage. He brushed past her toward the door.

Pausing beside Ruhana, he leaned down and murmured, "Next time, knock before entering." With that, he strode out quickly, leaving the atmosphere thick with shock.

Angel glanced helplessly at Ruhana, her face burning. "I... I need to wash up," she stammered before darting into the washroom and slamming the door shut.

Ruhana sank down on the bed, still processing. Her breaths came shallow and fast, her mind reeling at the scandalous sight she had just walked into her brother, her best friend, *Kissing*.

She rubbed her temples, trying to steady herself, but the image refused to leave. After a long stunned pause, she finally exhaled; bot up slowly, and stepped out of the room—still in disbelief.

The dining table was set with the clinking of plates and the faint aroma of buttered toast drifting through the room. Ruhana moved about cheerfully, laying dishes one after another, her lips curved in a secret smile she couldn't seem to hide. She hummed to herself, clearly lost in her own thoughts.

Kunal emerged from the kitchen, a jug of juice in his hand. He placed it on the table and then leaned against a

chair, watching his sister. She was still smiling. Still. For the last fifteen minutes.

“Do tell,” he muttered irritably, narrowing his eyes.

Ruhana bit back a laugh, her eyes sparkling. Leaning in conspiratorially, she whispered, “I caught a scandal in our house.”

Kunal’s brows shot up. “Scandal!”

Her grin widened. She lowered her voice further, enjoying every word. “I caught them red-handed. Kissing.” Kunal’s face twisted in confusion, but before he could ask, a voice snapped behind them.

“Are you done talking, Roo?” Angel had just entered the room; her arms folded tightly, her jaw clenched. Her tone was sharp, almost a warning.

Ruhana spun around, plastering on a shy, guilty smile. “Sorry... I ruined your moment,” she said softly, though the mischievous twinkle in her eyes betrayed her.

Angel’s cheek flamed instantly. “Shut up!” She nearly yelled, trying to mask her embarrassment, her voice higher than usual.

Kunal’s gaze bounced between the two girls, his irritation now tangled with curiosity. “What moment? What are you two talking about?”

Ruhana could no longer hold it in. She leaned closer to him, grinning ear to ear. “I caught her kissing Bade Bhaiya,” she said in a sing-song whisper.

Angel groaned, covering her face with both hands. “You should respect our privacy,” she mumbled, her voice breaking between embarrassment and disheartened protest.

Ruhana laughed softly and threw her arms around her friend. "Oh come on, Angel. I'm so happy for both of you. There's nothing to be embarrassed about." Her tone, this time, was sincere.

Angel peeked at her through her fingers, her lips curling into a shy, reluctant smile as she hugged her back.

Kunal, meanwhile, sat back, staring at them with wide eyes as realization sank in. "Wait... wait... did you guys sleep together?" he blurted out.

The words hung in the air like a dropped glass. Both Angel and Ruhana turned to glare at him with fire in their eyes. "Shut. Up." Their voices rang in perfect unison.

Kunal's shoulders slumped immediately. He gulped, looked away, and sank into his chair, quickly reaching for the toast in a bid to save himself. "Fine, fine," he mumbled, chewing his breakfast like a man who had just stared death in the face.

The silence broke with Kunal's cautious voice. "Where's Sachin?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"He already left. A case came up," Angel replied, her voice quieter now as she distracted herself with her glass of juice.

Just then, Kunal's phone buzzed. He glanced down—it was a message from Sachin himself, reminding him to take Angel for her check-up and physiotherapy session.

"Angel, we're going to the hospital today," Kunal said, slipping the phone back into his pocket. "Routine check-up for your arm, and a session with the physio."

Angel nodded without protest.

Breakfast ended with the usual clinking of cups and plates, though the undercurrent of teasing still lingered in

the air. Kunal left soon after, muttering promises to pick Angel up from college by noon. Angel and Ruhana gathered their things and headed out together, their laughter echoing in the hall as they teased each other all the way to college.

The noon sun bore down mercilessly on the crime scene. Sachin's shirt clung faintly to his back, though his expression never wavered from its usual focus. His eyes darted between the people gathered, listening carefully to every detail, cross-questioning when necessary. His fellow officer, however, looked like he might collapse any second. Sweat streaked down his forehead as he jogged to keep up.

"Sir," the younger man pleaded, almost panting, "it's already two in the afternoon. Can we please get food before I faint? I'll interrogate the crows if I have to, but at least let me eat first."

Sachin gave him a flat look, but the corner of his mouth twitched. With a sigh, he finally nodded. "Fine. Come."

They walked to a nearby café tucked into a busy street corner. The air inside was cool, humming with quiet chatter and the clinking of cutlery. But the moment Sachin stepped through the doorway, his stride faltered. His sharp gaze landed on a familiar figure.

Vineet Oberoi, effortlessly poised, sat by the window with a cup of coffee in hand, scrolling through his phone.

Sachin stiffened, the memory of their last humiliating encounter replaying in a rush. His jaw clenched. Without a word, he pivoted on his heel.

"Sir?" his officer asked, blinking.

"Let's eat somewhere else." Sachin's tone was curt, his expression unreadable.

The younger man frowned. “Why? This place looks perfect.”

“I don’t like the interior,” Sachin muttered, voice flat, as if the pale blue curtains and wooden tables offended him personally. In truth, his only aim was to slip away unnoticed. But luck was not on his side.

“Inspector!” Vineet’s voice rang clear across the café.

Sachin shut his eyes for a brief second, like a man about to face a firing squad. When he turned back, his smile was strained, his tone awkward. “Oh... hi, Mr. Oberoi. How have you been?”

Before Vineet could answer, someone brushed past humming loudly to “*Hookah Bar*.”

“Shut up!” Sachin and Vineet barked together, their voices colliding in perfect irritation.

The entire café chuckled. A few patrons exchanged knowing glances, trying not to laugh outright. Several of them had seen that viral clip, and watching the two men side by side only fueled the amusement.

Vineet’s lips curved into a smirk. “Come, Inspector. Join us.” He gestured toward the empty chairs.

Sachin’s instinct screamed no, but politeness forced his feet forward. With the heaviness of a condemned man, he sat opposite Vineet, his junior sliding in beside him. Vineet signaled the waiter and ordered food with practiced ease.

The silence that followed was thick. Both Sachin and Vineet avoided each other’s gaze, focusing instead on their glasses of water, the saltshaker, even the napkin stand—anything but each other.

Finally, Vineet chuckled, breaking the tension. “Alright... fine. Let’s just not bring up that day.”

Sachin leaned back, forcing an innocent expression. "What day? I don't remember anything."

The terrible acting made Vineet laugh, easing the weight in the air. "Okay, dinner tonight?" Vineet asked smoothly, tilting his head.

Sachin smirked, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he raised his glass. "What about drinks?" he shot back with a playful wink. The ice melted instantly, the café filling with their quiet laughter.

"So," Vineet asked after a pause, curiosity lacing his tone, "how's life going?"

Sachin allowed a small smile. "Got a girlfriend, finally." His voice carried both pride and softness, a rare mix for the hardened officer.

"That's great news." Vineet's grin widened. He rose from his seat, adjusting his cufflinks casually. "Alright then, I'll see you tonight. Dinner at my place—I'll send you the address." With his usual effortless charm, Vineet exited, leaving the faint trace of expensive cologne in the air.

Sachin and his junior finished their meal quietly before heading back out into the harsh afternoon sun, their minds already turning back to the investigation.

It was early evening when Ruhana stepped into Vineet's office. The moment she entered, the room shifted—employees looked up from their desks, smiles softening their professional faces. One by one, they greeted her warmly, and this time, unlike before, Ruhana didn't shrink into her usual shyness. She returned their greetings with a calm nod and a gentle smile, but there was a new weight in her demeanor—the quiet pride of someone who belonged here, someone who mattered.

Just then, a sharp shoulder brushed against hers. A young woman, well-dressed and overly confident, looked her up and down.

“And who exactly are you?” the girl asked, her voice dripping with disdain.

Ruhana’s smile thinned, but her tone carried quiet irritation. “Do I really need to explain myself?”

The girl folded her arms with arrogance. “I’m Mr. Vineet’s personal secretary. And trust me, it won’t be long before he falls for me.”

A flicker of amusement crossed Ruhana’s face. She tilted her head slightly and asked with subtle pride, “Do you even want to keep working here?”

The secretary scoffed loudly. “And who are you to decide that? Whether I work here or not is for Mr. Oberoi to decide, not you.” Her words were sharp, her arrogance pressing hard against Ruhana’s patience.

But Ruhana didn’t falter. She straightened her posture, her eyes gleaming with quiet fire. When she spoke again, her voice carried an authority no one had ever heard from her before.

“I will decide.”

A stunned silence spread across the office. The secretary blinked, taken aback, then snapped bitterly, “This place, this industry—everything here belongs to Mr. Vineet Oberoi, not you.”

Ruhana’s lips curved into a slow, proud smile. Her next words landed like a sword. “And Mr. Vineet Oberoi belongs to me.”

The room froze. Every head turned, every breath held. For the first time, they saw not the timid, soft-spoken girl,

but a woman radiating strength, protective and untouchable—like a lioness shielding what was hers.

“Karan,” Ruhana called firmly, without raising her voice. “Fire this girl.”

Her heels clicked against the polished floor as she strode toward Vineet’s cabin, not sparing the secretary another glance. Behind her, the girl erupted, shouting and protesting—until Karan coolly tossed a termination letter on her desk. Security arrived moments later and escorted her out, her shrill complaints echoing uselessly in the corridor.

By the time Ruhana opened the door to Vineet’s cabin, the office was still buzzing with shock and awe. The timid Ruhana they knew had vanished—what stood in her place was a woman unafraid to claim her authority, unafraid to fight for her love.

Vineet was seated in his chair, eyes buried in a thick file, when the door to his cabin burst open. Before he could look up, Ruhana marched straight in, snatched the file from his hands, and plopped herself into his lap with a huff.

“Stop pretending you don’t see me,” she complained, her lips curving into a grumpy pout.

Vineet couldn’t help but smile shyly at her antics. “Well, I just heard someone threw my secretary out of the office...” he teased, raising an eyebrow at her.

“She deserved it!” Ruhana snapped, her anger still raw. “She was claiming you as hers. Bitch!”

Before Vineet could respond, she cupped his chin firmly in her palm, forcing him to meet her fiery gaze. “Tell me honestly—do you have a thing with her?”

He blinked, startled. “Are you serious, Roo? I have nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with her.” His voice

softened into a pleading tone, nervous at the storm in her eyes.

Ruhana narrowed her gaze suspiciously. “Don’t try to fool me. My brother is an officer, remember?” she warned, her voice low but edged with authority.

That made Vineet chuckle nervously. He pressed his palms together in mock surrender. “I swear, Madam, I won’t let you down. In fact, tonight I’m having dinner with your brother.” He dropped the news quickly, hoping to soften her mood.

Her expression shifted, surprise flickering into amusement. She knew Vineet was still working so hard to win Sachin’s approval—for her sake. “So... he’s really coming?” she asked, her voice lighter now.

Vineet slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer, and nodded.

“Be good this time,” Ruhana instructed firmly, wagging a finger at him. “No more drinking, no more... awkward moments. You still haven’t lived down to the last one. The whole city is laughing.”

Vineet sighed dramatically and nodded like a schoolboy caught in mischief. Then, without a word, he leaned into her, resting his head against her shoulder. Through the soft fabric of her dress, he began planting gentle kisses along her shoulder, each one sending tiny shivers racing down her spine.

“Vineet...” she whispered, her breath hitching. “Stop it.”

But her voice wasn’t stern this time—it was weak, trembling under the weight of the warmth he was stirring in her.

Vineet's lips trailed deeper along Ruhana's neck, his warmth sending tremors through her. She melted against him, lost in the moment—until he suddenly stiffened, as if reality had struck him. Without a word, he gently pushed her back, stood, and caught her hand.

"Vineet?" Ruhana blinked, startled as he tugged her toward the door. "Where are we going?"

"To my place," he said hastily, his voice carrying urgency. "You're going to help the chefs with today's menu."

Before she could question further, he had already guided her into the passenger seat of his car. The drive was quiet, filled with a strange nervous energy. Thirty minutes later, the car pulled into the private basement of a sleek building. They stepped into the elevator, and Vineet pressed the button for the very top floor.

The elevator opened into his penthouse—modern, spacious, and gleaming under warm lights. The door unlocked with a swipe of his fingerprint. Inside, a team of chefs³⁴ was already waiting.

"Ruhana," Vineet said, his tone softer now, "Dad sent them. Just... help them out, okay?"

She turned to him, her eyes shimmering with something more than admiration. His effort to win her brother's heart was clear in every gesture. Rising on her toes, she pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. "I'll help. And I'll be there for dinner. Let's tell him the truth tonight," she said, but her fingers wouldn't stop tracing the edge of her bracelet.

Vineet's lips curved into a relieved smile as he drew her into his arms. "Then I'll call my sister. She should know who her bhabhi is going to be." His words were light, but his

arms tightened as if letting go too soon might undo his courage.

Ruhana's cheeks warmed, but she nodded, moving to the kitchen with the chefs. Vineet quickly sent a message—one to his sister, another with the location to Sachin.

By 7:30, the doorbell rang. Vineet opened it to find his younger sister standing there, her face bright with cheer. "Hi, Bhai!" she said, hugging him tightly.

They exchanged lighthearted words before he guided her to a guest room, careful not to reveal the surprise just yet.

At 8:00, Ruhana stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Everything is ready," she said, dropping beside him on the couch. She smoothed her hair behind her ear, then did it again, even though it was already in place.

"Good," Vineet murmured, ruffling her hair affectionately. "Go to my room, freshen up, and get ready. Sachin will be here any moment." Vineet ruffled her hair gently, though his other hand drummed a restless rhythm on the armrest.

On the surface, they acted calm, but both could feel the storm raging inside. The weight of the coming confrontation pressed heavily on their chests. She nodded, but her steps toward the bedroom were slow. Her palm brushed along the wall, steadying her as though her legs were suddenly too light to trust.

Minutes later, the doorbell rang again. Vineet straightened his shirt, forcing a collected smile onto his face. When he opened the door, he found Sachin standing tall, his expression unreadable.

"Inspector Singh," Vineet greeted, offering his hand.

Sachin shook it firmly. “Mr. Oberoi.”

The air between them was polite but tight. Inside, the househelp served drinks, and both men took their seats, the silence between them already carrying the weight of what was about to be revealed.

Chapter 27

The Night Everything Collided

The two men sat across from each other, their conversation drifting into odd, almost unnecessary topics that neither of them seemed fully invested in.

“Have you heard about the new movie? I heard it’s wonderful,” Vineet asked, breaking the silence. His tone was casual, but there was a hint of effort behind it, as though he was trying too hard to fill the gaps.

Sachin gave a small nod, feigning interest. “Really? I’ll watch it if I get the time,” he replied lightly, the kind of answer that ended a topic rather than carried it forward.

Not giving up, Vineet leaned in a little. “Who’s your favorite hero?”

Sachin tilted his head, thinking. “Vinod Khanna ji, always. If we’re talking Hollywood, then Chris Hemsworth. But honestly, it’s been ages since I last sat down to watch a film.” His voice trailed as he tried to recall when that had even been.

Vineet smiled, though his eyes betrayed a flicker of hesitation. He raised his glass, took a sip from it, only to realize it had been empty for a while. Setting it back down, he said casually, “My sister is coming over to meet you.”

Sachin chuckled under his breath. He could sense the awkwardness hanging in the air, yet he also noticed Vineet’s strange persistence in trying to bridge the distance between

them. It was still a mystery why Vineet wanted his approval so badly. Relaxing back in his chair, Sachin said with an amused grin, "I think we should stop being formal now. Look—we've had dinner together, drinks together, and even made a blunder together the last time. That should be enough to make us comfortable with each other."

The servant's quiet voice broke their conversation. "Dinner is served, sir."

Vineet gestured toward the dining area, and both men rose. The long table gleamed under the chandelier, the polished cutlery catching the golden light. As they took their seats, Sachin rested back, trying to settle into the unfamiliar space.

Then, without warning, a hand reached toward him, gently serving a ladle of curry onto his plate. The rich aroma hit him instantly—it was his favorite dish.

"Bhaiya, I hope you'll like it," a familiar voice said softly.

Sachin's hand froze midway to his glass. His head snapped up, and his breath caught in his chest. Ruhana. Standing there in Vineet's apartment, dressed neatly, her eyes nervous yet hopeful. The serving spoon trembled faintly in her hand.

His mind went blank. His throat tightened. A thousand questions collided inside him, but his eyes stayed locked on her like he was staring at an illusion.

"When did it start?" Sachin's voice carried an unsettling calm, the kind that masked something deeper. His eyes darted between his sister and Vineet, sharp yet unreadable.

Ruhana's lips quivered, her throat tightening. She couldn't speak.

"It's been three years, Sachin," Vineet stepped in, his tone even but cautious. His gaze lingered on Sachin, bracing for anger. But instead of fury, he saw something else—a flicker of fear, almost like a man standing at the edge of an abyss.

"Are you alright, Sachin?" Vineet's voice softened. His concern slipped through before he could restrain it.

Sachin wiped the sweat gathering at his temple, his jaw tightening as though to hold back words he wasn't ready to say. "Nothing. I'm just... processing." The reply was light, but his eyes betrayed him—restless, clouded, haunted.

Then he turned to Ruhana. "Can I have some words with her?" His tone left no room for discussion.

Vineet nodded and quietly stepped away, leaving the siblings alone.

The silence weighed heavy between them.

"Bhaiya..." Ruhana's voice cracked. "I wanted to tell you. At the right time. I never meant to hide it." Her guilt pressed down on her chest, heavy as stone.

Sachin stepped closer, taking her trembling hands in his. His grip was steady, protective. "You should've told me. Or at least Kunal. This could've been risky—for you, for Vineet."

Her brows drew together, her heartbeat racing. "Risky? What do you mean?" She searched his face, reading the fear there. "You're not angry—you accept us—but... something's eating at you. What's the risk, Bhaiya?"

Sachin hesitated, his eyes softening, filled with a grief she couldn't understand. He raised a hand and touched her cheek, the way he used to when she was little, when he shielded her from the storms of their past.

“Just... keep it private for now,” he said quietly, but with an edge of finality.

“Why?” The word slipped out, desperate.

Sachin’s chest rose and fell with a heavy sigh. His gaze drifted past her, as if seeing something she couldn’t. “Because some truths, once spoken, can tear everything apart. This news—it won’t just touch you and Vineet. It will ripple through all of us.”

He looked at her again, his voice firm but weighted with sorrow. “Until the time is right, Ruhana... this stays between us.”

Her lips parted, a hundred questions rising, but when she met his eyes—those haunted eyes—she stopped. Against her confusion, she nodded. But her heart whispered that her brother’s silence was guarding a wound far deeper than she could yet imagine.

The air in the dining room was already heavy when Ruhana returned with Vineet at her side. Sachin leaned back in his chair, arms folded, his eyes fixed sharply on Vineet.

“So...” Sachin’s tone was low, edged with arrogance. “Out of one hundred and forty crore people in India, you chose my sister? Must’ve been a courageous move to date Inspector Sachin Singh’s sister.”

Ruhana’s heart skipped. *Why does Bhaiya always have to sound like he’s interrogating someone?* She shot Vineet an apologetic glance, praying he wouldn’t take the bait.

Vineet straightened his shoulders. “I didn’t know she was your sister when I met her. It just... happened.” He kept his voice calm, casual—but inside, he bristled. *So this is what it means to stand before a brother’s judgment. Am I not more than Ruhana’s lover? Must I prove myself like a suspect?*

Sachin exhaled, shaking his head. "Fine. Then prove yourself." His eyes swept Vineet up and down, as though measuring his worth.

Ruhana chewed her lip, forcing a smile to keep the dinner from collapsing before it even began.

And then, a voice broke the tension. "Sorry I'm late."

Three heads turned instantly.

"Angel?" Sachin and Ruhana said together, their voices thick with shock.

Angel walked in, smiling easily, unaware of the bomb she was about to drop. She slid into the chair beside Vineet. "What are you two doing here?"

Before they could speak, Vineet asked, his brow furrowed, "You... know them?"

Angel's grin widened. "Of course I do. She's my best friend. And he—" she leaned into Sachin, wrapping an arm around him, "—is my boyfriend." The room froze.

Sachin felt his pulse hammer against his ribs. Of all the ways for this to come out. He forced a small smile for Angel, but his mind spun. Now it wasn't just about Vineet and Ruhana—this dinner had turned into a battlefield of loyalties.

"What are you doing here?" Sachin asked carefully, his eyes narrowing.

Angel winked. "Why? Jealous?"

Sachin shook his head, but his suspicion didn't fade.

Angel's tone turned playful again. "He's my brother." She pointed at Vineet.

The silence that followed was deafening. Ruhana's jaw dropped. Sachin froze mid-breath. Even Angel looked amused at their stunned expressions.

But Vineet wasn't laughing. His mind raced. *My sister, with him? A man nearly fifteen years older? This isn't right. She's too young.. too different. How could she ever survive the gap?*

Angel sensed the storm in his silence, so she quickly tried to deflect. "By the way, what are you two doing here?"

Sachin answered in a clipped rush. "Vineet invited me for dinner. I was in charge of his case. Then he introduced Ruhana as his girlfriend."

Angel's spoon slipped from her hand, clattering onto her plate. "You're dating someone—and you never told me?" she demanded, her voice sharp as glass.

"Angel—" Ruhana started, but Angel cut her off, her voice rising.

"And not just anyone. My brother? Ruhana, are you serious?!"

Her eyes burned, her hands shaking. I told her everything. Every stupid fight with Sachin, every stolen glance, every secret. And she hid this from me? Was I just a fool thinking we were equals?

"Angel, I—"

"No!" Angel's voice cracked. "I told you every little thing about me and Sachin. And you kept this from me? Are we even friends?"

Ruhana's heart broke at her words. She reached across the table, grabbing Angel's trembling hands. "It was my fault. Not Vineet's. Not Sachin's. Mine. I was scared. Vineet's a high-profile man—if word got out before we were sure, it

could have ruined him. I wasn't ready. That's why I stayed quiet. Not because you're not important."

Tears stung Angel's eyes. Her chest ached. She was my whole world. My anchor. And for once, she didn't trust me enough to hold her secret.

Sachin, watching her crumble, wrapped an arm protectively around her shoulders. "Calm down, Angel," he whispered, his voice gentler than anyone at the table had ever heard.

She leaned into him but whispered hoarsely, "She was all I had, Sachin. If she shuts me out... what do I even have left?"

Ruhana's arms went around her in a desperate hug. "Angel, I'm sorry. Please believe me. I never wanted to hurt you."

Vineet finally spoke, softer this time. "Angie, listen... I called you here today for this. To meet Ruhana officially. To tell you. If anything, I was waiting for the right moment." He gave a small smile. "And I didn't know your best friend was the woman I've fallen for."

Angel blinked at him through her tears, her lip trembling. "You... called me crazy once, didn't you?"

Ruhana laughed nervously, nodding. "Yeah."

Angel gave her a playful slap. "Whatever. I'm happy for you, idiot." She hugged her back, the storm finally ebbing.

But Vineet wasn't finished. He turned his gaze back to Sachin. His voice hardened. "We need to talk."

Sachin released Angel gently and sat opposite him, his eyes steady.

“No need to scare him,” Angel muttered, glaring at her brother.

“Stay out of this, Angel,” Vineet snapped, his temper flaring.

Her jaw tightened, but she stayed silent.

“When did this start?” Vineet demanded, his voice like steel.

“Just a few days ago. Officially, yesterday,” Angel replied before Sachin could open his mouth.

Vineet’s eyes narrowed. “Can’t he speak for himself?”

Sachin finally leaned forward, meeting his gaze without flinching. “I know the age difference looks impossible. I know society will talk. But I love her. And I’ll fight every odd until we’re together.” He squeezed Angel’s hand under the table, his voice low but firm.

Vineet’s face darkened. “Society will not accept this.”

Sachin scoffed. “Society? Society never came to my house when I was starving. Never paid my bills. Never stood by me when I was fighting my demons. So why should I bow to them now? I don’t need society’s permission. I need her.”

Angel’s eyes softened as she looked at him, her lips trembling with a small, fierce smile. He really means it. Against the world, he’d still choose her. She stood beside him.

“You always have me, Sachin. No matter what?” Angel’s words sounded casual, but the way her gaze lingered on his face betrayed her heart. Her voice carried a quiet certainty, an intimacy that neither Vineet nor anyone else could miss.

Vineet’s sigh was heavy, impatient. His fingers tightened around the glass in his hand. “Don’t be ridiculous,

Angel. He's fifteen years older than you." His tone snapped like a whip, less brotherly advice and more accusation.

Angel's shoulders stiffened. Her eyes burned as she turned toward him. "So what? He could be older, younger—it doesn't matter. If you can find a real reason to hate him, then I'll listen. Otherwise, stop pretending you're protecting me."

"He's arrogant," Vineet snapped, his voice sharp with irritation.

Sachin didn't rise to the bait. He only offered a faint, unreadable smile, his calmness a deliberate sting. Across the table, Ruhana's brows furrowed, and she shot her boyfriend a glare, silently urging him to stop.

"Not more than you, Vinnie," Angel countered, her words cutting clean, her tone dismissive.

"He has anger issues," Vineet pressed, his jaw tightening. His voice shook now—not with fear, but with desperation to prove himself right.

Angel let out a dry laugh, shaking her head. "You're talking to me about anger? Don't forget, I've broken more things in this house than anyone else. So no, that's not going to work."

Vineet hesitated, his lips pressed into a thin line. Then his tone dropped lower, sharper. "He has secrets."

The word landed heavy. Sachin's expression shifted almost imperceptibly, but Angel noticed. His jaw tensed, his fingers froze midway to his glass. For a heartbeat, silence thundered louder than words.

Angel studied him—just for a second—before turning back to her brother. A faint smile spread across her lips, one not of carelessness but of defiance. "Good. Secrets don't

scare me. If he wants to tell me, he will. If not, that's his choice. What matters is I love him. And I'm not letting you turn this into some circus just because you don't like it. Stop acting like an old uncle, Vinnie."

Her words slammed the door shut on the argument. Vineet's lips parted as though to respond, but no sound came. The silence at the table was thick, broken only by the quiet clinking of cutlery as the dinner dragged on.

When the plates were nearly cleared, Angel stretched her arms with deliberate ease. "It's late. Everyone's staying here tonight." Her eyes flicked briefly to Sachin, soft but certain. "Sachin, I'll be waiting upstairs." Without waiting for permission or protest, she rose from her chair and walked away, her presence lingering in the air like a storm that had just passed.

Vineet forced a smile at Ruhana and gently guided her toward his room, though his eyes betrayed a restlessness he couldn't hide.

Soon, only the two men remained at the dining table. The clatter of dishes was gone. What was left was silence—and the weight of two sets of eyes locked on each other. Not looking. Not blinking. Glaring, like predators circling, each waiting for the other to make the first move.

"I don't approve of this relationship," Vineet finally growled, his voice low and dangerous.

Sachin leaned back slightly, his expression calm but mocking, the corner of his mouth tugging in a smirk. "And I don't remember asking for your approval."

Vineet's nostrils flared. His hand pressed hard into the wooden table, knuckles pale. "Don't even think about sharing a bedroom with her tonight." Vineet warned Sachin to stay away from Angel's room.

Sachin's smile faded. His eyes darkened, turning sharp and unyielding. "Go near her room, Vineet," he said, his voice a quiet threat, "and I'll make sure you never walk out of this house again."

The air between them grew razor-thin. Two men—respected, disciplined, admired in public—were now stripped to their rawest selves. Beneath the civility, they were nothing more than two furious hearts, ready to shatter the peace like glass.

The air between Sachin and Vineet was still thick, like sparks refusing to die out. Both sat rigid at the dining table, eyes locked, jaws clenched, daring the other to flinch.

Angel stepped in, her voice deliberately light. "Sachu, did you have your dinner?" She leaned toward him, trying to soften the storm brewing in his eyes.

Both men glanced at her at once, their anger momentarily distracted. Before Sachin could even answer, Ruhana rubbed her tired eyes and spoke, her tone sharp with irritation.

"Vinnie, stop making things more awkward than they already are. It's late. Come and sleep—we have college tomorrow." Her voice carried no room for argument, her hand already curling around his wrist to drag him away.

But Sachin's voice thundered before Vineet could move. "Roo—are you sharing a room with him tonight?" His tone was sharp, almost a growl, and his eyes burned with protective fury.

For a moment, the room went still.

Angel's patience snapped. She strode toward Sachin, caught him by the collar, and yanked him down so he had no choice but to meet her glare. Her eyes were blazing, her voice low and dangerous. "Enough, Inspector. Either you

both share a room with us, or you share one with each other.”

Ruhana, usually the gentler one, crossed her arms and nodded in fierce agreement. “The choice is yours.” Her sleepy face still carried fire in her eyes, siding with Angel without hesitation.

Sachin and Vineet both stiffened, horrified at the suggestion. Then, as if on cue, their voices exploded together. “With him? Never!”

Angel and Ruhana exchanged a look—one of exasperation, but also a spark of amusement at how alike these two men really were. Their lips curled into identical smirks before they delivered their final verdict in unison.

“Then scoot over.”

Without waiting for protests, Angel tugged Sachin by his collar while Ruhana pulled Vineet along, both men dragged like stubborn, sulking children who had lost a battle they didn’t even realize they were fighting.

The hallway echoed with reluctant footsteps, grumbles, and the quiet laughter of two women who knew exactly how to tame the storm in their lives.

Ruhana nudged Vineet into the room, and he dropped onto the bed with a dramatic huff, shoulders slouched, lips pressed in a pout. He looked like a sulking child denied his favorite toy, and the sight drew a quiet smile from her lips.

“What was that about?” she asked, arms folded across her chest, giving him an annoyed glare that was softened by the amusement shining in her eyes.

Vineet ran a hand through his hair, restless. “He went to sleep with Angel. What if he does something?” His words tumbled out, sharp but laced with unease.

Ruhana tilted her head, watching him. He looked genuinely unsettled, brows knitted tight, like an older brother guarding his little sister.

“And how could Angel even choose Sachin?” Vineet muttered, voice rising as if to convince himself. “They’re the worst match—completely wrong for each other.”

She sighed, shaking her head at his rambling, and sat down beside him. “Vinnie,” she said softly, her tone melting some of his stiffness.

He turned his face toward her, and for a moment the sulkiness dropped—his eyes carried a depth of concern, not hatred. He didn’t despise Sachin, she knew that. Their paths had crossed during investigations, and there was always friction—competitiveness, mistrust—but never true enmity. Vineet respected him, but he couldn’t look past the flaws. Not yet.

“I’m not saying this because he’s my brother,” Ruhana murmured, slipping her hand over his, pressing his restless fingers still. “As a girl, can I ask you something?”

Vineet’s gaze softened, his head dipping in a silent nod.

“What is it you really don’t like about him?” she asked gently, eyes searching his face. “Not the obvious excuses. The real reason.”

He hesitated, brow furrowed. “Forget his age for now? Fine. They’re not compatible, Roo. They think differently—there’s an entire generation gap between them. And I just... I don’t want Angel hurt if it all falls apart. That’s all.”

Her lips curved into a faint smile, her thumb brushing the back of his hand.

“Vinnie, I understand. But can you guarantee Angel would be happy with a man her own age? You can’t.

Happiness doesn't follow rules." She leaned in closer, her voice steady but tender. "They might argue, fight, even drive each other crazy sometimes—but if they love each other, that will only make them stronger. Let them cherish what they've found. Let them grow."

The fight drained from him slowly, his shoulders loosening as her words sank in. His dark eyes, once tense, now shimmered with quiet thought.

She squeezed his hand and smiled. "When you proposed to me, remember how unsure I was? I kept saying we were too different, like poles apart. But you didn't let go—you convinced me. And look at us now. We're perfect for each other. Don't you think Angel and Sachin deserve the same chance? At least trust Angel to know what's right for her."

Vineet let out a slow breath, the edge in his expression softening into something gentler.

"Just trust them for once. Love is a beautiful thing—let them figure out for themselves whether they need it or not." Ruhana's words lingered in the air as she reached over and ruffled his hair playfully.

Vineet gave a small nod, almost sheepish.

"Let's sleep now," Ruhana added, her tone suddenly firm, like an order.

"Alright," he murmured, and they both shifted to opposite sides of the bed.

Silence settled between them, heavy and awkward. It was the first time they'd ever shared a bed, and the awareness of that fact seemed to press down on them more than the blanket did. They sat stiffly for a while, backs almost too straight, until Vineet finally whispered without looking at her, "Lay down."

Ruhana nodded, her lips twitching in a shy smile. She lay on her back, eyes fixed on the ceiling. Vineet stretched out beside her, mirroring her pose, as if they were competing to see who could stare harder at the blank expanse above them. Every now and then, their eyes darted sideways, catching for a brief second before both turned away quickly, pretending to be uninterested.

They closed their eyes, but sleep stayed far away. The silence felt too loud.

Finally, Ruhana shifted onto her side, facing him. "Vinnie," she whispered.

He turned his head to meet her gaze, his voice soft. "Haah?"

"Sorry... I've never shared my room before, so it feels a bit awkward." Her laugh was nervous, an attempt to lighten the mood.

Vineet smiled faintly, the corners of his lips tugging up. "Then how about we watch a movie? That might help."

Ruhana shook her head, smiling at his attempt. "No." Instead, she slipped her hand into his, then tugged his arm gently and placed it beneath her head like a pillow. Her other hand came to rest lightly on his chest. "Let's just be comfortable," she murmured.

Vineet's heart skipped at the sudden closeness, but he only smiled, his hand instinctively moving to pat her hair in a soothing rhythm. Her breathing soon steadied against him, and the awkwardness dissolved into warmth. Within moments, they both drifted into sleep, side by side.

Chapter 28

Storms before Sunrise

Angel dragged Sachin into her room, her fingers cinched tight around his wrist. She kicked the door shut and faced him, eyes hard.

“Why were you arguing with my brother?” Her voice was steady, but frustration flickered beneath it—at him, at her brother, at the mess of it all.

Sachin’s face was already grumpy, jaw locked. “Because he’s sleeping with Roo,” he snapped. “He’s in the same room with my sister. You think that’s easy for me?”

Angel exhaled and, instead of scolding, reached up and tugged his cheek. “Awww.” The simple touch softened him for a heartbeat; then his features reset, hard again.

“And I’m here with you,” she said, palm to her forehead in disbelief. “Same situation, different room.”

He glanced at her, a reluctant smile tugging one corner of his mouth. “Come here,” he murmured, patting the bed.

Angel sat beside him. “Speak.”

“She was five when I moved here,” he began, voice low. “In the beginning it wasn’t money—we had enough. It was the scars we carried. Traumas she still doesn’t know about. I raised her behind a shield she couldn’t see.” He swallowed. “Now she has a boyfriend. I agreed to it, I did, but my brother’s instincts are still clawing at me. I’m... possessive.”

Angel's expression softened. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and rested her head there. "You're scared of losing the thing you protected most," she whispered. "I get it."

He nodded against her hair. "I already agreed to them, but the worry doesn't listen."

Angel pulled back just enough to meet his eyes. "You know, I never thought I could love someone like this. But the moment I saw you, I craved you—your love, your stubbornness, all of it." Her throat tightened, and a tear slipped free before she could stop it.

He smiled, faint and sad. "I never stayed with my family. Life pushed me away—hostels, rooms with strangers, silence. I craved a home and found it in Ruhana. She's my solace." Angel's voice was shaken with emotions. He brushed the tear from Angel's cheek with his thumb. "And somehow, I found it in you too." Angel smiled.

She blinked, heart trembling. He tried to lighten it, chuckling. "I agree—I'll be number two in your life after Ruhana."

A small laugh caught in her chest. '*It's true*', a selfish voice whispered. "*Roo has the first key.*" "Don't say that," she murmured, even as a flicker of jealousy pricked her—quick, ashamed, human.

Her gaze dropped, worry creeping in. "Sachin... I don't even know if my parents will agree with us."

"That's okay," he said at once. "I'll make them agree." He paused, then gently turned her to face him, thumbs warm at her jaw. "But before that, I need to tell you something."

Angel stilled.

“I have a past,” he said, breathing steady. “A failed relationship.” He waited for her to flinch; she didn’t, though her fingers tightened around his.

“When I was eighteen, I fell in love with Payal, Childhood friends. In the UK, during graduation, I proposed. She said yes.” A ghost of a smile. “When we returned to India, our parents opposed it—social status, pride, the usual walls. We didn’t want to part. We swore we wouldn’t.” His voice thinned. “Destiny didn’t ask. It’s been fifteen years since she died.”

Angel’s chest hollowed. ‘Payal.’ The name landed like a stone in water, sending rings through her calm.

“I couldn’t take it,” he went on, eyes bright with pain he rarely showed. “I left the city. It took me fifteen years to learn how to breathe without her.”

Silence pressed close. The grief in his eyes was old and clean, like a scar that still aches in the rain. Angel felt a small, frightened thought curl inside her: *‘Will he ever love me the way he loved her? Can anyone win against a memory?’* The jealousy was quicksand—and still, compassion rose higher.

She slid forward and wrapped him in both arms, cheek to his chest. “I don’t want to compete with what you lost,” she whispered. “I just want to be part of how you heal.”

He held her like an anchor after a long storm. Her doubts didn’t vanish, but love steadied her hands. She said nothing else, and in that wordless space, he let a few tears fall—safe, at last, in the quiet she made for him.

Sachin hugged her back, his arms heavy with unspoken truths. “I still told you only half the truth,” he murmured against her hair. “The other half... I’ll never tell you. And please, never ask me. What I thought you needed to know—I’ve told you.”

Angel froze. His words sank like stones in her chest. *'Half the truth? What else is buried in him?'* She pulled back slowly, her face clouded.

Sachin read her silence. "Speak," he urged.

She bit her lip, then whispered, "I almost wish you hadn't told me. Because now I'm jealous, sad." Her smile wavered, fragile and wrong on her lips. "If love can last fifteen years after someone's gone, it must mean she still owns a piece of you I'll never touch."

Sachin closed his eyes briefly, then cupped her face with steady hands. "It's true. I loved her, maybe I always will. She was my first. But you—" his voice cracked just slightly—"you're my forever. You have my heart now, Angel. That's a promise."

Her throat tightened. She nodded, though her voice came out rough. "Let's just sleep."

He didn't argue. They lay down side by side. Angel turned her face to the wall, hiding in the shadows, while Sachin stretched out an arm to slide beneath her head. For a while, he stared at the ceiling, sighing.

'Maybe she can't process my past. Maybe I've already hurt her too much.'

He rolled to the opposite side, leaving silence between them. Minutes passed. Ten. Fifteen. The air grew thick. Angel's irritation swelled until it burned in her chest.

'He could lie here so calmly? After dropping that on me?'

She flipped over—and her anger doubled when she saw his back turned.

"Unbelievable," she muttered. Then, in a burst of temper, she shoved him hard. Sachin yelped as he tumbled off the bed with a loud thud.

“What the—?!” he exclaimed, sitting up on the floor, rubbing his arm.

Angel snatched a pillow and hurled it at his face. “You’re a bad boyfriend!” she shouted, eyes flashing.

Sachin blinked, bewildered. “What did I do now?!”

“You broke my heart with your tragic past, made me jealous without meaning to, and then when I said let’s sleep, you actually slept!” she snapped, hands flailing. “You should’ve held me, talked to me, comforted me—anything but this!”

Her voice cracked, the anger laced with something rawer. She wasn’t just mad—she was hurt. Hurt that another woman had once held him so deeply. Hurt that his eyes still carried that old pain, a love carved in scars.

Sachin stared at her, dumbfounded, then gave a small, helpless laugh. “So... you’re mad because I listened to you?”

Angel grabbed the second pillow and raised it threateningly. “Don’t you dare be smart right now, Inspector?”

Despite the fire in her voice, Sachin could see it: the shimmer of unshed tears in her eyes, the silent plea behind her fury. And he realized—her anger wasn’t against his past. It was against the fear of never being enough for his future.

Sachin sat on the floor, still blinking at the pillow that had smacked him. “Angel, you’re impossible,” he muttered, though the corner of his mouth betrayed a twitch of amusement.

“Don’t you dare smile!” she snapped, pointing at him like a school teacher. “I’m serious, Sachu. You broke me with that story, and instead of holding me, you turned away and left me to stew in it. Do you know how that feels?”

Her voice cracked on the last word, her anger slipping into something softer, more fragile. Sachin's smirk faded. He climbed back onto the bed, slow and careful, like approaching a wounded bird. He sat cross-legged in front of her, searching her eyes.

"You're right," he said quietly. "I hurt you without meaning to. I thought giving you space would help... but I should've known you didn't want space. You wanted me."

Angel tried to hold onto her scowl, but her lips trembled. "Of course I wanted you," she whispered. "How could you not see that?"

Sachin reached for her hand, threading his fingers through hers. "Because I'm an idiot," he admitted. "An idiot who doesn't deserve you, but still can't stop loving you."

Her eyes stung. The jealousy that had been gnawing at her finally spilled into words. "She was your first love, Sachu. I can't compete with that. The way you said her name... it still hurts you. It hurts me too."

He cupped her face gently, thumbs brushing away the tears that escaped. "Angel. Payal was my first, yes. But she's gone. You're here. And I don't want to compare, because love doesn't work like that. She was my past... you are my present, my future. Do you hear me?"

Angel's throat tightened. She hated how much she wanted to believe him, how desperately she needed those words. "And you promise? You won't ever let me feel like second best?"

"I promise," he said without hesitation. "I already told you—she was my first. But you..." his voice softened to a whisper, "you'll be my forever."

Her walls crumbled. She lunged forward and hugged him fiercely, burying her face in his chest.

Sachin wrapped his arms around her, this time holding her the way she had needed all along. He kissed the top of her head, lingering there. "I'm sorry," he murmured. "For everything—for the pain I still carry, for the pain I gave you tonight."

Angel sniffled, her words muffled against him. "You're still a bad boyfriend."

Sachin chuckled, relief breaking through. "Fine, then I'll spend the rest of my life trying to be a better one."

She looked up at him with red eyes and a crooked smile. "You'd better."

And when he leaned in, their lips met—not rushed, not desperate, but steady and certain, sealing the crack that jealousy had carved. They didn't push beyond what was right; they simply held onto each other, breathing the same quiet air, letting warmth replace the silence.

Maintaining the boundaries they both knew mattered, they finally dozed off in each other's embrace—her head resting against his chest, his arm curled protectively around her—as if the night itself promised them peace after the storm.

Morning light slipped through the curtains, brushing Ruhana's face as her eyes fluttered open. Vineet was still asleep beside her, his arm draped around her like she was the most precious thing in the world. A soft smile crept across her lips. She leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to his forehead.

As she pulled back, her gaze lingered—drawn to the curve of his mouth. His lips looked soft, flushed pink, almost inviting. Before she even realized it, her fingers traced lightly across them. "His lips are softer than mine," she whispered to herself, almost shyly.

Heart racing, she leaned closer, ready to brush her lips against his—when his eyes suddenly opened. He blinked at her, then sat up with a jolt. “What are you trying to do?” he exclaimed, clutching the blanket and yanking it up to cover himself dramatically. “Taking advantage of me?” His wide-eyed expression was somewhere between mock horror and genuine bewilderment.

Ruhana froze, her jaw dropping in shock. “Vinnie... what?” She hadn’t expected this reaction.

“I saw it with my own eyes!” he declared, his tone overly wounded. “You were about to take advantage of my loneliness. I’m scared!” He buried half his face in the blanket, peeking at her like a victim.

She let out a frustrated sigh, shaking her head. “Are you serious right now?” Her voice grew firm. “What if I do take advantage of you? You’re my man. I can do whatever I want.”

Vineet’s hand flew to his mouth in a mock scandal. “Hawww! Bad woman,” he gasped theatrically. “I’ll sue you for this!”

The seriousness broke, and the room filled with their laughter—hers rich with exasperation, his bubbling with mischief.

“Roo, what am I saying?” Vineet murmured as he stepped closer, his eyes fixed on hers.

Instinctively, Ruhana took a step back to put distance between them, but his hand shot out and gently caught her wrist, tugging her toward him.

“Wh... what are you doing?” she stammered, her voice barely a whisper. Her nerves betrayed her, and he could feel the tremor in her hand.

Instead of answering, Vineet's lips curved into a teasing smile. He leaned in, closing the gap until his warm breath fanned against her ear. The heat of it sent shivers racing down her spine, her heartbeat drumming louder with every second.

His hand slid behind her neck, steady and firm, guiding her closer until she had no choice but to shut her eyes. The tension stretched her whole body taut with anticipation.

"Good morning, Roo," he whispered, his voice brushing against her skin like silk. "This is the most beautiful morning... because I woke up beside you."

Instead of doing what her racing heart half-feared—and half-hoped—he pressed a tender kiss to her forehead. The warmth lingered, soft and steady, making her eyes flutter open.

Vineet was smiling down at her, still holding her close. His arm rested around her waist like it belonged there. "You look so peaceful when you sleep," he murmured. "Almost makes me forget how much trouble you cause when you're awake."

Ruhana blinked, caught between a laugh and a blush. "Excuse me? Am I causing trouble?"

"Constantly," he said, smirking. "You steal my peace, my sleep... Now apparently my mornings too."

She rolled her eyes, trying to hide the flutter in her chest. "If I'm stealing all that, why are you smiling like an idiot?"

"Because," he said softly, his thumb tracing a lazy circle on her arm, "I like being robbed by you."

Her breath hitched. The teasing tone had shifted—his voice had dipped lower, slower. Their eyes met, and for a

moment, neither of them spoke. The air between them hummed, quiet but heavy with something unspoken.

Ruhana swallowed, suddenly aware of how close they were—how easily she could close that last inch between them. “Vinnie...” she whispered, unsure what she meant to say.

He smiled faintly, brushing his thumb along her jaw. “You don’t have to say anything.”

Her pulse stuttered. “You’re flirting again.”

“Only because you’re blushing again,” he countered.

She let out a soft laugh, trying to look away, but he caught her chin gently, guiding her gaze back to his. “Don’t hide,” he said. “It’s my favorite look on you.”

Ruhana’s cheeks burned, and she finally pushed lightly at his chest. “You’re impossible.”

“And yet,” he said, grinning as he loosened his hold, “you’re still here.”

She slipped out of his arms, flustered but smiling. “Not for long,” she muttered, pretending to fix her hair as she escaped toward the door.

Behind her, Vineet’s quiet chuckle followed—warm, knowing, and full of the kind of tension that made the morning feel far from over. He stretched lazily, running a hand through his hair before heading to the washroom.

Ruhana paused at the doorway, glancing back once. The sight of him—hair tousled, smiled soft—sent a flutter through her chest. She turned away quickly, deciding she’d use the guest room washroom instead. She needed a few minutes alone... and maybe a cold splash of water to steady her heart.

Ruhana stepped into the dining area, still carrying the warmth of the morning on her cheeks. Angel and Sachin were already halfway through their breakfast.

“Good morning, Roo!” Angel chirped, waving her toast before taking a bite.

Ruhana smiled as she slid into the chair beside them. “Goo... good morning, Angie,” she replied, trying to sound casual while reaching for the teapot.

Angel paused mid-chew, squinting at her. Then her eyes widened mischievously. “Oh-ho! Why are you blushing like that? Sachu, look at her—her cheeks are red like a tomato!”

Ruhana nearly choked on her tea. “I am not!” she protested weakly, avoiding both their eyes.

Sachin set his cup down with a thud, his gaze narrowing on his sister. His protective instincts flared instantly. “We’re going back today,” he announced sharply, as though that would solve everything.

Angel, oblivious to the tension, nodded cheerfully while shoving another piece of toast into her mouth. “Yes, yes. I can’t stay here too long anyway.”

Ruhana just nodded along, keeping her head down. “Angel, hurry up and get ready. We have class in an hour.” She finished her breakfast quickly, pushing back her chair.

“On it!” Angel said, hopping up. The two girls dashed off to their rooms to change, leaving Sachin alone at the table.

He sipped his coffee slowly, his jaw tight, thoughts brewing behind his silence.

Just then, Vineet strolled in, fresh from his room, and dropped into the seat beside him. Their eyes met briefly, neither one smiling. The air between them was thick—civil,

but strained, like a storm waiting for the first crack of thunder.

“Hopefully, you’ll understand someday,” Vineet scoffed, his voice edged with disdain. “You’re the worst man Angel could ever have.”

Sachin drew in a slow breath, steadying himself. “Time will tell,” he said evenly. Then, with a faint smile, he added, “But I’m certain of one thing—you’re the best man for my sister. Which is why I’ll say this once: be careful.” He pressed a firm hand against Vineet’s shoulder, his tone low but unyielding.

“Careful?” Vineet snorted, puffing out his chest. “Please. I’ve got the best security personnel with me.” His pride was almost boyish.

Sachin’s gaze hardened, his words cutting sharp. “The same security I walked right through last time? Crashed without breaking a sweat?”

Vineet’s lips parted, ready to retort—but nothing came. His confidence faltered under the weight of Sachin’s calm, merciless truth.

Sachin leaned closer, his voice dropping. “You once said I had secrets. You weren’t wrong. Maybe you noticed a glimpse of them that day.” He paused, letting the silence sink in. “Fine. I admit it—I have secrets. And because of that, I’m warning you: stay alert. Be careful. I’ve already called Kunal to add additional security for you. Don’t argue, and don’t tell anyone. Not Ruhana. Not Angel.”

Vineet froze, confusion clouding his face. For once, words failed him.

Sachin rose from his chair, sliding an intercom and a sleek card across the table. “Keep these safe. You’ll need them.”

Vineet picked them up hesitantly, still struggling to make sense of what was happening. But when his eyes landed on the card, his breath hitched. His heart skipped.

It was a card for *the most elite security network in the world*—a service he himself had tried to acquire, only to be denied, even with his money and influence. Yet Sachin had arranged it, effortlessly, in mere hours.

For the first time, Vineet stared at Sachin not as Ruhana's overprotective brother... but as a man far more dangerous and capable than he had ever imagined.

Vineet couldn't shake off the weight of the conversation he'd just had with Sachin. The man wasn't just mysterious—he could be dangerous. Sachin had warned him to be careful, even went as far as assigning security for him. And not just any security—the best in the world. Yet, even with all Vineet's power and connections, he had never been able to secure that kind of deal. Sachin had done it effortlessly.

"Gosh! This guy is so damn mysterious. And my sister loves him deeply..." Vineet muttered, scratching his forehead in frustration.

He leaned back, recalling the first time Sachin stormed into his office—accusing him of drug peddling. Back then, Vineet had thought him nothing more than an arrogant, overzealous officer. But everything shifted once Ruhana revealed that he was her brother. Harsh, intimidating, unbending as he was, Sachin had ultimately helped prove those accusations false.

Vineet had tried to meet him later, hoping to make a good impression, but instead left with more questions than answers. Sachin carried an aura of contradictions. A mere police officer... yet he mingled effortlessly with the elite. He knew Polo, Golf, and other sports of the privileged few. He

could identify a car model that hadn't even been released to the public yet. He drank whiskeys worth millions a bottle. He had access to a bottomless black card.

Who was this man?

Vineet knew digging would be pointless—Sachin had carved out his identity with careful lies and locked it away too well. And now... the situation was even worse. His sister had introduced Sachin not as her brother's friend, not as some acquaintance, but as her boyfriend.

A mysterious man, entangled with his sister. That was not acceptable.

"She has no idea what she's gotten into," Vineet whispered, his chest tightening. He couldn't meddle—not when Angel had spent years alone, guarding her independence, demanding the right to live her life without interference. But his instincts as a brother screamed otherwise. He couldn't stand by if she was walking straight into heartbreak... or danger.

With a deep sigh, Vineet sank further into his couch, his thoughts tangling into knots.

He gave me security. The best, but how? He admits he has secrets, but what are they? Does Ruhana know the truth? Does Angel? Don't we deserve to know at least that much?

His temples throbbed as the questions multiplied. Frustrated, he tipped his head back against the chair, staring at the ceiling as if it might hand him an answer.

"My head's going to explode if I keep thinking about this," he groaned.

But the truth was simple—he wouldn't rest until he uncovered the mystery of Sachin Singh.

Chapter 29

Echoes of a Forgotten Heir

After dropping the girls at their college, Sachin drove in silence toward headquarters. The car engine hummed steadily, but inside his chest was chaos. His thoughts clashed and collided—fragments of memories, warnings, promises—all threatening to unravel the careful life he had built.

By the time he reached his office, his nerves were raw. He pushed open the door, let it click shut behind him, and sank heavily into his chair. For a moment, he simply sat there, staring at the blank screen before him. His hand hovered over the keyboard, stiff with hesitation.

Finally, with a sharp inhale, he began to type.

Atharv Singh.

The search results appeared instantly. His eyes locked on a photograph—a teenage boy with aristocratic features, dressed in ceremonial attire. The faintest smirk curled his lips, a boy too sure of his place in the world.

The headline beneath it read:

Atharv Singh Rathore — Crown Prince of Jaipur.

Sachin's throat tightened. His heart hammered as he clicked the link.

'Atharv Singh Rathore, sole heir of Jaipur's royal family. For twenty years, he lived as the pampered prince—wealth, privilege, and power at his fingertips. Spoiled, some said. Untouchable, others believed. After completing his education abroad, he returned to

Jaipur to claim his place. But soon after... he vanished. Rumors whispered of his death at the hands of rivals. Others claimed he was locked away in a mental asylum. To this day, his fate remains an unsolved mystery.'

The words blurred on the screen. Sachin blinked hard, but the tears kept forming, stubborn and hot. His hands gripped the edge of the desk until his knuckles whitened.

Fifteen years.

It had been fifteen years, yet the past still stalked him. He had built a life, buried his scars under duty and silence, but one name, one face, could still split him open.

Atharv and with her

Her laugh echoed in his mind, soft and cruel in its sweetness. A memory he had tried to strangle but never could.

He pressed a hand over his face, but the images wouldn't stop—the crown prince with his careless smile, Payal's eyes full of light, and the darkness that followed them all.

Sachin told himself he had moved on. That time had healed him. But deep down he knew—part of his heart was still shackled to that night, to the shadows of Payal, Atharv, and the tragedy that had defined his fate.

And now, after fifteen years, those shadows were stirring again.

Sachin had revealed only a portion of the truth to Angel—so little it could hardly be called a confession, not more than five percent of the whole. The rest he locked away, asking her not to dig any further. Ruhana, though, had grown relentless, her questions about their past and about

their parents carrying a stubborn edge that shook even his strongest defenses.

Vineet, meanwhile, had started piecing things together. He wasn't naive. His sharp eyes had caught every hesitation, every unfinished sentence. Doubt had taken root in him, growing heavier each day, and he was certain—Sachin was hiding something enormous.

Still, Sachin had asked him to cooperate, even placing the finest security at Vineet's side—an arrangement so flawless that it unsettled Vineet more than it reassured him. He agreed, outwardly, but his curiosity gnawed at him like a wound that refused to heal.

For Sachin, that curiosity was the real danger. Not because he feared the truth itself—he could speak it if he chose. No, what froze him was the weight of reality. Some truths weren't just bitter; they were unbearable. And once spoken, they had the power to destroy everything.

A new case had just been reported, snapping Sachin out of the spiral of his thoughts. Shoving aside the weight in his chest, he grabbed his coat and stepped out, his mind switching gears as he moved toward the investigation.

It was evening when Angel and Ruhana reached home. The last strands of sunlight filtered through the curtains, casting the living room in a warm, golden haze. Angel immediately flung herself onto the couch with a dramatic sigh, sprawling as though she were completely drained. Ruhana, in contrast, shook her head with a tired little smile, her steps quieter, more thoughtful. She drifted toward the kitchen, the faint sound of clinking glass filling the stillness, before returning with two glasses of water in her hands.

"Roo, sit here. I've ordered some snacks and juices. We have a lot to discuss." Angel's voice carried an unusual energy, her hand patting the cushion beside her.

Ruhana hesitated for a heartbeat, noticing the way Angel's eyes glimmered with something beyond mischief—something heavier. Still, she joined her friend on the couch.

“Speak,” Ruhana said softly, sipping her water, her eyes studying Angel's face.

Angel smirked, her usual mischief taking over. “Let's start with you! Just speak up about you and Vinnie—each and every detail.” She nudged Ruhana's arm playfully, her wink brimming with curiosity.

A faint blush crept across Ruhana's cheeks. “I told you last night,” she murmured, swatting at Angel's arm with mock annoyance.

Angel narrowed her eyes like a detective catching a lie. “Still, I want to know each and every detail of your love story. When did you guys meet for the first time? How did things turn into love?” Her voice bubbled with excitement, eager to soak in every word.

Ruhana sighed, surrendering to the inevitable. “Fine. We met at a movie theatre three years ago. We collided, and my entire glass of juice spilled on him.” She burst into laughter at the memory.

“I just apologized and bought him a coat for just 500 bucks.” Ruhana laughed harder, covering her mouth.

Angel's jaw dropped. “Just 500! Are you serious, babe? The business tycoon of the nation was wearing a coat worth only 500? He's brand-conscious though!” Her shock made Ruhana laugh even harder.

“I took his coat for laundry,” Ruhana continued between giggles, “and when I returned it, I accidentally left my hairpin there. Mr. Tycoon actually came all the way to my college just to return a 5 rupee hairpin.” She clutched

her stomach, roaring with laughter until tears pooled in her eyes.

Angel joined her, laughter spilling freely. "That is something! And this way, love bloomed in you two. Isn't it?" Her wide, teasing smile made Ruhana blush again.

But then, Angel's laughter slowed. The spark in her eyes dulled, replaced by a weight that dimmed the room's warmth.

"But Roo," she said quietly, "I have lots to say."

Ruhana straightened, confused knitting her brows. "Speak then."

Angel drew in a sharp breath. Her voice was softer now, heavier. "Your brother had a girlfriend years ago. She died... and he grieved her for almost fifteen years. A part of his heart still belongs to her."

Ruhana froze, her glass suspended midair. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs. She had never—never—heard this part of her brother's life. A sting of guilt and sadness surged in her chest. All the times she had pushed him for answers, not realizing what pain she was demanding he reopen.

"And I always pressured him to tell everything, and he kept hiding this." Ruhana's tone was thick with regret, her eyes shadowed.

"That is not over. Don't get to any conclusion." Her voice sharpened suddenly, forcing Ruhana's head up.

Ruhana frowned. "What do you mean?"

"He said this is the half truth," Angel muttered bitterly, pulling a face just as the doorbell rang, startling them both.

Angel stood quickly, almost too eagerly, as though grateful for the interruption. A moment later, she returned with the food, the aroma of noodles and pasta filling the air. She handed a steaming box of noodles to Ruhana and kept the pasta for herself.

“What’s the other?” Ruhana asked instantly, her curiosity and worry threading together.

Angel’s jaw tightened. She glared at her friend, stabbing her fork into the pasta. “He didn’t tell me. He told me not to ask.” She shoved a mouthful into her mouth, chewing with deliberate force.

Ruhana’s mouth fell open, her eyes widening in shock. “You should have asked him!” she said, disappointment sharpening her voice.

“He simply denied it.” Angel’s tone was flat now, her earlier spark gone, replaced by a hollow frustration.

The food sat between them, steam rising in soft curls, but neither of them seemed to taste it. Ruhana’s heart was pounding too fast, her mind reeling. The evening that had begun with laughter now hung heavy, thick with secrets—secrets that pressed against her chest, demanding answers she wasn’t sure she was ready for.

Angel shifted restlessly on the couch, her eyes narrowing as if she had pieced together a puzzle no one else could see. “Roo, I’m sure that Kasauli thing is a lie,” she said, voice low but urgent. “He’s hiding something. Something big. I’ve seen him... waking up from nightmares. Not the usual kind—bad ones. His face looked pale, drenched in sweat, like he’d seen a ghost. And he kept mumbling two names—*Maa* and *Payal*.”

The glass in Ruhana’s hand trembled slightly. The water rippled before she set it down with a soft clink. “Payal?

Who's Payal?" Her confusion was written all over her face as she glanced at Angel.

Angel exhaled, leaning back into the couch, shoulders sagging under the weight of her revelation. "His ex. She died. But Roo..." her voice dropped to a whisper, "...if her death hit him that hard, then what if it wasn't natural?"

Ruhana's lips parted in shock. Her throat felt dry as she croaked, "How could you say that?"

Angel dragged her fingers through her hair in agitation, eyes clouded with thought. "I don't know. It's just a feeling. Something's off—like really, really off."

Ruhana's heartbeat quickened. "You mean... there's more?" Her voice was a fragile thread.

Angel nodded gravely, but then a spark of mischief flickered in her eyes, betraying her seriousness. She leaned forward, voice dropping conspiratorially. "Your brothers are coming home late today. What if we... checked their rooms?"

Ruhana's eyes widened in horror, her pulse thudding in her ears. She shook her head so fast it made her earrings jingle. "Are you crazy? I'm not even allowed to go into their rooms when they're here. Forget about sneaking in when they're not."

A wicked smile spread across Angel's face, her teeth flashing like a dare. "Which means that's exactly where the truth is hiding."

Ruhana felt her stomach twist. Just the thought of crossing that invisible line into her brothers' private space made her skin prickle. "I... I can't do this," she blurted, her voice breaking.

Angel's expression softened for a heartbeat, then she fired her most dangerous shot, her eyes steady, voice calm

but sharp as glass. “What if your parents are alive somewhere?”

The air seemed to leave the room. Ruhana’s body went rigid, her breath hitching in her chest. A fresh tear escaped her eye, tracing a slow path down her cheek. She looked at Angel as if her whole world had shifted under her feet.

Angel’s face twisted into a grumpy scowl. “Don’t ask me again, and stop worrying about the past if you won’t do anything about it,” she snapped, her tone cutting like glass. Without waiting for a reply, she stormed into her room, leaving the air heavy with her words.

Ruhana sat frozen, her mind rattling. *Maybe they are alive somewhere...* Angel’s parting words echoed in her ears, each syllable digging deeper. Alive? Could her parents really be alive?

Her chest tightened as she replayed everything Angel had told her today—the name *Payal*, Sachin’s lost love, and her death. The puzzle only grew darker. She longed for answers, but she had always dreamed her brothers would trust her enough to share the truth themselves. Instead, all she had were secrets and silence.

With a shaky breath, she made up her mind. If her brothers wouldn’t speak, she would uncover it herself.

She slipped quietly into Kunal’s room, each step measured, as if the walls themselves were listening. The faint scent of his cologne lingered in the air, mixed with the musk of old papers. She pulled open his wardrobe, her hands trembling as she shuffled through neatly folded shirts, drawers lined with clear plastic bags, scraps of notes, and small boxes. Nothing.

Biting her lip, she turned to the side drawer, opening it with a soft creak. Empty again. Disappointment sank in her chest—until a sudden voice broke the silence.

“I found something.”

Ruhana whirled around, her breath catching. Angel stood in the washroom doorway, mischief glinting in her eyes, holding up a photograph like a trophy.

“What are you doing here?” Ruhana whispered sharply, her voice trembling with shock.

“Digging the truth,” Angel replied with a wink. She waved the photograph teasingly before Ruhana snatched it from her hands.

Ruhana’s eyes widened. The photo was old, the edges slightly worn. Four people stood at an airport: Kunal, Sachin, a girl about Sachin’s age, and an older man with salt-and-pepper hair, his hand resting on a suitcase. Sachin’s smile in the picture looked different—softer, warmer—and his arm rested protectively close to the girl.

“Who’s this girl? Sachin looks... so close to her,” Angel muttered, peering over her shoulder.

“Payal? Could this be her? Then who’s this uncle?” Ruhana whispered, her pulse racing as she studied the elderly man.

“Maybe your father... or Payal’s father?” Angel guessed, her tone casual but her eyes watchful.

Ruhana’s brow furrowed. “But how can we be sure this is Payal? We’re only guessing...”

Before they could continue, the low rumble of an engine cut through the silence. A car door slammed outside. The sound jolted them like thunder.

Panic flickered in Angel's eyes. She darted forward, hurriedly tucking the photograph back into the same spot she had found it. Both girls exchanged a frantic glance, then bolted out of Kunal's room, their footsteps muffled against the carpet. They slipped into Ruhana's room, their hearts pounding, praying no one had noticed.

Sachin and Kunal stepped into the house, only to be met with an unusual silence. The place, usually buzzing with warmth and chatter, felt strangely still. Both exchanged a look, sensing something was off.

Kunal wandered toward the kitchen while Sachin sank onto the couch, loosening his shoulders after a long day. Moments later, Kunal came rushing back, his face pale with surprise.

"There's something wrong, Sachin. The kitchen's empty—no dinner, nothing's been cooked!" he blurted out, half panicked.

Sachin barely reacted, leaning back against the couch. "Then order something. I'm going to change," he said casually, getting to his feet.

But just as he turned toward his room, he collided with someone. Angel.

Her forehead bumped against his chest, and for a moment she froze there, her head resting comfortably against him.

"I-I'm so sorry," Angel murmured, though she didn't immediately pull away.

Sachin looked down at her, the faintest smile tugging at his lips. His hand lifted almost instinctively, gently cupping

her face to tilt it away from his chest. He leaned closer, his voice dropping near her ear.

“Don’t be so eager for this,” he teased, eyes glinting. “I can wait.”

With a sly wink, he walked past her toward his room, leaving Angel stunned in place. Her jaw fell open, and her cheeks flushed a deep red.

Ruhana who had been watching, immediately nudged her with a wicked grin. “Why are you blushing?” she teased, her voice sing-song, clearly delighted by the moment.

The room carried an unusual tension, heavy and unspoken. Angel’s sharp whisper broke the silence. “Shut up. See if Kunal will find something.” She leaned toward Ruhana, her eyes darting nervously.

Ruhana nodded quickly, forcing a smile as her brother entered. “How was your day, Bhayia?” she asked, making him comfortable on the couch as if nothing was wrong.

Angel’s voice chimed in, casual but shaky. “I’ll order something for us. We had a project, so no meal was prepared.” She kept her gaze locked on her phone screen, avoiding Kunal’s piercing eyes.

Kunal smiled faintly, but his gaze lingered. He studied their faces, catching the flickers of unease hidden behind their words. Their voices told one story, but their eyes—another.

“Don’t bother,” he said smoothly, ruffling Ruhana’s hair. “If you’re hiding something, I’ll find it.”

Ruhana shut her eyes tightly, as if the touch exposed her guilt. Angel shot Kunal a shocked look, but before she could stop it, Ruhana blurted out, “Bhayia, she’s the sister of Vineet Oberoi... that business tycoon.”

Kunal's smile deepened, half amusement, half suspicion. "And you're dating her brother. Don't you think I already knew?" His eyes locked on Ruhana's nervous ones.

Angel jumped in quickly, her words tumbling out. "Of course you do. Sachin must have told you everything. She's just shy, embarrassed now that you know. A cultured sister feels a bit awkward about these things."

Kunal let the cover-up slide with another smile. "We accept the truth, Ruhana. But keep it a secret for now." He patted his sister's head gently, but his stern glance at Angel lingered before he turned toward his room.

On the way, his phone buzzed. He checked the screen—his lips curved in a knowing smile. Once inside his room, he paused, scanning every corner carefully. Another smile appeared, darker this time.

He dialed a number. Sachin answered. "They searched my room," Kunal said flatly. That was all—and he disconnected.

Inside the washroom, he reached for a hidden photograph. His eyes softened, moisture gathering as he whispered to the silent image, "So... we have two detectives here."

He placed the photo back carefully, washed his face, and stepped out again. By the time he returned to join them for dinner, his expression was calm, unreadable—a man who carried secrets the others couldn't even imagine.

In the dining area, Angel was setting the table, as the food had already arrived. Ruhana had slipped away to her room after receiving a call from Vineet.

Sachin walked in, his expression tight, his mood clearly sour. Without a word, he caught Angel's hand and forced her to turn toward him.

"Spill," he said flatly, his voice clipped but loaded. He didn't need to explain what—Angel knew exactly what he meant.

Her heart skipped. Nervousness spread across her face as she lifted her eyes to meet his. She knew this man's anger could be worse than anyone's. "What?" she asked, feigning ignorance.

Sachin shut his eyes for a brief moment, holding himself back from snapping. His voice came out steady but heavy with restrained fury. "Stop playing dumb. Tell me—what were you doing in Kunal's room?"

Angel looked away, her silence betraying her hesitation. Sachin's patience thinned. He gripped her chin and forced her to face him.

"I told you not to dig into anything. I'll tell you when the time is right. This is the last time I'll say it." His tone was calm, but the warning laced within was sharp as steel.

Angel swallowed and nodded quickly, not wanting to provoke him further. A faint smile flickered on Sachin's lips as he tapped her cheek.

"If you continue your little investigation," he said coldly, "I'll have to rethink us. Keep that in mind." His words were simple, but the weight of the threat pressed down on her—he had placed their entire relationship at stake.

Angel sighed, nodding again. "But... Ruhana wants to know," she whispered at last.

Sachin pulled her into his arms without hesitation, holding her tightly against him. He lowered his chin to her shoulder, his warm breath brushing against her neck, enough to weaken her resistance. His voice softened, though it carried the same finality.

“I’ll tell her soon. Don’t ever interfere in this. What was necessary, I’ve already told you.”

Angel melted into his embrace, nodding against him. “I won’t. Promise.” A small smile touched her lips, though her mind spun with questions. She tried to read his silence, his controlled calm, and it only confirmed her fear: Sachin’s past was painful, dark, and dangerous.

And if she wasn’t careful, that darkness could swallow their relationship whole. Sachin sighed deeply, taking Angel’s words as a promise to stay by his side. Calmer now, he began helping her lay the dishes on the table.

“Angel,” he called softly.

“Hmmm,” she hummed, noticing the unusual calm in his tone.

“If my past is darker and more dangerous than you can imagine... if I wasn’t the same man back then, or if the hidden truths are far more brutal than you think—will you leave me then?” His voice was calm, but the fear etched on his face did not escape her.

Angel smiled gently and turned toward him. “I already told you, I have nothing to do with your past. I just want your present and future. Whatever your past throws at me, I’ll toss it in the trash. Nothing to do with your secrets’ shit.” She laughed lightly at her own words, and her laughter eased Sachin’s tension. Together, they finished setting the table for dinner.

Just then, Kunal and Ruhana entered with smiles. “If you’re done with your talks, can we get in?” Kunal teased with a sheepish grin.

Sachin shot his brother a threatening look, and Kunal bit back a laugh. Ruhana peeked playfully from behind him. “We’ve been waiting outside for thirty minutes just to let you finish your conversation.” She slid into the seat beside Sachin.

“Shut up! Don’t you think you’re talking nonsense these days?” Angel snapped, her eyes warning Ruhana not to say more.

Sachin ignored the girls and began serving food. Kunal, however, seemed distant, lost in thought. Suddenly, he broke the silence.

“Ruhana, if you have questions, just ask. But stop digging into the past. It might be dangerous... not for you, but for Vineet.”

The words dropped like a stone into the quiet. Both girls froze, shock written on their faces.

“Excuse me?!” Angel nearly yelled. “She’s digging into the past, and that’s dangerous for Vineet? Why?”

Kunal placed his spoon carefully on the plate. “My words should be enough. But Angel—you need to be more careful. Don’t go anywhere alone. Share your location with either Sachin or me whenever you step out.”

Confusion clouded Angel’s eyes. She turned to Sachin for answers.

He nodded, his voice calm but heavy. “I’m not in danger... *I am* the danger to the people I love. So be careful. We’ll protect you.”

Angel stared at him, unsettled. Beside her, Ruhana's confusion only deepened. She finally gathered courage. "How are you even a danger?" she asked softly.

Sachin's gaze shifted to her, his eyes unreadable. "You're a danger too. Keep Vineet and your relationship under wraps." With that, he rose from the table, Kunal following close behind.

The friends sat frozen, confusion and shock swirling between them.

"What the hell is going on here?" Angel snapped, shoving her plate in frustration.

Ruhana cupped her face in her hands. "We have to dig more," she muttered.

Angel gave her a helpless look. "It'll cost me my relationship with your brother."

Ruhana's eyes widened. She was already shaken, but Angel's words left her more stunned.

Angel softened her tone, forcing a smile. "But that's okay, Roo. I'll sacrifice him for my best friend." She lifted her hand for a high five.

Ruhana smacked it away lightly. "No. We need to wait until they calm down. Hold the investigation for now."

Angel sighed heavily, her mind still restless. "Don't you think we've already found something important? And they're pushing us back?"

Ruhana didn't answer immediately, just studied her friend. Angel's persistence only grew. "We shouldn't stop here."

Finally, Ruhana smiled faintly, placing her hand gently over Angel's. "No need to sacrifice anything for me. Just

focus on your relationship with my brother. The past and secrets will come out soon, in their own time.”

Angel nodded, though her disappointment was clear. She wanted to protest, but Ruhana shook her head with a quiet smile.

“You don’t need to worry about me. Now you only have one job.”

Angel tilted her head, confused. “And what’s that?”

Ruhana’s smile turned teasing, a playful wink flashing. “Cherish your relationship with my brother. Love him, drive him crazy.” She chuckled at her own tease.

Angel glared at her, furious. “Shut up!” she snapped and stormed out of the dining area.

Ruhana laughed softly, but her smile faded almost instantly, replaced by tension. Her thoughts grew heavy. *‘I’ll have to dig deeper—but carefully, without Angel. Both brothers’ voices carried anger and stress. This is bigger... darker than I imagined. And if they see me and themselves as dangers to Vineet... the truth must be far worse.’*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the buzz of her phone. When she glanced at the screen, a smile touched her lips. It was Vineet’s nam

Chapter 30

The Danger is Us

Ruhana slipped into her room, shutting the door softly behind her. She picked up her phone, her fingers trembling, and dialed.

“Hie, Vineet...” she whispered, forcing a smile that never reached her eyes.

On the other end, Vineet sighed, the sound heavy with concern. He could sense her unease even in the rhythm of her breath. “Tell me, Roo... What's bothering you?” His voice was calm, steady—like an anchor thrown into stormy waters.

Her eyes stung as tears spilled silently down her cheeks. “Vineet...” she breathed. The name came out broken, her words faltering even as her heart screamed with things she wanted to say.

“Ruhana, I’m here. With you. Tell me,” Vineet urged gently, already knowing she was weighed down by something she could no longer keep inside.

She broke then, her voice trembling. “Vineet... Bhaiya told me not to dig into the past. He said it would be dangerous—for you. He said... we are a danger to the ones we love.” Her sobs escaped as the truth of her loneliness poured out. “I don’t know anything about my parents... about his lost love. I don’t know anything at all. And this is not knowing... it’s killing me.”

Vineet sat in silence for a moment, her words piercing him with both confusion and helplessness. He didn't fully understand what she meant, but he understood her pain. Her longing. Her breaking point.

"Ruhana, calm down..." His tone was composed, warm, and clear. A quiet promise hid in his words—that no matter how dark the past was, he wouldn't let her face it alone.

Ruhana took a shaky breath, her fingers clutching the phone tighter. "Vinnie... I don't know what's wrong, but everything about Sachin and Kunal bhaiya feels wrong. They've been feeding me lies for the last fifteen years. My past... our house in Kasauli... even the story that our parents burned alive in that fire... all of it is a lie!" Her words tumbled out in a rush, every tear carving the pain deeper into her voice.

Vineet listened quietly, a small, sad smile tugging at his lips as she poured her heart out. He hated seeing her broken, yet he cherished that she trusted him enough to bear it all. "Ruhana... if things are hidden, they'll surface when the right time comes," he said softly, his tone gentle but steady, trying to anchor her storm.

Her calm lasted only a second before it cracked again. "When will this bloody right time come, Vineet?" she burst out, her voice sharp, almost shaking with rage. "Everyone keeps saying that—but when?!" The sentence echoed like a hammer pounding in her skull.

Vineet closed his eyes, listening, his heart aching at the sound of the girl he loved unraveling. The wise, chirpy Ruhana he had fallen for was fading into someone cornered by doubts, betrayed by her own family, and drowning in the weight of secrets.

"Wanna meet?" he asked finally, his voice warm, patient, and tender. He knew what she needed wasn't

words—it was presence, touch, the comfort of someone who wouldn't lie to her.

Ruhana sighed, her tears slowing but her fear still gripping her chest. "Bhaiya will kill me," she whispered, almost bitterly. She knew Sachin had accepted Vineet, but the words he had thrown at her earlier in the dining room still haunted her like a curse.

Vineet couldn't help but smile at the way Ruhana sighed and refused him. "So... my brave Roo is actually scared of her arrogant brother," he teased, dragging out the words just enough to lighten the heaviness in her voice.

Her eyes widened in amused disbelief. "Shut up!" she exclaimed, her cheeks warming though no one was there to see. "I am not scared of him. He already agreed." She folded her arms on the bed as if she was physically defending her pride, but her lips betrayed her with a shy curve of a smile.

Vineet leaned back in his chair, chuckling at her reaction. The sound of her spark returning was worth every word. "I know... he agreed," he said softly, letting the truth slip out.

Ruhana blinked in shock, sitting upright. "Wait—what?" Her breath caught, her mind racing. He hadn't told her that!

Vineet paused deliberately, enjoying the surprise in her tone. "He doesn't like me much, true," he admitted, then his chest swelled with quiet pride, "but he said I'm the best person for his sister."

The words hung in the air, sinking into her heart. For a moment, the tension that had been weighing on her chest loosened.

Ruhana gasped, her eyes misty but a smile breaking through. "Oh my God... someone's really flexing tonight."

She tried to sound mocking, but her voice was softer than usual, laced with affection.

Vineet laughed, low and warm, the kind of laugh that always melted her defenses. “Well, I have every right to flex. Your brother himself handed me that medal.”

Ruhana bit her lip, her heart fluttering despite the storm of doubts still lurking in her mind. Somehow, Vineet always found a way to plant light in her darkest corners.

They talked for a while longer—light teasing from Vineet, a few stolen laughs from Ruhana, and soft reassurances tucked between their words. Slowly, the weight on her chest felt lighter. But when Vineet reminded her of her upcoming finals, she sighed in defeat.

“Fine, Mr. Distraction, I’ll go study now,” she said reluctantly.

“Good girl,” he teased with warmth, his tone softer than the words themselves. “Sleep early too. And stop overthinking.”

“Hmm. Good night, Vinnie.”

“Good night, Roo.”

The line clicked, leaving behind a silence that still carried his presence like an afterglow.

Ruhana sat for a moment staring at her phone screen, a small smile lingering on her lips. Then she exhaled, letting the heaviness of the day slip off her shoulders. She changed into her comfy pajamas—a soft, oversized T-shirt and cotton shorts—and pulled her hair into a loose bun.

Her room felt quieter now, almost too quiet after Vineet’s voice. She glanced at the stack of books waiting on her desk, the highlighters scattered like tiny weapons of war. Pulling out her chair, she sat down, pressing her palms

against the cool surface of the study table as if grounding herself back into reality.

Opening her notebook, she tried to focus on the neat rows of text, but her mind kept wandering—to Sachin's cryptic warning, Kunal's stern gaze, Angel's restlessness, and Vineet's laughter. She shook her head and forced her pen to move, whispering to herself, "Finals first, mysteries later."

Still, the uneasiness lingered at the back of her mind like a shadow she couldn't quite chase away.

Angel slammed the door shut behind her, her steps sharp as she crossed the room. She muttered under her breath, her anger spilling with every word.

"What the hell is she thinking? To stop now? When we were so close... Phew!" She pressed her palms to her temples, pacing restlessly. Her voice rose in frustration. "I was ready to sacrifice my love for Sachin, and she just backed out. Just nonsense! Just like her brothers—idiots, both of them."

Her chest heaved as she gripped the edge of her desk, trying to calm the storm inside her. But her fury refused to settle.

The door creaked open behind her.

"Why aren't you asleep yet?" Sachin's deep, steady voice cut through her thoughts.

Angel froze, then turned sharply, her eyes narrowing. She forced a smile, but it dripped with sarcasm. "You are not welcome here."

Sachin blinked at her, startled by the coldness in her tone. He stepped inside anyway, closing the door softly behind him. "Why?" he asked, moving toward the bed and sitting down as if he belonged there.

“Because I have to study,” Angel snapped, planting her hands on her hips. Her voice grew louder, her anger breaking through. “So move out.”

Sachin studied her quietly, his lips curving into a faint smile. He had expected this—her sharpness, her defiance. He leaned forward slightly, his elbows on his knees. “You’re angry with me.”

“No,” she bit back, her tone dripping with sarcasm. “I’m just thrilled with the way you shut me down earlier. That calm warning of yours? Oh, it was so... comforting.” Her laugh was bitter.

Sachin’s smile faded. He rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes for a moment as if restraining himself. “Angel, you don’t understand—”

“No, Sachin,” she cut him off, her voice shaking now. “I do understand. You don’t want me to know anything. You want me to stay quiet, stay blind, stay obedient. But I’m not like that!”

He rose from the bed and crossed the room in two strides. His hand reached out, gently but firmly lifting her chin so her eyes met his. His voice was calm, almost too calm, but there was steel in it. “I told you before—I’ll explain when the time is right. Until then, don’t dig. Don’t put yourself in danger. I can’t...” His jaw tightened. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Angel’s breath caught. His closeness, his steady gaze—it softened her anger for a moment, but the hurt remained. She searched his face, her voice low and trembling. “And what if your silence is already hurting me?”

Sachin’s hand lingered against her cheek. His eyes flickered with something unspoken—fear, guilt, and an emotion deeper than either of them had admitted.

"I'd rather take your hatred than risk your life," he whispered.

Angel's lips parted, but no words came. Her anger wavered, tangled with the weight of his words. She wanted to fight him, to scream at him—but instead, she stood frozen, caught between fury and a pull she couldn't deny.

The room fell into a silence so heavy it pressed against both of them, the air thick with everything said and unsaid.

"Enough of you. I have to study. Don't disturb me." Angel turned her back, carrying a stack of books and notebooks to the bed. She buried herself in her notes, ignoring Sachin as though he wasn't even in the room.

Sachin's mouth fell open at her dismissal. "Wow... just like trash," he muttered under his breath, sighing in dissatisfaction. Louder, he said, "Fine, you do your studying, and I'll work on my case notes for tomorrow's interrogation."

Receiving no response, he picked up his file and stretched himself across the couch. Soon, the room fell into silence—both lost in their own worlds, pretending the other didn't exist.

Hours slipped by. Sachin eventually closed his file, set it down on the table, and let his eyes wander to Angel. She was sprawled lazily across the bed now, her books scattered like fallen leaves. One leg bent, the other stretched, an arm tucked beneath her head while the other covered her eyes. She shifted restlessly, scratching her scalp with irritation.

Sachin's lips curved into a small, involuntary smile. *How clumsy.*

He walked over, carefully gathering her books off the bed, and pulled the blanket over her. He lay down beside

her, but soon her constant fidgeting began to grate on him. She tossed, scratched, and shifted endlessly.

“What the hell, yaar?” he grumbled, sitting up in irritation.

Angel jerked awake, her eyes sleepy, face grumpy. “It’s itching so bad—I can’t take it anymore,” she almost cried, scratching her arms.

Sachin’s irritation melted the moment he saw her skin—angry red rashes crawling over the uncovered patches. He held her hand gently. “Angie... Do you have any allergies?”

Angel nodded weakly. “I have so many. Do one thing—there are meds in that drawer. Please, bring them.” She pointed desperately at the bedside table.

He hurried, fetched the pills, and handed them over. She swallowed quickly, then passed him an ointment. “Apply this.”

Sachin blinked. “Me? No way—”

Angel smacked his arm lightly. “Seriously? You can’t even put ointment on your own girlfriend? And this is the same man who brags about being tough in interrogations?”

Sachin’s ears burned. “That’s different!”

Her lips curved in a sly smile. “Different? You want to kiss me but you can’t even touch a rash?”

Sachin choked on his own breath, coughing, and his face red as fire. “A-Angel!”

Laughing, Angel snatched the ointment back and slid off the bed. “Useless boyfriend.” She walked out, leaving him sitting there, still flustered, and staring at the door in disbelief.

Angel stomped into Ruhana's room and tossed a tube of ointment onto her desk. Ruhana glanced up from her book with an annoyed sigh. "Again? Didn't I tell you to stay away from that vinegar-loaded Chinese food?" She grabbed the tube like a weapon.

Angel flopped into the chair. "Yeah, yeah. Lecture me later." She smeared the ointment on her arm and grumbled, "You know what he said? My so-called boyfriend? He said he *can't do this*."

Ruhana arched a brow, amused. "And that's a crime?"

"It is!" Angel threw her hands up. "If he refuses to touch a stupid rash, what happens when it's... not a rash? What happens when it's serious? Like—make our level serious?" Her eyes widened as if the world was ending.

Ruhana burst out laughing. "Angel, stop. You sound insane."

"I'm being practical!" Angel insisted, clutching her chest like a wounded heroine. "What if he's incapable? Roo, what if I've fallen for the wrong man?"

Ruhana reached over and flicked her forehead. "Drama queen. Your relationship hasn't even crossed the warm-up stage. Calm down."

Angel shot her a glare, stood up, and muttered, "Heartless. Just like your brother." Then she marched out with all the flair of a soap opera star, leaving Ruhana laughing so hard she nearly dropped her book.

Angel marched back into her room, still fuming. Sachin was sitting on the bed, his face tense with worry. The moment he saw her, he jumped up and hurried over.

“Did she apply for it? How are you feeling now?” he asked gently, guiding her toward the bed.

But Angel, still frustrated, pushed him away and flopped onto her side of the bed. Sachin only smiled at her stubbornness. Without a word, he climbed onto the bed, slipped his arm around her, and pulled her close.

Angel resisted, nudging him back. “I have rashes and itching... What if it’s contagious? You’ll catch it too.” Her voice softened with genuine worry.

“I’ll manage,” he murmured, refusing to let go. He tucked his arm under her head, holding her steady.

Angel’s lips curved into a small smile at his persistence. As he lightly patted her head, her anger slowly melted away, and she drifted to sleep in the warmth of his embrace.

It was morning when Sachin opened his eyes. Angel was still asleep beside him, her face calm, untouched by the storm brewing inside him. For a brief moment, he let himself watch her—peaceful, unaware, safe. Then the weight of reality pressed back into his chest.

He reached for his phone silently, careful not to disturb her. Sliding out of bed, he walked to the balcony and shut the door behind him with deliberate care before dialing a number.

“Keep an eye on them,” he said, his tone leaving no space for argument. It wasn’t a request—it was an order.

His jaw clenched as he listened. “Tighten security for Vineet. For Angel...” He hesitated, his gaze flicking back through the glass at her sleeping figure. “She won’t tolerate guards around her. She’d notice, she’d fight it.” He paused again, calculating. “Send people as faculty, classmates. On

campus, I want eyes everywhere. I'll handle her pick and drop myself. No slip-ups. She can't know."

His words were sharp, precise, but his hands trembled around the phone. This wasn't just vigilance—it was fear. The kind of fear that dug deep into his bones. Something was coming back, something from the shadows of his past that he had buried long ago.

And Sachin knew one thing with terrifying certainty: he wasn't worried. He was scared. After finishing the call, he moved to his room to freshen up...

Vineet's Place

Vineet sat on the balcony, a cooling mug of coffee cradled in his hands, his gaze unfocused. His mind wasn't in the quiet morning; it was tangled somewhere else—still circling around Sachin.

There was something enigmatic about that man, a presence wrapped in layers and guarded secrets. Sachin seemed determined to keep his true self hidden.

Vineet replayed their encounters: their first meeting as officer and civilian, then the moment Sachin stepped in as a savior to prove his innocence. Later came the dinner where Ruhana introduced Sachin as her brother. That night, Vineet had glimpsed yet another side—a man of refined tastes, flashing a limitless card, carrying the effortless confidence of someone born to privilege. Beneath the stern façade, a carefree boy had briefly surfaced before retreating back into mystery.

Finally, Vineet had confessed his own relationship with Ruhana, but learning about Angel and Sachin had been a softer, more disquieting shock. He couldn't decide if Sachin

was the right match for his sister—or for anyone. A man made of mysteries could break hearts too easily, and yet Angel remained stubbornly loyal to him.

Vineet's worry for Angel simmered. He couldn't force her hand, but the unease stayed. Sachin had openly admitted that he carried secrets, yet never revealed a thing. He'd even tightened his own security without explanation. Now Ruhana had begun voicing the same concern: Sachin's past was sealed behind silence.

Everyone sensed it—something hidden. Vineet's curiosity sharpened into determination. He dug for answers and found nothing. No social-media footprint, no trace in public records. Even discreet inquiries within the crime unit came back empty. It was as if Sachin existed only in the present moment, a man without a past.

The chime of the doorbell sliced through his thoughts. Vineet paused mid-sentence in his notes, already sure who it would be. He slipped into a soft linen shirt and loose joggers, the cotton cool against skin still warm from sleep, and padded downstairs.

Ruhana stood framed in the doorway like a quiet sunrise—hair slightly mussed from the sea breeze, a faint flush on her cheeks from the climb. The earthy scent of rain-damp morning clung to her.

His grin came easily. He crossed the last few steps and gathered her in, the faint perfume of jasmine in her hair brushing his senses.

"Good morning," he murmured, pressing a gentle kiss to the crown of her head.

"Good morning, Mr. Oberoi," she teased, her voice a low melody. She released him first, eyes bright. "Come

inside—I brought breakfast.” The paper bag in her hand crinkled softly as she set it on the polished teak table.

He followed her toward the kitchen, the quiet tap of her sandals on marble guiding him. Warm spice drifted from the bag—cardamom, a hint of ghee. She moved with practiced ease, pulling plates from the cabinet, the soft clink echoing through the airy room. Morning light spilled across the counter, catching in her hair like stray gold.

They ate with an easy rhythm, the scrape of cutlery mingling with the distant city hum.

“Ruhana, you’re a wonderful cook,” Vineet said between bites, savoring the buttery parantha.

Her lips curved, eyes lowering shyly.

He leaned in a little, curiosity alive in his gaze. “Have you thought about publishing your writing? You’re too good to keep hidden.”

Ruhana gave a small, private smile, fingertips brushing an invisible grain of flour from the table. “I don’t want that kind of attention,” she said. Her brothers’ warnings about privacy still rang in her ears. What Vineet didn’t know—what no one knew—was that she had already released a book under the name **Devi**, a name that came to her like a whisper in her dreams.

“You’re letting a gift go to waste,” he said, a sigh threading through his words. “But I can’t force you.”

Silence followed, broken only by the soft hiss of the ceiling fan. Then Vineet set down his fork, eyes narrowing in thought.

“Your brother,” he began slowly, “is...mysterious. I tried to look into him, but it’s as if Sachin didn’t exist fifteen

years ago. He just—appeared. Feels like there's something dark there."

The air seemed to tighten around the table, the smell of spices suddenly sharper, as if the room itself held its breath.

Ruhana smiled, quiet warmth softening her features. "Let's leave all this talk about the past for now," she said, threading her fingers through his. "Let's just... talk about us."

Vineet leaned a little closer, his grin carrying a playful glint. "About us?" he murmured, voice low. "And what exactly about us?" He punctuated the question with a wink—an easy, practiced charm that could melt anyone. Anyone, including Ruhana, though she tried not to show it.

Her cheeks bloomed with heat. "Shut up," she whispered, pressing a hand against his chest as if to hold the distance between them. The steady beat beneath her palm betrayed how near he already was.

"It's been three years," Vineet said, a touch of mock exasperation in his voice, "and you still blush like this. What am I supposed to do with you?"

Ruhana's sheepish smile widened despite herself. "Maybe stop teasing."

"That," Vineet murmured, "would be impossible."

A hush settled over them, the hum of the city outside fading to a faint, distant murmur. He reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, his fingertips tracing the curve of her jaw as if memorising it. Her breath caught a soft tremor she couldn't disguise.

"Tell me to stop," he whispered, his voice barely a breath.

She didn't. Her hand slid from his chest to the back of his neck, fingers threading through his hair in a quiet answer.

The space between them disappeared.

His mouth found hers in a kiss that started tender and quickly deepened—slow at first, then more certain, more urgent. The warmth of him pressed close, the faint taste of morning tea still on his lips. She felt the world tilt, her pulse drumming in her ears as her free hand curled into his shirt.

Vineet drew her nearer, the rhythm of their breathing mingling, the room around them dissolving into nothing but the heat of their embrace and the steady thunder of their hearts.

When they finally broke apart, their foreheads rested together, both breathing hard, eyes still locked. A single, shared breath lingered between them—silent, electric—before Ruhana let her head settle against his shoulder, the echo of the kiss warming every heartbeat.

They were sitting enjoying the moment of togetherness, none of them were speaking. The silent lovable moments of them were disturbed with the sound of the doorbell. Someone from the staff opened the door. Angel ran inside while shouting for her brother.

The living area glowed in the brightness of the morning. A single lamp spilled honey-gold light across the plush rug, catching in the crystal vases and the faint swirl of dust that floated like quiet secrets.

“Bhai, where have you been?” Angel’s voice broke the calm a

she stepped inside, her heels clicking softly against the marble.

The question snapped Vineet upright. For a heartbeat the room seemed to tighten around him. He turned, the light catching the faint crease between his brows. "Why are you here?" The words were polite enough, yet carried an edge, like silk drawn over glass.

Ruhana felt the shift before she understood it—a subtle chill threading through the warm air, the sudden weight of something unsaid.

"Oh, oops!" Angel's eyes flicked to the couch and widened when she spotted Ruhana beside him. "I disturbed you two. Sorry. I'll come back later." She half turned, her bangles giving a soft chime.

Ruhana's lips curved in a small, teasing smile meant to break the tension. "No need. Sit," she said, patting the cushion beside her.

Angel's grin flashed as she sank gracefully onto the sofa. She leaned close, her perfume carrying a hint of jasmine. "Sorry," she whispered, voice like a conspiratorial breeze.

Ruhana nudged her with an elbow, trying to mask the faint quickening of her pulse.

Angel's eyes gleamed. "Blushing, huh? Did bhai do something?" she teased, a sly wink glinting in the lamplight.

Heat brushed Ruhana's cheeks. *'Why does she always catch me so easily?'*

Vineet exhaled, the sound low and deliberate, and their laughter tapered. "Alright," he said, leaning back, dark eyes narrowing. "What brings the mysterious Oberoi heiress here? Or was it just to ruin my romance?" His calm carried a quiet irritation, like distant thunder.

Angel's playful expression softened. "Didn't even know she was here. I actually came to talk to you." Her tone shifted, weighty enough to draw the room taut.

Ruhana straightened. Angel rarely sought serious talks. The air itself seemed to hold its breath.

Vineet's brows lifted, suspicion sharpening his features. "What is it?"

"I overheard his phone call." Angel's lashes fluttered shut, as if bracing herself against her own admission.

A prickle of unease slid along Ruhana's skin.

"What did he say?" Vineet asked, the question clipped, the warmth gone.

Angel exhaled, her voice a low tremor. "I don't know who he was talking to, but he told them to add more security... for you and me."

The words fell like stones in still water.

Ruhana's breath caught. *Security? For them?* A faint draft whispered through the room, though no window was open.

Vineet's reaction was almost careless—a dry scoff. "So? What's new? He's been doing that since we revealed our relationship."

Angel frowned, the gold in her earrings trembling with the slight shake of her head. "That's not the point. Why isn't he adding any security for Ruhana?"

Ruhana blinked, startled. *Me?*

Silence stretched. Even the city noises beyond the balcony door—distant horns, the hush of traffic—seemed to fade.

Vineet's gaze drifted to Ruhana, something calculating behind his eyes. "Then it means..." he said slowly, each word

heavy, deliberate, “the danger isn’t to her. It’s to us. Being close to them is what puts her at risk.”

The lamp’s glow suddenly felt too warm, too close. Ruhana’s mind churned: *Danger. Us. Them.* Each thought unfurled like a dark ribbon, twisting with unanswered questions.

In that quiet, the evening’s comfort dissolved into something fragile—like a glass about to crack under the pressure of secrets no one was ready to name.

“Yeah.” Ruhana finally spoke, her voice a low thread that pulled their attention to her. “Once... he said we are the danger, Ruhana.” The memory surfaced in fragments, her thoughts straining to stitch the whole conversation together.

Angel straightened, eyes flashing. “Yes—he did say that. At the dining table once.” She gave a quick nod, the certainty sharpening her words.

Vineet frowned, confusion shadowing his face. “So he admitted it.” His gaze drifted toward Ruhana, dark with unease. “Why does it feel like we’re jumping into a deep, dark pit?”

Angel let out a sudden, brittle laugh. “It does feel like some Bollywood thriller—secrets behind closed doors, hidden palaces, who knows what else.” The laugh cracked into frustration. “I’m fed up with it.”

Ruhana and Vineet exchanged a look, startled by the sudden edge in her voice.

Angel’s composure slipped. “Bhai, he’s been under so much pressure all the time—protecting you, protecting me. And the guilt of keeping us in the dark—it’s killing him.” Her words tumbled out, sharp and breathless. She shut her eyes, forcing herself to calm.

The room held its breath. The faint hum of the ceiling fan became loud, insistent.

"I mean..." Angel opened her eyes again, softer now. "We just started as a couple, but his past—it's haunting him. He keeps getting those threatening calls. I just wish he could find some peace. But whatever that past is..." She shook her head slowly, the gold of her earrings catching the lamplight. "It's something we can't afford to provoke. Something is very, very wrong there."

Her final words settled like a shadow across the room, heavy enough to make even the silence feel dangerous.

Ruhana had stayed quiet so long the room itself seemed to lean into the silence. At last she spoke, her voice low but steady. "Stop worrying. I'm the one who should be frightened. I don't remember my parents, not a single clear memory of my early life. If anyone should feel lost, it's me." Her eyes flicked toward Angel, a faint edge of irritation sharpening the words.

Angel let out a dry scoff, a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh. "Have you seen him at night? The way he trembles? His tears don't even obey him while he sleeps. He's aching for his family." She pressed her fingertips to her forehead as if holding the pressure in, shoulders tight with a frustration she couldn't name.

Ruhana slipped an arm around her friend, drawing her close. Warmth flowed between them like a quiet promise. "Hey... you'll help him through this. Just stay beside him," she murmured, rubbing slow circles across Angel's shoulder until the tension softened.

Angel rested her head against Ruhana, a tiny surrender. "I love him," she whispered, the words thick with a fierce kind of ache. "And he is not okay."

Before Ruhana could answer, Vineet stepped forward and pulled his sister into a sideways hug. His touch was awkward but protective. "Look, I don't even like the guy," he admitted, voice gruff but gentle. "But I tolerate him—for you. So please, stop torturing yourself with worry." He patted Angel's hair, a small, clumsy comfort that said more than his words.

Ruhana glanced between them, resolving flickering in her eyes. "First thing," she said quietly, "we stop digging. For now."

Angel stared at her, stunned, while Vineet only gave a slow, reluctant nod.

"I'm not ending this," Vineet added after a beat, his tone softening. "But for you, I'll pause."

Ruhana's answering smile was fragile and grateful, like a candle shielded from the wind.

Suddenly Angel pushed to her feet, the chair legs scraping the floor. "Do whatever you want. Sachin called everyone for dinner tonight. Be on time." Her voice carried a thin blade of irritation as she swept out of the room, leaving a faint echo of perfume and frustration behind.

Ruhana watched the door close, then looked back at Vineet with a rueful grin. "Bhaiya wants to be cordial. After Angel, you're only the second person he's ever invited into his little paradise."

Vineet exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. "Then I'd better stay away from the bottle—one more drunken disaster and I'm finished." Color touched his cheeks as the memory of his last tipsy fiasco returned.

Ruhana's laughter broke through, soft and melodic, recalling that ridiculous night of off-beat dancing.

“What’s so funny?” Vineet tried to scowl, though his lips betrayed the start of a smile.

“No blunders this time,” she teased, giving his shoulder a playful pat.

He nodded, mock-solemn, like a schoolboy agreeing to a pact.

“Okay, I really have to run.” Ruhana gathered her things, then leaned in to press a quick kiss to his forehead—a gesture of affection that lingered like warmth in the cool air.

When the door closed behind her, the flat fell into a sudden hush. Vineet stood alone for a long moment, the echo of their laughter fading. With a quiet sigh he headed to his room, the weight of unspoken worries trailing him, and began to change for work to move out..

Chapter 31

When Ghosts Learn to Call

Kunal was buried in files at headquarters when his phone buzzed against the desk. Absentmindedly, he reached for it—then froze.

The name on the screen wasn't just a number. It was a ghost.

His throat tightened, breath hitching. For a moment his hands went limp, and the phone nearly slipped from his grasp. The storm in his eyes was impossible to miss. He wasn't just startled—he looked as if someone had carved open an old scar right in front of him.

Sachin, watching from the side, didn't hesitate. He strode over, plucked the phone from Kunal's hand, and pressed it to his ear.

"Hello?" His voice was sharp, almost venomous. "What's so urgent that you finally decided to call?" But beneath that steel, there was something else—an ache he couldn't hide. His lips trembled, his chest rose unevenly, and his eyes glassed over with unshed tears.

He didn't wait for the man to speak. His rage burst through, raw and jagged. "So finally, after fifteen years, you remembered you had a son? Fifteen years of silence—and all that time you were serving the same monsters that killed Payal."

At the sound of her name, Sachin's composure shattered. His entire body stiffened, and his voice broke. His tears, long restrained, spilled unchecked, trailing down his face in bitter streams. "Why are you even calling? Go back to them! Keep serving them!" His fury flared, violent and unrestrained, until words choked him.

Kunal jolted forward, wrenching the phone from Sachin's shaking hand. "This is my phone," he snapped, voice low and burning. "And he's the one voice I never wanted to hear again." With a savage flick, he disconnected the call.

Sachin said nothing. He turned away, his shoulders stiff with grief, and walked out as though the air itself had become suffocating.

The phone buzzed again. The same cursed number.

Kunal's jaw clenched. For a heartbeat, he considered letting it ring, but the rage clawing through his chest demanded release. He answered.

"What do you want now—after all these years?" His voice thundered down the line, ragged with fury. "Do you think you can crawl back into our lives as if nothing happened?"

Silence stretched on the other end, suffocating and heavy, until Kunal could barely stand it.

"I don't care what you have to say," he spat, his tone laced with betrayal. "You chose them. The people who murdered Payal. We begged you to stand with us, but you turned your back. You betrayed us—you served them." The last words tore out of him as a scream, and he slammed the call shut with trembling fingers.

For a moment, he just stood there, chest heaving, pulse hammering in his temples. His reflection in the dark screen

of the phone stared back at him—eyes red, jaw set, face twisted in pain he had fought so long to bury.

Fifteen years of silence had not dulled the wound. He had stitched it, chained it, and buried it under the weight of duty. But this call—just the sound of that voice—was enough to rip it open again, raw and bleeding.

The past had never left. It had only been waiting. Kunal finally spotted Sachin on a weathered bench in the small park across from headquarters. The evening light lay heavy over the grass, a wash of amber and deepening blue.

Sachin sat motionless, elbows braced on his knees, hands loosely clasped. From a distance he looked calm, but Kunal could feel the storm beneath it—the way his shoulders trembled almost imperceptibly, the rigid set of his jaw. Fear, anger, grief: it all seemed to vibrate in the air around him.

Kunal approached without a word and lowered himself onto the bench. The wood creaked softly. He didn't speak; words felt too fragile, too small for what churned inside them both.

The silence stretched, thick with everything unsaid. Kunal's own chest ached with memories he'd buried long ago. He was hurting every bit as much as Sachin—maybe more—but as always, he forced his pain down, choosing instead to steady the man beside him.

Before he could gather a single sentence, Sachin turned and wrapped his arms around him. The sudden warmth of the embrace startled Kunal.

"I'm sorry," Sachin whispered, the words rough and breaking.

Kunal stiffened, pulled back just enough to see his brother's face. "What?" he breathed, startled by the tremor in Sachin's voice.

Sachin's eyes shone with unshed tears, guilt etched into every line of his expression. "I know you've suffered too," he said quietly. "I was so blinded by my own pain that I never saw yours. I never even tried. I'm... I'm sorry."

The confession landed heavier than Kunal expected. For years, he had carried the weight of silence, of being the one who always held the pieces together. Sachin might not share his blood, but through every loss, every shadow, he had stood by him like family.

Kunal exhaled, the knot in his chest loosening just a little. He didn't trust himself to speak. Instead, he let the embrace linger, the unspoken understanding settling between them like the first calm after a long, merciless storm.

The park around them lay steeped in the late-evening hush, a faint mist curling along the grass as the last traces of sunset bled into violet night. Kunal eased down onto the cold wooden bench beside his brother. For a long moment neither spoke. The silence carried years of things unsaid—the kind that settled on the chest like a heavy, familiar weight.

"You were in pain, Sachin," Kunal said at last, his voice quiet but steady. "No one could have understood anything in that condition."

Sachin exhaled, the sound rough, like stones shifting. He turned, the dim streetlamp gilding the hard lines of his face. "No. Your pain was deeper than mine. She was your sister—you lost her. I was so blinded by grief that I didn't see it. You stayed with me through every storm, every long night. You didn't have to. You chose me... and I made you leave everyone behind. I'm sorry for that." The words dragged out of him, heavy with fifteen years of unspoken guilt.

Kunal's mouth curved in a brief, fragile smile. The lamplight caught the sheen of unshed tears in his eyes. "I still

think your burden was heavier. I only lost my sister, and our father was where he was meant to be. But you..." He paused, the memory tightening his throat. "You lost everything—your childhood sweetheart, your blood family—vanished in a single hour. I hold no grudges, Sachin. Not one. At least I have you and Ruhana. That's still a family."

Sachin reached for him, and they embraced—two grown men locked together like children weathering the same storm. "The past can't repeat itself," he murmured, voice trembling. "I have to protect Angel and Vineet."

Kunal's hand came down on his back in a firm, reassuring rhythm. "Then we protect them together," he said simply, the words a quiet vow. For a heartbeat the world narrowed to the scent of damp earth and the thud of their hearts.

"But how?" Sachin pulled back, worried about sharpening his eyes. "It's been ages since we saw them. We don't know what moves they might have made against us."

Kunal drew a slow breath, the fog of it hanging in the cool air. "Want to move back?" The question fell between them like a stone in still water.

Sachin stared, stunned. "If we must, we will. For now... it's safer here." He had already steeled himself for the possibility—the bitter return to a place he despised, to faces he'd sworn never to see again.

Kunal only nodded, and the two of them sat with their thoughts, the night wrapping them in its damp, restless quiet.

A soft chime shattered the stillness. Sachin glanced at his phone, and a small, unguarded smile spread across his face. On the glowing screen, a name appeared: *My life*,

punctuated with three red hearts. Angel. She had changed it only that morning.

“Oh ho, *My life*—romantic as ever,” Kunal teased, rising with a knowing grin. “You’ll never change.” He left, giving them the privacy of the moment.

Sachin answered in a low, warm murmur. “Yes, Angie?”

“We’re out of groceries,” her voice crackled through the speaker, bright and sharp as always. “And you invited Vineet for dinner.”

He chuckled, the sound easing something tight inside him. “Don’t panic. I’ll place the order—you’ll have everything in half an hour. Just focus on your exam next week. I’ll be home soon and handle the rest.”

A soft laugh drifted back. “I’m not letting my kitchen explode. No half-cooked meals, no burnt pots, and I refuse to clean up your disasters. I hired a cook today. Ruhana and I will handle the menu. You, mister, just be a good boy and come on time. And absolutely no drinks for you two, tonight.”

The memory of his last drunken escapade flashed hot in his mind—wild laughter, blurred lights, and the viral videos that had mysteriously vanished. His cheeks warmed.

“I’m not covering for you again,” Angel warned, a teasing edge beneath her firmness. “Next time the internet can have its fun.”

“This time I won’t trouble you,” he said, voice dipping into a mischievous register. “If I do get drunk, I’ll bother you directly.”

Her gasp was audible. “No romance until I finish my exams,” she blurted, though her quickened breath betrayed

her. He could almost see her blush bloom through the phone.

“You’ve only one exam left,” he whispered, each word a velvet promise. “Be ready after that.”

A heartbeat of silence—and then the call clicked off.

Sachin slipped the phone into his pocket, a slow smile lingering. In just a few minutes she had swept away the shadows of the evening. With Angel, the darkness of his past lost its grip.

He placed the grocery order, the glow of the app lighting his face. “Delivery in thirty minutes. Perfect,” he murmured. The night air felt lighter as he turned back toward the crime branch, the chill no longer biting, and the mist no longer so heavy.

It was early evening, and a warm scent of herbs and spices was starting to drift through the house. Angel and Ruhana had set the menu, and the hired cook was now in full swing. Both girls, though, were buried in their studies, sequestered in their respective rooms, preparing for their exams.

A chime from the doorbell interrupted the quiet. Their house help opened the door to find Sachin and Kunal. Sachin handed her a box—a celebratory cake for dessert—and headed straight to his room. A quick change into something casual, a soft cotton T-shirt and track pants, and he was back across the hall to Angel’s door.

He paused, a soft smile touching his lips. Angel was a study in comfortable concentration: half-reclining on the hardwood floor, a pillow propped against the bed frame, a book tented in her hands.

He didn't speak. He simply crossed the room, scooped her up effortlessly, and lifted her into his arms.

“What are you doing?” Angel gasped, momentarily startled, her eyes wide as she looked up at him.

He gently placed her on the bed and closed the remaining space between them. His hand cradled her chin, tilting her face up to meet his gaze.

“The weather has been changing,” he murmured, his voice low. “Stop lying on the floor. You’ll catch a cold.” He traced a finger along her cold foot. “See?” he added, then began rubbing her feet.

The simple, unromantic action sent an unexpected tremor through Angel. Her heart began to race. “Sachin, stop,” she managed, her voice trembling slightly.

He smiled, a mischievous glint in his eyes, and snapped his finger softly against her forehead. “Everything is not about romance, Miss Angel. I’m just warming your feet to prevent you from getting sick.”

Angel’s face flushed, utterly embarrassed by her sudden, wild thoughts. “I didn’t have any wild thoughts!” she protested, trying to salvage her dignity. “I just told you to stop because it’s ticklish.”

Sachin’s smile widened, transforming from teasing to something much warmer. “But I was just teasing you. My intentions are not that good,” he confessed, his face moving closer until their breaths mingled.

Angel moistened her lips, pressing them together in a wave of sudden nervousness. Sachin’s warm breath ghosted over her mouth. Her anxiety spiked as his hand slipped beneath the hem of her T-shirt, finding her bare waist. He tightened his grip, a sudden, firm squeeze that made her flinch and gasp.

“I have to study, Sachin,” she whispered, her hand instinctively pressing against his chest, a soft barrier meant to stop him.

He captured her hand on his chest, then gently guided it away, only to secure it behind her back. Before she could form another protest, his mouth claimed hers.

Angel’s eyes fluttered shut. All thought of protesting vanished in the instant their lips met. The kiss was deep, filled with a sudden, surging passion and love. His lips moved against hers with a rhythm that matched the feverish beating of her own heart. His hand on her waist pressed her closer, igniting a rush of sensation with every touch.

She responded with fierce abandon, one hand trailing up to his neck, the other twisting into the thick strands of his hair. Soon, she struggled to draw breath, but he was stubborn, refusing to break the connection. He pressed her backward, pushing her gently onto the mattress, and followed her down. Pinned beneath him, Angel was breathless, completely overpowered.

Finally, he lifted his head, a triumphant smile on his lips as he watched her fight to steady her breathing. He shifted, his lips finding the vulnerable expanse of her neck, planting a line of soft, searching kisses.

The sudden escalation—the raw hunger of his touch—left her baffled and utterly weak beneath him. Her fingers tightened, pulling fiercely at his hair. In a surge of excitement, he bit down, a sharp, possessive nip on her neck.

Angel moaned. The sound, louder and sharper than either of them, expected, seemed to jolt Sachin back to reality. He closed his eyes for a brief, heavy second. Then, he lifted himself off her and sat on the edge of the bed.

Angel was shocked, her mind hazy from the abrupt stop. "What?" she asked, her eyes still half-lidded, her breath heavy.

He leaned down and pecked her forehead. "We will do this once your studies are completely finished." He glanced down at his chest. His shirt buttons were already untied, undone by her eager hands, and he smiled slightly at the sight of her faint nail marks near his collarbone before casually securing the buttons.

Angel was disappointed, but she said nothing.

Sachin ruffled her hair playfully. "Dinner might be ready. Come on." He helped adjust her shirt before standing.

She stood beside him, a sudden, radiant smile lighting her face. "My last exam is on coming Tuesday," she declared, and sealed the promise with a quick, firm kiss on his lips. "I won't stop after that."

Sachin nodded, an answering fire in his eyes. Together, they walked out of the room.

Kunal lounged across the living-room couch, phone glowing in his hand. The lamplight pooled like honey across the room, catching the quiet clink of plates as Ruhana and the house helped set the dinner table.

The door latch clicked. Sachin entered behind Angel, a faint trace of cool night air following them. His eyes swept the room—alert, searching—before he dropped onto the couch beside Kunal. Angel moved toward the table, the soft sway of her hair brushing her shoulders, a hint of jasmine trailing behind.

“Call Vineet,” Angel murmured, nudging Ruhana with a conspiratorial smile. Ruhana reached for her phone, but the doorbell chimed before she could dial.

Kunal padded across the polished floor and returned with Vineet, whose crisp cologne mingled with the warmth of dinner spices.

“Hey, Sachin,” Vineet greeted, settling opposite.

“Sit,” Sachin said quietly, his voice a low rumble. His thumb traced the edge of his phone, but his gaze lingered a heartbeat too long on Angel as she crossed the room.

Kunal handed Vineet a glass of water. Angel slipped onto the couch beside Ruhana, the fabric of her dress whispering against the cushions. Sachin’s shoulders eased, almost imperceptibly.

“How are you?” Ruhana asked Vineet. He answered with a simple squeeze of her hand.

Sachin kept his attention on his phone, though his eyes flicked up whenever Angel shifted—small movements that tightened something in his chest.

“By the way, Vineet,” Kunal said, mischief flashing in his grin, “are you staying here tonight? You’ve got three options now.”

Vineet raised an eyebrow. “Three?”

“You can bunk with me,” Kunal teased, “or with Ruhana... or crash in Sachin’s room—though he hasn’t been sleeping there lately. Seems he’s practically moved in with Angel.”

The words sliced through the room. Sachin’s phone slipped from his hand with a soft thud. Angel froze, breath catching. A warm flush crept up her neck.

“Kunal bhaiya!” she blurted, half-rising, her fist curling as if to strike.

Kunal only shrugged. “What? I’m not lying. He can’t stay a minute without you. This stoic brother of mine even learned how to use emojis for you. Emojis! How cringe is that?”

Angel’s cheeks burned. She lunged forward and clamped a hand over his mouth. “Stop invading our privacy!”

Kunal laughed against her palm, struggling to pry her fingers away. Sachin was on his feet in a heartbeat. His hand slid around Angel’s waist—strong, sure—pulling her back. Her breath hitched at the sudden closeness, his warmth seeping through the thin fabric of her dress, his aftershave a low hum of cedar and spice.

“Leave me! He’s impossible!” Angel twisted, but Sachin’s grip tightened, protective rather than forceful. Their eyes met—dark on dark—an unspoken charge sparking in the space between them.

Ruhana and Vineet watched, wide-eyed. “Do they do this every day?” Vineet muttered, disbelief sharpening his tone. His sister’s chaos never surprised him, but the usually unflappable Sachin and Kunal were another story.

Then Vineet’s gaze snagged on something—a faint red mark blooming at the base of Angel’s neck, just visible beneath her collar.

His stomach dropped. In a sudden flash of anger, he stepped forward and pulled Angel from Sachin’s hold. The abrupt loss of warmth startled her; Sachin’s hand twitched as if to reclaim her.

“Vinnie! What are you doing?” Angel protested, struggling.

“You’re moving in with me. Tonight.” Vineet’s voice was low and absolute.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she shot back, heart still pounding from Sachin’s nearness.

“You’re not safe here.” Vineet’s eyes locked on Sachin, steel-hard.

Angel exhaled sharply, frustration and something softer tangled in her chest. “I’m not hungry,” she said, voice clipped, and disappeared down the hallway.

Silence thickened, heavy with everything unsaid. Ruhana finally turned to Vineet, her gaze steady. “What’s really going on in your head, Vineet?”

Vineet’s jaw tightened, frustration flickering across his face. “They should at least wait until they’ve met our parents,” he said, eyes closing for a moment as if that could blot out the image of his sister wrapped in Sachin’s arms.

Ruhan bit the inside of her cheek, fighting a smile. “Shut up,” she murmured, tilting her head. “They’re in love, Vineet. That’s just how they show it. They’re.. a little more passionate than you, that’s all.” Her mock-disappointed look deepened as she shook her head.

The words landed like a spark.

Vineet blinked, stunned, then straightened, a slow heat rising under his collar. “You think I don’t have enough passion?” His voice dropped, low and deliberate. His eyes locked on hers, unflinching, as he planted his hands on his hips. “Or are you saying I love you less?”

Ruhana’s breath caught. The playful air between them thickened, suddenly charged. She felt her heartbeat pick up—quick, traitorous—at the intensity in his gaze. The teasing retort on her tongue dissolved, leaving only the quiet thrum

of awareness as his question hung in the space between them.

She bit her lower lip in nervousness. Vineet slowly walked towards her. Sachin and Kunal who were watching them till now, looked at each other and decided to give them space.

"I... I didn't mean that," Ruhana whispered, her voice a little shaky as she instinctively stepped back.

Vineet closed the space with a slow, deliberate stride, a glint of mischief brightening his eyes. "Oh, I know exactly what you meant," he said, his grin widening just enough to unsettle her.

"My brothers are watching," she protested, breath catching as his gaze lingered on her face.

"They've gone," he murmured, the corners of his mouth lifting in a conspiratorial smile. "Just long enough to leave us a little time."

Ruhana's pulse quickened. Heat rose to her cheeks as he leaned closer. She pressed a palm to his chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath the fabric, holding the distance between them.

"I've got more passion than they do," Vineet teased, his voice dropping low, almost a purr. "The only difference is they share a roof, and we have to steal our moments."

A reluctant laugh slipped from Ruhana's lips, soft and nervous, betraying the flutter he'd stirred inside her.

"So someone's jealous," Ruhana teased, eyes sparkling.

Vineet folded his arms across his chest. "I'm not jealous. I'm just concerned about my girlfriend questioning my love." His tone still carried a faint edge.

Ruhana reached up and gently tugged at his cheeks. "I'm not questioning you. I'm just saying there's a difference. We're a slow flame; they're more rushed and passionate. That doesn't make what we have any less."

"Are you serious?" Vineet's eyes narrowed, half-playful, half-skeptical.

She nodded with quiet certainty. "Now come on—dinner's ready." She slipped her hand into his and led him toward the dining table.

Sachin and Kunal were already setting down the last of the dishes, while Angel sat nearby with an unmistakably grumpy expression.

"Have a seat, Vineet. I'll serve tonight," Sachin said, his voice unusually polite.

Everyone turned toward him, wide-eyed.

Vineet chuckled. "I'm not as arrogant as you think. No need to flatter me for approval."

Sachin pressed his lips into a thin line, the hint of a smile playing there. "Not flattery—just a gesture of courtesy. At least I didn't make your sister serve, unlike someone did when I was invited for dinner." His words hit their mark with an easy tease.

Vineet shook his head, half-amused, half-resigned. "Fine. I was seeking your approval for our relationship." He accepted the bowl from Sachin's hand. "Consider me family, and stop being so formal." Together they began to serve the meal.

Ruhana watched the two men she loved—one her brother, the other her partner—working side by side, and a quiet smile spread across her face. For the first time, it felt as though a fragile peace was finally settling between them.

Kunal struggled to suppress a laugh, the corners of his mouth twitching. *'What a sight! Two alpha males, both commanding in their own ways, bending over backward to impress each other—all for love.'* His eyes glittered with amusement as he shook his head subtly.

Ruhana, finally losing patience, spoke up. "Vineet, Bhaiya, please sit and start eating. We'll serve." Her voice carried authority, the calm in her tone contrasting the chaos around the dinner table. Both men exchanged brief glances, nodded, and began eating with the polite efficiency of warriors momentarily tamed.

Sachin leaned toward Kunal, his expression shifting into business mode. "By the way, Kunal, any progress on Rana's murder case?" His eyes, sharp and searching, flicked to Kunal's.

Ruhana quickly cut in, her eyes narrowing. "Don't even think about opening a case file here," she warned, tapping the table for emphasis. Both men's nods were quick, almost guilty, and they stayed silent.

Angel, ever unpredictable, piped up from the far end of the table, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Vinnie, have you closed the deal with those Steves from the USA?" Her question was bold, slicing through the tension like a dagger.

Vineet shook his head, the lamplight glinting off the sharp angles of his jaw. "No. You didn't give me the report; they're just a startup," he replied evenly, trying to maintain control.

Angel huffed dramatically, letting her fingers trail along the edge of her plate. "Good. Then don't collaborate with them—they're frauds." Her voice carried a theatrical finality.

Ruhana, at the opposite end, buried her face in her hands and groaned. "Angel, is this what we do over dinner?

Discuss fraud and finances?” Her voice was equal parts exasperation and amusement, and she literally yapped, unable to contain herself.

Angel’s eyes twinkled. “Fine. Then tell me about your first kiss, Vineet,” she said with a cheeky wink at Ruhana. The sudden question made everyone at the table freeze for a heartbeat. Vineet, caught mid-sip, nearly choked, water bubbling at the corners of his mouth.

“Shut up, Angie!” Vineet barked, glaring at her with a mixture of annoyance and disbelief.

Ruhana leaned back, her fork tapping the plate impatiently. “Angel, don’t ask nonsense, or I’ll tear your tongue out.”

Angel’s tongue poked out teasingly. “You said we shouldn’t talk about work during meals, so why not discuss love life? Friends do it all the time. Spill!” she demanded, shamelessly, her grin wide enough to spark a headache.

Ruhana rolled her eyes so hard they almost threatened to roll out of her head. “Are you done enough?” she asked, holding her fork like a spear.

Angel crossed her arms and pouted. “Stop being arrogant, Ruhana. You know we kissed in the morning for the—” Before she could finish, Sachin’s sharp, controlled voice cut through the air like a whip.

“Shut up, Angel!” His glare was ice-cold, slicing through her cheeky defiance. “No need to discuss our bedroom life here.”

Angel opened her mouth to argue, but Sachin, in a feat of precision, shoved a spoonful of rice into it. She glared, indignation written across her face, eyes blazing.

Kunal, who had been silently observing the chaos like a general watching the battlefield, finally spoke. His voice was low and measured, carrying a weight that demanded attention. "Vineet, after dinner, we need to talk."

Vineet's eyes flicked to Kunal, the first real tension of the evening creeping into his expression. The easy banter, the laughter, and the teasing suddenly gave way to something heavier—a sense that beneath the humor, serious matters were waiting to be confronted.

Meanwhile, Ruhana shook her head, a reluctant smile tugging at her lips. Angel, finally silenced, slumped back with exaggerated defeat. The dinner table had settled, for now, but the air still hummed with electricity—love, rivalry, and unspoken promises dancing invisibly around them.

Chapter 32

Fragments of a Buried Past

After dinner, Vineet wandered upstairs with Kunal, while Sachin retreated to his room, phone pressed to his ear. Angel and Ruhana slipped away to Ruhana's room, shutting the door behind them. Without a word, they both flopped onto the bed, limbs sprawling as though the day had drained every bit of energy.

The quiet stretched comfortably until Angel's lips curved into a sly smirk. Mischief lit her eyes as she shifted, propping herself up on one elbow. She stared at Ruhana with the kind of look that always spelled trouble.

"You didn't tell me yet."

Ruhana blinked, her brows knitting. "What?"

Angel slapped her own forehead with mock exasperation. "About your first taste of romance, silly." She punctuated her words with a wink that made Ruhana instantly roll her eyes.

"Stop talking nonsense." Ruhana's warning tone was firm, but Angel was Angel—incorrigible and impossible to silence.

"Ruhana, tell no," Angel half-pleaded, her voice sweetening as she made an exaggerated baby face.

Ruhana couldn't help the small tug at the corner of her lips, but she quickly masked it with a hard expression. "That

baby face might work on Bhaiya, but not on me.” She snapped lightly before marching over to her wardrobe.

She pulled out a book and waved it in Angel’s direction. “Come, help me solve this equation.”

Angel’s mouth fell open in disbelief. “I’m not touching books tonight. Keep them far, far away from me.” She plopped back on the bed dramatically, arms stretched wide like a queen refusing work.

Ruhana sighed, clearly disappointed. “But this is important. We need to practice,” she tried again, her voice carrying the stubborn edge of a student who refused to slack.

Angel turned her head slowly to look at her. “Stop being such a nerd. Come, let’s chat—it’s been ages since we had a proper heart-to-heart.” Her insistence was soft but playful.

Ruhana gave her a pointed look before teasing in a mock-hurt tone, “Oh, now you remember me? You’re always busy with your boyfriend. No time for your poor best friend. Hmph!” She even folded her arms for effect, her pout making Angel chuckle.

Angel chuckled, her eyes glinting with mischief. “It’s just the beginning of the relationship, and I needed to spend a little extra time with him. But now that the probation period is over, I’m all free for you.” She winked at her best friend.

Ruhana stared at her in disbelief. “Stop being mean, Angel. He’s my brother!” She tried to counter Angel’s wit with as much seriousness as she could muster.

Angel only shrugged carelessly. “So what? He passed his probation. No need to be so cautious anymore.” Another soft chuckle escaped her lips.

Ruhana narrowed her eyes, pretending to think. "Hmm... that means I don't need to act so sweet with your brother either." Her words carried a teasing bite.

A cushion flew straight into Ruhana's face. Angel smirked, pulling the blanket over her. "That's entirely up to you, Madam. I won't interfere between you two," she said before shutting her eyes as though ready to sleep.

Ruhana gave her a playful shove, forcing Angel to crack one eye open. "What the hell are you doing?" she muttered in a groggy, half-asleep tone.

"You want to sleep? Go to your own room," Ruhana shot back firmly. "Otherwise, your boyfriend will show up here and ruin my sleep too."

Angel scoffed, propping herself up on her elbow. "When did he ever do that? Don't slander him!" Her voice carried an annoyed edge, though the faint curve of her lips betrayed her amusement.

Ruhana smiled, her tone dripping with mischief. "Ohho, favoring him, are you?" She shot Angel a teasing look.

Angel scoffed dramatically. "Of course I am. After all, we're going to lead a happy life together. Now let me sleep." With that, she shut her eyes and tugged the blanket over her face.

But Ruhana wasn't ready to give in. She pulled the blanket away and stared at her stubbornly. "Angel, please go. I don't want my peace ruined tonight." Her voice was half-pleading, half-strict.

Angel groaned, making an exaggerated face, but finally nodded. "Fine, Madam Peace," she muttered as she climbed off the bed. She stuck her tongue out at Ruhana before walking out of the room.

Ruhana couldn't help but smile a little at her best friend's antics. Once Angel left, she settled back into her chair and got engrossed in her work, the room falling into a quiet calm again.

On the terrace, Vineet and Kunal stood shoulder to shoulder, the night air cool against their skin. Below them, the city pulsed with life, but up here it was quiet, detached, as though the world had fallen away. It was only their second meeting—once as chance roommates, and now as Ruhana's brother and Ruhana's boyfriend.

For a long moment, neither spoke. They simply stared at the stars, each wrapped in his own thoughts.

"Ruhana is our baby sister," Kunal finally said, his voice calm but edged with steel. He didn't look at Vineet, his gaze fixed firmly on the horizon. "We don't want her to be hurt."

A faint smile touched Vineet's lips. He turned toward him, sincerity in his tone. "I know. She talks about you all the time—about you and Sachin, how you practically raised her."

At his brother's name, Kunal's jaw tightened. "She's our world," he admitted quietly. "We've seen enough darkness to make sure she never has to."

Before Vineet could reply, the sound of measured footsteps broke the silence. Sachin stepped onto the terrace, sliding his phone into his pocket. His expression was unreadable, but his presence shifted the air—calm, commanding, protective without needing words.

His eyes moved from Kunal to Vineet before he joined them at the railing. For a heartbeat, the three men stood shoulder to shoulder, the weight of unspoken tension pressing between them.

Kunal broke it first, glancing at his elder brother. "I told him what we expect," he said simply, as if no more explanation was needed.

Sachin's gaze locked on Vineet. When he spoke, his voice was low, steady, but it carried the weight of years. "Ruhana is not just our sister, Vineet. She's everything we've fought for. Everything we've protected." He leaned ever so slightly toward him, his eyes sharp, unwavering. "If you can't respect that... this ends here."

Vineet held his stare, unflinching, his voice firm but without defiance. "I understand. And I don't intend to give you a reason to doubt me. She means the world to me too. Hurting her is the last thing I'd ever do."

The silence that followed stretched thin, taut as a pulled string. Then, at last, Sachin gave the faintest nod, almost imperceptible—a wordless acknowledgment that carried more weight than speech.

And so the three of them stood together beneath the night sky, the unspoken pact sealed in their silence: three men, bound not by trust yet, but by the same fierce protectiveness of the girl they all cherished.

Sachin let out a quiet sigh. "Let's go for drinks," he suggested, his tone casual but carrying an unspoken weight.

Vineet glanced at him, a mischievous smile tugging at his lips, as if amused by the unexpected invitation.

Beside them, Kunal exhaled deeply, shaking his head. "I'm not interested. You two go," he said politely, his voice calm but firm. Without another word, he turned and headed downstairs.

Vineet nodded once, acknowledgement like a closed loop, then looked at Sachin. The silence between them said

enough; neither needed more words. They stepped out together, the night opening before them like a blank page.

Their car idled in front of a bar that thumped with low bass and neon. Inside, bodies swayed under strobes; laughter and shouted lines of conversation braided with the music. Sachin and Vineet took a table in a shadowed corner, ordered two drinks, and let the sound wash over them.

Sachin turned the glass slowly in his hand and said, almost to himself, "Vineet, I don't know why, but you seem right for Ruhana."

Vineet gave a small, careful smile. "I know. But I'm not sure about Angel... about you." The truth sat plain between them, bitter and unavoidable.

Sachin let out a short scoff—annoyance and an admission in the same breath. "I know you don't like me. But one day I'll prove I'm the right man for Angel." He lifted his glass in an easy toast.

Vineet only nodded. The answer didn't ease the knot in his chest. "Let's dance," he offered, a gentle change of subject.

They rose and moved toward the little cleared space. The DJ slid into a familiar number—*Duniya haseeno ka mela*—and the crowd peeled into motion. This time, their steps were clear-headed, precise; there was no blur of intoxication, only the happiness of two men letting themselves be young for a moment. When the song finished they returned to the table, breathed warm with the afterglow, and returned to their drinks and easy chatter.

Later, they walked out into the cool night. Sachin climbed into the driver's seat; Vineet settled in beside him. Headlights cut through fog as they drove, and the city seemed to breathe around them. Then Sachin braked

abruptly. Vineet glanced up, ready to ask what was wrong. Sachin opened his door and let the night air in; he thumbed the car radio and a late-night show filled the small space between them.

“—Heart to Heart with Devi,” the presenter chimed, voice smooth and intimate. “This is a midnight show for those still awake. Call in. Tell your story. Let the world hear your heart.”

Sachin reached for his phone without thinking and dialed. Vineet watched him, curiosity folding into a new kind of unease. The host’s voice answered, bright over the speaker. “Hello—welcome to the show. Who are we listening to tonight?”

Sachin inhaled and, as if stepping behind a different face, said, “I’m Atharv.” His voice trembled once before it steadied. “Years ago I loved someone. My people—my people destroyed her.”

A low sigh escaped him. Droplets gathered at the corner of his eye. “Fifteen years. It took me fifteen years to breathe again. Then she came—like a breeze—her love healed me. But now the past is knocking. I don’t want bloodshed. I lied to my sister because I had no choice. I can’t afford to lose anyone else.”

He let out a short, almost incredulous laugh that held more pain than humor. Vineet’s jaw went taut. The name Atharv, the confession about a lover taken by enemies—each word tilted the world a little.

“Mr. Atharv,” Devi’s voice softened, carrying sympathy through the speaker. “That’s tragic. Your sister deserves the truth. Fight for yourself and for love—don’t let fear rule you.”

Sachin’s breath hitched. He tried to explain the scale of the thing—how the other side moved like weather,

unstoppable. “They treat people like insects,” he said flatly. “They have power I can’t break.”

There was a long pause. On the radio, Devi’s voice returned, gentler now. “If they’re powerful, find the power that can break them,” she suggested. “Be the storm that ruins their calm.”

Vineet sat frozen beside him, a thousand questions running through his mind. First: why an alias? Second: the shard of truth—an ex-lover killed by men tied to Sachin’s past—and now the revelation that Angel might be in danger. The car felt suddenly too small, the night outside suddenly larger and far more threatening.

Sachin ended the call and slid his phone back into his pocket. He didn’t look at Vineet; he stared out at the empty road as if trying to memorize it. The rhythm of the streetlights slid past, indifferent. Vineet’s silence was heavier than any reply.

When they drove on, both men carried the radio words with them—advice that felt both foolishly brave and terribly necessary. The city hummed, indifferent, while inside the car two men wondered how to protect the ones they loved from ghosts that refused to stay dead. “Let’s have a talk.” Vineet finally broke the silence, his voice even, though there was no mistaking the gravity in it. He didn’t look at Sachin—his gaze lingered on the endless clouds beyond the plane window.

Sachin didn’t answer immediately. He sat still, shoulders taut, eyes fixed ahead as if the world outside held answers he wasn’t ready to give.

After a moment, Vineet exhaled slowly. “So... Atharv. That was the name you used. If your story was real, then who is Sachin? And if your story was false... Why did it sound so true?”

Sachin's lips twitched faintly, not quite a smile—more the trace of someone caught between truth and denial. He leaned back, closing his eyes for a beat before opening them again, his voice quiet, deliberate.

"My name is Sachin," he said firmly. "That hasn't changed. Atharv... Atharv is just a name I borrow when the weight of memory gets too heavy."

Vineet studied him carefully. "Memories of what?" His tone wasn't sharp—it was curious, almost gentle.

Sachin looked down at his hands, fingers curling loosely together. "Of a boy I once was. Of a life that was stolen." His throat tightened, but he forced the words out. "There was someone—years ago—someone I loved. She was my entire world. And Atharv... Atharv is the boy who lost her."

The admission hung between them, raw but controlled. Vineet's brows furrowed, not with judgment but with something close to empathy. "And she... she was taken from you?"

Sachin nodded once, barely perceptible, his jaw tightening. His voice lowered, almost a whisper. "Not taken, killed. By people who never had to face justice. People powerful enough that even today, speaking of them feels like inviting their shadow back into my life." He looked up then, his eyes faintly glistening but steady. "That's why Atharv exists. He carries what I can't let Sachin show."

Vineet didn't interrupt. He let the silence stretch, and gave the words room to breathe. Finally, he spoke softly. "So Atharv is the ghost you carry. But Sachin is the man who protects his sister, who pretends none of that exists."

Sachin allowed himself the faintest smile, weary but genuine. "Exactly."

For a long moment, Vineet just watched him, seeing more layers than he had ever imagined. Then he leaned back, his voice thoughtful. "I don't need the whole story. Not now. But one thing I ask—when the past comes knocking again, don't shut me out. If I'm to be part of Ruhana's future... then I deserve to help guard her present."

Sachin's gaze softened. He didn't speak at once, but finally, with quiet conviction, he said, "When the time comes, Vineet—you'll know everything. Until then... trust me as much as I'm trying to trust you."

Vineet gave a slow nod, accepting the words for now. The engines hummed beneath them, carrying both men forward through the night—two protectors bound not by friendship, but by the same unspoken promise: to shield the one they both loved, no matter the shadows still chasing them.

It was well past three in the morning when they finally reached home. The house was wrapped in silence, everyone asleep. Sachin, without a word, guided Vineet down the hallway and pointed him toward Ruhana's room before quietly slipping away to his own.

Vineet stepped inside, careful not to wake her. The sight made him pause—Ruhana lay fast asleep, her book resting against her chest as though she had drifted off mid-sentence. A soft smile touched his lips. He moved closer, gently lifting the book and placing it on the side table. Then, unable to resist, he slipped onto the bed beside her.

Ruhana stirred, shifting slightly in her sleep before her eyes fluttered half-open. Her voice was drowsy, almost childlike. "Why are you here?"

Vineet's smile deepened as he pulled her close, lowering his voice to a whisper. "Your brother showed me the way to your room."

Her eyes flew open wider this time, sleep giving way to shock. She pushed herself up on one elbow, staring at him in disbelief. "Are you serious? He actually told you to sleep here? I can't believe this."

Vineet chuckled softly, proud of the moment, and brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Believe it or not, Ruhana—he did. Maybe your brother finally trusts me."

Ruhana smiled faintly and nestled her head against Vineet's arm, hugging him tightly around the waist. Vineet's arm instinctively curved around her, keeping her close to his heart. For a long moment, the silence between them felt safe and warm, but her curiosity broke it.

"By the way," she murmured, her voice muffled against him, "how did Bhaiya suddenly have this change of heart?" The disbelief was clear in her tone.

Vineet kept his gaze fixed on the ceiling, his expression calm though his mind was restless. So many questions about Sachin were still circling inside him, unanswered. "Maybe..." he said quietly, "maybe he accepted me with his whole heart." His reply was simple, but it lacked conviction.

Ruhana tilted her face up to him, unconvinced. "I don't know, Vineet. These days Bhaiya is... strange." Her brows knitted slightly as she spoke, her voice carrying both confusion and worry.

"Strange?" Vineet echoed, finally glancing down at her.

She sighed, trying to put her unease into words. "He's behaving... extra sweet. Like a completely different person. A lover boy... a complete family man. He's never been like this before."

A small smile tugged at Vineet's lips. He reached out to ruffle her hair. "Angel is crack-minded. She must have changed him." He chuckled softly, teasing.

Ruhana slapped his chest playfully. "How mean!"

Vineet clutched his chest dramatically. "Ouch! That hurt!" he groaned in mock pain, earning another shake of her head in mock disappointment.

But her expression softened again, a shadow of sadness passing over her face. "Vinnie... why didn't he tell me anything?" she whispered, her voice low, almost fragile.

Vineet smoothed his hand over her hair gently, his tone steady but thoughtful. "Truth can't be hidden forever, Ruhana. I think the time is coming soon." His eyes drifted back to the ceiling, but his words carried weight.

She opened her mouth, hesitating. "But Vineet—"

"Sleep, Ruhana," he interrupted softly, tightening his hold around her. "It's already four. I have an important meeting tomorrow." His tone was firm, a quiet plea to let the matter rest.

Ruhana gave a small sigh and closed her eyes, surrendering to his warmth. Sleep claimed her quickly, but Vineet lay awake longer, Sachin's shadowy past replaying in his thoughts. Only much later, with those questions still haunting him, did he finally drift into uneasy sleep.

After changing into his nightwear, Sachin wandered into Angel's room. To his surprise, she was dancing—at this hour. He froze at the doorway, stunned. Angel, who was usually a sleepyhead, bouncing around with headphones on and completely lost in the music, was the last thing he expected to see.

He quietly sat down on the edge of her bed, watching. She hadn't noticed him at all. Her carefree energy pulled him in—he knew she was playful, but this side of her was new to him. Breathless from her wild moves, Angel finally collapsed on the bed, flinging her legs up without thinking.

Smash.

Her heel landed squarely on his face.

"Ahhh!" Sachin yelped, clutching his cheek.

Angel shot upright, wide-eyed. "W—when did you get here?"

"Where do you think? Sitting here while you are lost in your own world!" He half-scolded, still rubbing his face.

She sighed, guilty, and gently reached out to rub his cheek. "You should've said something. I didn't notice you—I was... too into it."

"I'm this tall, and you didn't see me? What a shame!" he grumbled dramatically.

Angel bit her lip, trying not to laugh. "Oh stop acting like a kid. It was just a tiny hit."

"Just a hit? Look, it's turned red!" He leaned closer, pointing at his cheek.

Angel couldn't help it—she burst out laughing, then leaned in to kiss his cheek softly.

Sachin's lips twitched into a smile. "See? It's red here too." He tilted his face to the other side expectantly.

She shook her head, amused, but indulged him with another quick kiss. "How dramatic!" she teased, giving his forehead a playful flick.

"Stop teasing," he muttered with a grumpy face before turning onto his side.

Angel chuckled softly and settled beside him. As Sachin turned his back to her, she smiled mischievously, slid closer, and wrapped her arm around his waist in a tight hug.

“Leave me, Angel,” he said, calm but edged with irritation.

But Angel, being Angel, only doubled down. She playfully hooked one leg over his. “Leave you? How could I, darling? Look at this—such a romantic night!” Her husky, teasing tone made the words linger in the air.

Sachin stiffened. “Angel... don’t test me,” he warned, his voice low.

She only clung tighter, her laughter bubbling against his back. “You’re already trapped, Mister. No one can save you now.”

His patience snapped. In one swift move, Sachin rolled and pinned her beneath him. His body loomed over hers, his hands locking her wrists against the bed. “Tell me,” he murmured with a smirk, “who’s trapped now?”

Angel froze, her cheeks flushing hot. His heartbeat thundered against her chest, his breath fanning across her face. For the first time, her teasing faltered. “Sa...Sachin, stop,” she whispered, trembling with nerves.

But his smirk only deepened. He leaned closer, lips brushing the edge of her ear. “You started this... but I’ll be the one to end it.”

Her eyes fluttered shut as his face inched closer, her body betraying her with shivers. Then—just as her breath hitched—he shifted away, slipping to her side instead. His arm pulled her firmly against him.

“Sleep now,” he murmured, eyes closed.

Angel exhaled in relief, though her heart still raced wildly. A smile curved on her lips as she nestled into him, wrapping her arm around him once more. Within moments, the two drifted off, tangled in each other's warmth.

Morning sunlight spilled into the Singh household, warm and golden. Ruhana stepped out of her room, Vineet following behind as he adjusted his tie. The aroma of simmering soup drifted from the kitchen, where Kunal was already at work. Angel stood at his side, pretending to help—though in reality she was doing little more than passing him spoons and humming to herself.

"Angel, tell me," Kunal said as he stirred the ladle in the pot, "how's Sachin's mood these days?"

Angel giggled, tossing her hair back. "He was fine. Went to sleep after a little argument. Grumpy kid!"

Kunal raised his brows, smirking as he glanced at her. "So it is you giving him trouble."

Angel pressed her hand to her chest, widening her eyes in mock innocence. "Me? I'm just an innocent little girl! He's the nutshell—hard to crack, always sulking."

Kunal chuckled, shaking his head.

Just then Ruhana breezed in, bright-eyed. "Good morning!"

"Morning!" Angel and Kunal echoed together, their energy making Ruhana smile.

"You two seem too cheerful this early. Did I miss something?" she teased.

Before anyone could answer, Vineet plucked an apple off the counter, checking his watch. "I've got an early meeting. See you all tonight." With that, he strode out.

And then came a calm voice from behind. "Good morning."

Everyone turned toward the doorway. Sachin stood there in his nightwear, freshly washed, hair still damp. But their attention instantly locked on the faint reddish mark along his cheek.

Ruhana's eyes widened, her jaw dropping as she pointed. "Bhai... what is that on your face?!"

Sachin blinked, confused, and touched his cheek. "What?"

Kunal leaned against the counter, his grin spreading wider by the second. "Oh-ho. Don't tell me our tough inspector has finally got himself a love bite."

The room went still for a beat—until Angel let out a snort of laughter she couldn't hold back.

Sachin shot her a warning look, which only made her laugh harder.

Ruhana gasped dramatically, clutching her mouth. "It really does look like one! Bhai, this is unbelievable—you come out of Angel's room in the morning with a mark on your cheek?"

"Exactly!" Kunal chimed in, eyes twinkling with mischief. "The story writes itself. Angel, are you going to admit it or keep us guessing?"

Angel was doubled over now, tears of laughter brimming in her eyes. "Admit?! Oh, please!" she squeaked between laughs. "That's not a love bite. That's my kick! He

walked in on me dancing last night and— well—his poor face got in the way of my legs.”

Silence. Ruhana and Kunal stared at her for two seconds—then both burst into hysterics.

Ruhana nearly fell onto the chair, laughing. “You kicked him?!” she wheezed. “And now it looks like you’ve been romancing him?!”

Kunal slapped the counter, roaring with laughter. “Living together is clearly showing its effects, Bhai!”

Sachin’s ears flushed crimson as he pinched the bridge of his nose. “You all have lost your minds. Sit down and eat.”

But Angel wasn’t done. She leaned on the counter, her eyes sparkling with mischief, her voice dipping playfully. “Well... at least everyone believes we’re that close.”

Her words hung in the air, deliberate and teasing. Sachin froze, his jaw tightening as the tips of his ears burned hotter. He gave her a look that promised revenge, but his reaction only made Kunal and Ruhana laugh harder, echoing through the kitchen.

“Is breakfast ready?” Sachin’s cold, commanding voice cut through the morning silence.

Angel glanced around before replying, handing a jar to Kunal. “No... another ten or twenty minutes.”

Sachin gave a curt nod, then shifted his gaze to Ruhana. “Fine. You two finish here. Roo—come with me. I need to talk to you.” His tone was firm, brooking no argument.

Angel and Kunal exchanged a quick look, then turned toward Ruhana. She raised her shoulders in a clueless shrug, equally uncertain. With a hesitant breath, she followed Sachin to his room.

Inside, Sachin settled heavily into the recliner. His face looked calm—too calm—but Ruhana had lived with him long enough to know there was always a storm brewing beneath that surface. She sat opposite, perching carefully on the couch, her eyes searching for him.

“Yes, Bhaiya?” she asked softly.

For a moment, Sachin remained silent, his gaze lowered as if weighing whether to open doors long kept shut. When he finally spoke, his voice was low, edged with heaviness.

“Roo... you’ve asked me about our parents, about our past, and I’ve always kept silent.” His pause felt like a knife cutting through the air. “There’s a reason for that. I have a past... a dark, painful one.”

Ruhana’s breath caught. Her heart quickened as she leaned forward, sensing the weight behind his words. “Bhaiya... are you upset about something?” she whispered.

Sachin finally lifted his gaze to meet hers. “I once loved someone. I had a girlfriend. And someone from our own family... killed her.”

The words fell like stones between them. Sachin shut his eyes, his jaw tightening as if he could hold back the pain seeping through his voice.

Ruhana sat frozen, struggling to process. She had imagined secrets—but not this. “But... why?” she breathed, her voice breaking with curiosity and fear.

A bitter scoff escaped him, sharp and cutting. “Because we belong to a world you can’t even imagine,” he said in his infamous, dismissive tone.

Her eyes widened, shock flashing across her face. But before she could press further, Sachin exhaled slowly, almost as if to calm the storm inside him.

“We may have to return soon,” he continued quietly. “Back to that place. Back to that world. So prepare yourself, Roo. Life may change... all over again.”

He reached forward, placing his hand gently on her head—an uncharacteristic tenderness in the midst of his harsh truth.

Ruhana swallowed hard, caught between fear, sorrow, and the gnawing pull of questions she wasn’t sure she wanted answered.

“Bhaiya... is there any family still alive?” Ruhana’s hesitant voice trembled as the words slipped out.

The question hit Sachin like a blow. His chest tightened, and for the first time, his composure cracked. A flicker of fear ran through his eyes before he shut them tight, as though her words dragged out ghosts he had buried deep.

“Roo...” His voice came out dry, restrained. “If we move back, everything will be different. Different in ways you can’t even imagine.”

Ruhana exhaled sharply, her frustration rising. “You’re still not telling me the full story. You told me about your pain, about her... but nothing about our parents. I’m still in the dark.” Her voice quivered, a mix of hurt and defiance.

Sachin’s gaze hardened. He leaned back, silent for a beat, then spoke with a measured weight. “You’ll get the answers soon. But until then, listen carefully—don’t leave Angel alone. Not for a minute. She’s in danger.”

The sudden shift left Ruhana reeling. She blinked, confused, her heart racing. “Angel? What do you mean? Are you... are you getting threats about her? Or is it—” she hesitated, her voice dropping, “—that someone doesn’t accept you being with her? Just like they didn’t accept your first love?”

Her attempt to connect the knots made the air heavier.

Sachin's jaw clenched. He didn't deny it—he simply nodded once, his expression grim. "It could be real. We have to be careful, Roo. This time... we can't afford to lose anyone."

Ruhana sat frozen, her mind a whirlwind. She was confused, shocked—and somewhere deep inside, strangely numb. At least now she knew a fragment of the truth, but it only opened more doors than it closed.

Sachin rose without another word, his heavy steps carrying him out of the room. The door clicked softly behind him, leaving Ruhana alone with the silence he left behind.

She stared blankly at the floor, thoughts crashing into one another. Her brother had revealed pieces of his past—painful pieces—but the picture was still incomplete. She could feel it in her bones: this was not the whole story. It was more. Much more.

And the part he was still hiding... might change everything.

Chapter 33

The Night Love Learned to Stay

It was a quiet afternoon. The sun streamed lazily into the living area where Angel and Ruhana sat cross-legged on the rug, their books spread out around them. The house felt peaceful, filled only with the occasional scratch of a pen or the rustle of a page turning. Both girls were lost in their studies when the sharp ding-dong of the doorbell shattered the calm.

Angel's head popped up, her lips curling into a mischievous grin. "It must be Sachin," she giggled, already half-rising with excitement. Ruhana shook her head at her childishness, hiding her smile as Angel bounded toward the door.

But the moment the door swung open, Angel's cheerful expression collapsed. "Sach—" she began, her voice cutting off when her eyes fell on the elderly man standing there.

Her smile vanished like a flame snuffed out. "What are you doing here?" she hissed, her voice low but edged with hostility.

Without waiting for an answer, the man brushed past her, shoving lightly at her shoulder as if she were an obstacle in his path. His presence filled the room with a heavy air.

"You're at the wrong place!" Angel's voice rose sharply, breaking with anger.

The man spun, his face wrinkled with fury. His eyes—sharp, unyielding—glared down at her. “Where are your manners, girl? Is this how you speak to your elders?” His voice boomed, deep and commanding, reverberating in the air.

Angel’s fists clenched at her sides. She met his stare with fire in her eyes. “And is this how you enter someone else’s home? Without permission?” she shot back, her voice shaking with both rage and defiance.

Ruhana, stunned by the sudden hostility, pushed herself up from the couch and hurried to stand between them. “Hello, sir,” she said, forcing a polite smile. “May I know who you are?”

The man’s eyes narrowed. “Where is Sachin?” His words came out sharp, his anger growing with each syllable.

That was enough to break Ruhana’s patience. She squared her shoulders, her tone cutting. “And who the hell are you to come into my home and start shouting?”

“Roo, calm down.” Angel grabbed her arm, her voice urgent. “He’s an oldie, don’t be rude. Please.” Her eyes pleaded, but her lips twitched with the strain of holding her temper.

Suspicion flickered across Ruhana’s face. “Why are you defending this old man?” she asked slowly, reading the strange shift in Angel’s behavior.

Angel pulled her best puppy-dog face, trying to lighten the mood. “Don’t start now. Just let me handle this.” She even winked playfully, though the tension in her voice betrayed her unease.

Ruhana sighed heavily, throwing up her hands. “This man isn’t even listening, and you—” Her words died as the man roared again, his gaze snapping back to Angel.

“Angel! Where is Sachin?”

Angel’s face tightened. She rolled her eyes, muttering reluctantly, “At work.”

The man jabbed his finger toward her, his voice dripping with disdain. “Out of millions of men in this country, you choose him? A mere police officer? How could you sink so low, Angel!”

Ruhana’s jaw dropped. The pieces clicked together. “Angel... you know him?”

Angel gave a sheepish smile, shrugging. “He’s just... my grandfather.”

Ruhana’s glare sharpened. “Unbelievable. You’re impossible, Angel.” She turned politely to the man, her voice softening. “Grandpa, please... have a seat. I’ll bring some water.”

But Angel was far from calm. “Grandpa, why are you here?” she demanded, her voice trembling with anger.

His face hardened further. “Because you are a princess, Angel. And yet you’ve allowed yourself to fall for a middle-class officer. I will never approve of this disgrace.” He seized her wrist. “Enough. We’re going home.”

The air in the room thickened. That’s when the door banged open. “Excuse me—who the hell are you to force Angel to leave me?” Sachin’s voice thundered as he stepped inside, his face carved in fury.

Angel groaned, slapping her forehead. *‘Perfect. Just perfect. What timing!’* she thought bitterly. Aloud, she snapped, “Why are you home early?”

Sachin’s glare cut to her. “FYI, this is my house,” he bit out, his forced smile doing nothing to hide his anger.

The old man's fury exploded. "You dare! You think you can date my granddaughter? A mere officer like you—how dare you trap her with your cheap tricks?"

Sachin stiffened, his eyes widening in shock. Recognition dawned. "Wait... aren't you Mr. Pankaj Oberoi?"

A cruel smile spread across the old man's face. "So you do know me. Then of course this is part of your plan—to climb the social ladder. Clever, officer. Very clever."

Sachin's mind raced back. "You... you came to headquarters once. To file a complaint about your missing granddaughter. And then... your son came in—" His words broke off as the memory came crashing back.

"You just knew everything, didn't you? Oh, I get it now — you did it on purpose! You've got no shame, trapping a young girl like Angel!" Pankaj roared, his face red with fury.

Sachin scoffed, the edge in his tone unmistakable. "I'm not faking anything," he shot back, refusing to take another word of nonsense from Angel's grandfather.

"Shut up, Inspector!" Pankaj bellowed again, raising his hand to slap him — but a firm voice cut through the air.

"Stop right there, Father."

The room fell silent. All eyes turned to the doorway, where a middle-aged man stood. His presence alone shifted the atmosphere. He walked inside, his expression controlled but intense.

"Papa," he said, his tone calm yet decisive. "I don't approve of this relationship either, but you can't just blame him. Angel is equally responsible."

Angel slapped her forehead in disbelief. “The whole clan’s here... wow, just wow,” she muttered under her breath.

“Mr. Singh,” the man turned to Sachin, his voice softening, “I beg of you—please let my daughter go. Everything else aside, this age gap... it’s just not acceptable.”

But as his gaze lifted fully to Sachin’s face, his voice faltered. His eyes widened. A stunned silence followed.

“Sir...” he whispered, emotion flooding his expression. Tears welled up as recognition dawned. He folded his hands together, overcome. “You were here... all this time. I searched for you everywhere for fifteen years. Why didn’t you come to me?”

Sachin smiled faintly, reaching forward to clasp his trembling hands. The gesture said more than words could.

Standing there, the state’s Governor, Vikas Oberoi, bowed before a police officer — and the sight carried a quiet, emotional power that left everyone breathless.

Vikas opened his mouth to speak, but Sachin shook his head gently. Vikas understood instantly and nodded.

“Are you out of your mind, Vikas?” Pankaj shouted, unable to contain himself.

Vikas turned sharply toward his father, his eyes blazing. “Enough, Papa. Not another word.” His voice held authority that silenced the room. “If Sir—” he said the word with unmistakable reverence—“has chosen our Angel, then that’s the only blessing this family needs. He’ll be my son-in-law, and that’s final. Don’t speak unless you know who you’re talking about.”

Their eyes met — Sachin and Vikas — a long, unspoken exchange passing between them, layered with history, gratitude, and something no one else could decipher.

“Dad, first of all—why are you even here? Do I ever ask for your permission?” Angel’s voice was sharp, her frustration boiling over at the sudden appearance of her family. The revelation stunned both Sachin and Ruhana, who exchanged confused glances.

Before Vikas could respond, Ruhana nudged Angel lightly. “You never told us about your father! You’re the Governor’s daughter?” She exhaled, still trying to process it. “Angel, I can’t believe this...”

Angel ran a hand through her hair, visibly agitated. “Is that something to flaunt? Being his daughter is a nightmare,” she muttered bitterly, turning away—only for Sachin to gently catch her hand.

“Angel,” he said quietly, his voice calm but firm. “Apologize to your dad.”

She froze for a moment, her eyes locking with his. His tone wasn’t harsh, but his authority carried weight. It sent a faint chill through her.

“Don’t interfere in my family matters,” she snapped, pulling her hand free. “It’s my concern, not yours.”

Sachin blinked, taken aback by her sudden outburst. Before he could respond, Pankaj’s voice cut through the tension.

“See? He’s already ordering you around, Angel. Not good for you. And just look at this place—” He started his usual tirade, trying to turn her against Sachin.

Angel shot her grandfather a cold glare, sharp enough to silence him mid-sentence. "Ruhana, come with me. I can't take this drama anymore."

Without waiting, she turned and stormed off to her room, Ruhana following quietly behind her.

Sachin let out a long breath, disappointment flickering in his eyes. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "Maybe I've spoiled her these past few days. I'll talk to her."

Vikas gave a faint smile, though his eyes carried an old ache. "Her anger is valid. We left her when she was just five. We deserve her resentment." He paused, then met Sachin's gaze with quiet sincerity. "Take care of her, please."

Sachin nodded, his voice steady but gentle. "Don't worry. I'll protect her. She'll never become another Payal."

He guided Vikas toward a chair, but before either could say more, Pankaj scowled and walked out, his disapproval hanging heavy in the air.

"Sorry, sir... Dad doesn't know anything about you. Don't worry about him. I have no problem with you and Angel," Vikas assured gently, referring to Sachin and his daughter's relationship.

Sachin simply nodded. "I understand your fear. But this time, nothing will go wrong. Trust me."

"I trust you, Sir," Vikas said with a warm smile. "I'm just humbled that I got to meet you again in this lifetime."

"Please, don't call me 'sir.' They'll get suspicious. These two little detectives are already investigating me," Sachin chuckled softly, glancing toward the hallway where he knew Ruhana and Angel would be curious.

Vikas laughed lightly. "How could I call you by name? No, sir, I can't."

“You can call me Mr. Singh, then,” Sachin said calmly.

Vikas nodded, then looked around with a fond expression. “She’s your sister, right? She must’ve been four or five the last time I saw her. She’s about Angel’s age.”

Sachin smiled faintly. “Her name is Ruhana. And she’s Vineet’s girlfriend.”

Vikas’s face lit up. “Ah, so Vinnie chose a perfect girl! Though,” he chuckled, “he did describe you as an arrogant police officer.”

Sachin gave him a sharp look. “Excuse me?”

Vikas suppressed a laugh, raising his hands playfully. “Nothing, Mr. Singh. I’m just happy my children chose the right partners.” His tone carried the pride of a father who felt his family had turned out well despite everything.

“Sorry, Mr. Oberoi, I didn’t even offer you water,” Sachin said, standing up. “I’ll get something.”

Vikas rose too. “Don’t bother. I’ll make tea for both of us.”

He walked into the open kitchen, moving with the ease of someone comfortable anywhere. As he prepared the tea, Sachin sat on the kitchen platform, silently watching him — eyes glistening with emotion.

“Thank you, Mr. Oberoi,” Sachin finally said. “Fifteen years ago, you saved us. You helped us escape when they took your daughter away. You risked everything. I’ll always be grateful.”

Vikas stirred the tea slowly. “My daughter was safe,” he said softly. “Back then, I was an MP on vacation in your city. They only threatened me. Nothing really happened to her. Do you know who that abducted girl was?” He looked up with a faint, knowing smile.

Sachin frowned, puzzled.

“Angel,” Vikas said, his voice heavy with memory. “She was four when it happened. And now... she’s your girlfriend. Destiny has its strange ways, doesn’t it?”

Sachin froze, disbelief flickering in his eyes. “But... if she’s your daughter, why does she hate you?”

Vikas sighed deeply. “After that incident, I sent her to boarding school in another city. I hid her identity for safety. Later, she started living independently. She’s angry because she never got the warmth of a family like Vineet did. Maybe that’s why she’s so bitter. But behind that arrogance, she’s a lovely child.”

He handed a cup of tea to Sachin. They shared a quiet moment before Vikas set his cup down and stood.

“Take care of her, Mr. Singh,” he said softly, before leaving the house.

Angel’s Room

The night was quiet except for the soft hum of the ceiling fan. A single lamp cast a warm, golden light across the room, its glow flickering over the shelves and books scattered on the table.

Ruhana sat on the bed, silent, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She didn’t speak; she only watched Angel move.

Angel was pacing—back and forth, her bare feet making soft sounds against the floor. Her jaw was tight, her eyes red from holding back tears. She muttered fragments of thoughts, unfinished sentences, as if arguing with ghosts that only she could see.

Ruhana's gaze followed her quietly. She knew this storm. Angel didn't need words right now—she needed space to fall apart.

Then Angel stopped. Her body stilled, shoulders trembling. For a moment, she stared at the floor before looking up at Ruhana. Her voice was barely a whisper when she spoke.

“Roo... why did he come here?”

The question cracked mid-sentence, and the tears that had been trapped behind her eyes finally spilled over. Her breath hitched as she tried to speak again, but the words drowned in sobs.

Ruhana's heart twisted. She rose from the bed and crossed the room in two steps, wrapping her arms around her. Angel collapsed against her, crying hard, her body shaking with every breath.

“You know...” Angel's voice came in gasps, her face pressed into Ruhana's shoulder. “I was all alone after that kidnapping. I understood everything—the danger, the threats—but they never let me call him Dad. No one knows who I really am, except our family of four. I missed him every single day... but I never got that love.”

Ruhana stroked her back gently, whispering, “Angel, calm down... it was for your safety. They just wanted to protect you.”

Angel pulled away sharply, her eyes fierce through her tears. “Protect me?” she snapped. “They abandoned me! They could've written to me... called me... anything! But they didn't. Not once.”

Her voice trembled, raw and hurt. The silence that followed was heavy enough to press against their chests.

Ruhana didn't argue. She only sat back down beside her, letting the quiet stretch. Sometimes listening was the only thing that helped.

After a while, Ruhana tried to lighten the air, her tone soft and teasing. "Angel... It's okay. You have us now—me, Kunal bhaiya, and your obedient Sachin bhaiya. Isn't that a full-time headache already?"

A faint smile flickered on her lips, hoping to coax one from Angel too. But Angel didn't smile. Her tears still rolled down, slow and silent.

"If they ever cared," she whispered, her voice breaking, "they would've let me stay with them. Or at least let me do what I love."

Her words dissolved into sobs again. She buried her face in her palms, shaking as the grief poured out. Ruhana said nothing. She just reached out and held her hand, firm and steady, anchoring her in silence.

For a long time, neither of them spoke. The only sounds were Angel's uneven breathing and the soft rustle of the night outside—the kind of silence that held more emotion than any words ever could.

Finally Ruhana spoke after a long silence. "Angel I understand your pain but time has passed already. You should forget the past. I saw your father love you so much he just doesn't express it." Ruhana was trying to make her calm and understanding.

Angel's voice shook with bitterness. "He never loved me. He just loves his politics and his power. Bloody old man trying to control me!"

Ruhana widened her eyes in disbelief, then let out a nervous laugh. "Did you just call your father a bloody old

man? Cut the crap, Angel,” she scolded lightly, trying to pull her back to humor.

Angel smiled faintly, but it was brittle, fading as quickly as it came. “But he is a bad man,” she muttered. “I don’t even want to talk to him.”

Her voice broke at the end, and then — all at once — her composure snapped. Her smile vanished, her breathing hitched, and her chest rose and fell too fast.

“Angel?” Ruhana’s tone changed instantly, her body stiffening.

Angel pressed a trembling hand to her chest. Her lips parted, but no words came out. A panicked gasp escaped her throat.

“Angel!” Ruhana rushed forward as her friend’s knees buckled. Angel collapsed to the floor, clawing at her chest as if she couldn’t draw air. Tears streamed down her cheeks, her breaths sharp and broken.

“Angel! Look at me—look at me, please!” Ruhana dropped to her knees, her voice trembling with terror. “Breathe, I’m here—breathe!” But Angel’s eyes were unfocused, her body trembling violently.

Ruhana’s voice cracked as she screamed, “Bhaiya! Bhaiya, come quickly!”

Within seconds, Sachin burst through the door. The moment his eyes found Angel on the floor, his world stopped. Her body was trembling, her face pale, her breaths ragged.

He was beside her in an instant. “Angel... hey, hey, it’s me,” he said softly, even as panic flared behind his calm voice. He lifted her carefully, her head falling against his shoulder. Her body felt cold — too cold.

“Ruhana, call the doctor. Now!” His tone was sharp, commanding, but his hands trembled as he rubbed her back and arms, trying to steady her breathing.

Ruhana’s hands shook as she grabbed her phone, tears blurring her vision. “Hello—yes, please, we need help—she can’t breathe!”

Angel tried to speak through her gasps. “S...Sa...chin...dra...wer...”

“Don’t talk, Angel,” he murmured, brushing the damp strands of hair from her forehead. “I’m right here. Just breathe... I’ve got you.” His voice was low but breaking — the steady tone of a man who was falling apart inside.

Ruhana returned with a glass of warm water, her hands trembling so badly the water almost spilled. “Bhaiya... here.”

Sachin took it, lifting Angel gently into his arms. “Drink this,” he whispered. She sipped weakly, her eyes half-closed, her breathing still erratic.

Just then, Kunal ran in. One glance at the scene — Sachin holding Angel, Ruhana crying, the air thick with fear — and he froze.

“What happened?” His voice was tight, urgent.

“She’s having a panic attack,” Sachin said, still rubbing Angel’s back. His voice was steady, but his eyes betrayed terror — the kind that only comes when you think you might lose someone you love.

Kunal quickly assessed the room. “Ruhana, change her into something loose. These clothes are too tight.” He grabbed a cotton dress from her wardrobe and tossed it to Sachin.

Sachin blinked, caught off guard. “How can I—?”

Kunal cut him off. "She's your girl. If you can't, I'll do it myself." His tone left no room for argument as he left to fetch the hot water bag.

Ruhana hesitated. "Bhaiya... should I go out?"

Sachin shook his head, his voice soft but urgent. "No. Stay. I need you."

Together, they changed Angel carefully, their movements quick but gentle. Sachin's hands trembled as he buttoned the dress. He'd faced criminals, dead bodies, even gunfire — but this kind of helplessness was different. Watching the woman he loved struggle to breathe shattered something in him.

When they were done, Sachin sat on the edge of the bed, one hand gripping hers tightly, as if she might disappear if he let go.

Moments later, the doctor arrived with Kunal. Sachin barely looked up, his entire focus on Angel's still face.

The doctor examined her quickly, inserting an IV and giving her an injection. "She's had a panic attack," he said. "I'll keep her under observation for a few hours. This isn't her first episode."

Ruhana's tear-streaked face turned toward him, shocked. "You've seen her before?"

The doctor nodded calmly. "Yes. I've treated her since her first attack. She's been under deep emotional strain for years."

He scribbled a prescription and handed it to Kunal. "Give her these medicines on time."

Before leaving, he looked at Sachin. "I don't recall seeing you before."

Sachin finally looked up, exhaustion in his eyes. "I'm her fiancé," he said softly. "We've been living together for a few weeks."

The doctor nodded with quiet understanding. "Then you must already know — she needs care and calm. She's been alone for too long. Don't let her bottle up more pain."

After the doctor left, the room fell silent again.

Ruhana sat beside Angel, brushing her hair gently off her forehead. Her eyes glistened. "She never told me, Bhaiya," she whispered. "Not once."

Sachin let out a deep sigh, his fingers still entwined with Angel's. "She hides behind that smile," he said softly. "She wants everyone to see her as fearless, unstoppable. But inside..." His voice trailed off, heavy with emotion.

Ruhana looked at him. "You really love her, don't you?"

Sachin's eyes softened. "More than she'll ever believe," he admitted quietly. Then, as if remembering his sister was still watching, he ruffled her hair gently. "From now on, we'll take care of her — both of us."

Ruhana nodded, her tears falling again as she whispered, "Always, Bhaiya. Always."

They both sat beside Angel, holding her hands — two hearts guarding one broken soul — while the night stretched long and silent around them.

The house was unusually quiet. The kind of quiet that comes after a storm — fragile, uncertain, holding its breath.

The morning light slipped through the curtains of Angel's room, bathing everything in a pale gold hue. The air still carried the faint trace of antiseptic, and a half-empty cup of tea sat forgotten on the bedside table.

Angel was asleep now, her breathing shallow but steady. Her lashes were still wet — a reminder of the long night that had wrung every drop of strength out of her.

Sachin sat beside her bed, still in last night's shirt, his eyes heavy but refusing to close. His hand lay over hers, thumb tracing slow circles over her knuckles. Every few minutes, his gaze moved from her face to the monitor's faint beeping sound — the sound he had begun to depend on.

Ruhana appeared at the door, her hair tied in a messy bun, wrapped in a blanket. She hesitated before stepping in, her voice soft. "Bhaiya..."

Sachin didn't look up. "She finally fell asleep around five," he said quietly. "The doctor said the panic attack drained her completely."

Ruhana moved closer and sat beside him, her eyes falling on Angel. Her heart clenched at the sight — the girl who usually filled their house with laughter and playful banter now looked so fragile, so small.

"Bhaiya..." she whispered again, her voice trembling. "You didn't sleep at all, did you?"

Sachin gave a faint smile without looking away. "Couldn't. Every time she breathed unevenly, my heart stopped."

Ruhana's throat tightened. She placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "She's safe now. You did everything right."

He nodded, but his jaw tensed. "I didn't see it, Roo. I live with her, and I didn't see it. She's been carrying all this pain and pretending to be fine."

Ruhana's eyes softened. "Angel doesn't let anyone see her weak side. You know that."

A quiet voice came from the doorway. “She doesn’t need to hide anymore.”

Both of them turned. Kunal was standing there, leaning against the doorframe, a cup of black coffee in his hand. His face was calm, but his eyes told a different story – he hadn’t slept either.

He walked in slowly and placed the cup on the table. “I checked the doctor’s notes,” he said. “She’s had these attacks before. She just never told anyone.”

Sachin closed his eyes briefly, his voice thick. “And she’s been living under my roof, trusting me – and I couldn’t protect her.”

“Stop blaming yourself,” Kunal said quietly. “You can’t protect someone from their past. But you can help them live with it.”

The words lingered in the air.

A soft groan came from the bed. Angel stirred, her fingers twitching, eyes fluttering open against the morning light. She blinked, confused for a second, before her gaze met Sachin’s.

He was already leaning toward her. “Hey...” he whispered, relief washing through his tone. “You’re awake.”

Angel’s voice was raspy. “What time is it?”

“Morning,” Ruhana said gently, moving closer with a soft smile. “You scared the life out of us, you know that?”

Angel’s lips curved faintly. “Did I?” she whispered weakly, trying to sit up. Sachin instantly supported her, adjusting the pillows behind her back.

“Easy,” he murmured. “You’re not going anywhere until you’ve eaten something.”

Angel looked between the three of them — Sachin's tired eyes, Ruhana's worried smile, and Kunal's steady silence. For the first time in years, she saw what family felt like — not perfect, not blood, but real.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, tears brimming again. "I didn't mean to cause all this—"

Sachin gently placed a finger on her lips. "Don't say that. You didn't cause anything." His voice cracked slightly. "You've been through hell alone. You don't have to be alone anymore."

Angel stared at him, her chest tightening. "You really mean that?"

He met her gaze — steady, unblinking. "I don't make promises I can't keep."

Ruhana sniffed, pretending to be annoyed to hide her tears. "If anyone makes her cry again, I'm filing a case," she said with mock seriousness, wiping her cheek with the back of her hand.

That earned a soft chuckle from Angel — weak, but genuine.

Kunal placed a hand on Ruhana's shoulder. "Let her rest," he said softly. "We'll make breakfast. The doctor said she needs something warm."

Ruhana nodded and stood, glancing at Angel one last time before following Kunal out.

The door closed softly behind Ruhana and Kunal, their murmured voices fading down the hallway. Silence filled the room again — not heavy like before, but fragile, like a glass teetering on the edge.

Sachin sat back down beside the bed, the sunlight pooling across his face. His eyes were tired, the faint shadow

of sleeplessness etched beneath them, but the calm in his gaze hadn't left since she woke up.

Angel leaned back against the pillows, watching him quietly. Her mind was still foggy, her throat dry, but the way he looked at her — as if she were something precious and breakable — made her chest ache in a different way.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. The rhythmic sound of the IV drip was the only thing that filled the air.

"You don't have to stare like that," she murmured finally, her voice soft, teasing out of habit though her tone trembled.

Sachin's lips curved slightly. "I'm making sure you're still breathing," he said. "Last night gave me a reason not to trust silence."

Her heart clenched. She looked away, blinking hard. "I'm sorry you had to see me like that."

"Like what?" His tone was gentle, but there was a faint edge of hurt in it.

"Like a mess." She swallowed. "Like someone who can't even control her own panic."

Sachin sighed quietly and shifted closer, sitting on the edge of the bed. "You think that's what I saw?"

Angel didn't answer. Her eyes fixed on her hands, fingers fidgeting with the blanket.

He spoke softly, his voice carrying a steadiness that made her look up again. "I saw someone breaking because she's been holding herself together for too long. You didn't scare me, Angel. You broke my heart — and that's worse."

The words hung in the air between them, and Angel's throat went tight. No one had ever said it like that. Not with such quiet truth.

Her voice trembled. "You shouldn't have to deal with this. I'm... complicated. I don't even know how to explain half the things in my head."

Sachin leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "Then don't explain. Just... let me be there when it happens."

She stared at him, searching his face. "You make it sound so easy."

He smiled faintly, that rare, gentle smile she'd learned was his way of loving silently. "It's not easy. But some people are worth the hard parts."

A tear slipped down her cheek before she could stop it. "You don't know how much I've tried to be fine. Every time I start to open up, I pull back — because I'm scared I'll lose control again."

Sachin reached up and brushed away her tears with his thumb. "You don't need control with me." His voice was low, almost a whisper. "You can cry, scream, break — whatever you need. Just don't shut me out."

Her lips trembled, her breath catching. "Why are you so good to me?"

"Because you make me forget what being alone felt like," he said simply.

That shattered her completely. The tears came faster now — not from panic, but release. She covered her face with her palms, and for a second, she didn't care how she looked or sounded.

Sachin didn't stop her this time. He let her cry, quietly rubbing her back until her sobs softened into hiccups. When she finally lifted her face again, her eyes were swollen, her cheeks damp, but her breathing was steady.

"Sorry..." she whispered again, half laughing through her tears.

He smiled and shook his head. "You apologize too much."

She sniffled. "You complain too much."

A tiny laugh escaped him — the first real one in hours — and it made something inside her unclench. They sat like that for a while, wrapped in the golden quiet of the morning. No more explanations, no more pretending. Just two people who had finally stopped running from what was real.

After a while, Sachin stood to fetch her some water. When he turned back, she was watching him — that same look she had when she wanted to say something but didn't know how.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

Angel hesitated, then whispered, "Thank you... for staying."

He walked back to her side, setting the glass down, and bent slightly so they were at eye level. "Get used to it," he said quietly. "Because I'm not leaving again — not when you need me."

Angel nodded faintly, her voice small but sure. "I'll try not to push you away next time."

Sachin smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. "Even if you do, I'll just find my way back."

And when their eyes met again, something shifted — not dramatic, but profound. It wasn't just care anymore. It was quiet love growing in the space where fear had finally loosened its hold.

Oberoi Mansion

The Oberoi dining hall gleamed with its usual morning elegance—sunlight filtering through tall glass windows, soft music playing faintly from the corner, and silver cutlery perfectly aligned on the marble table. But beneath all that polish, the air carried something dense and heavy—like tension dressed in civility.

Vikas Oberoi sat at the head of the table, his expression calm but his mind restless. Across from him, Pankaj Oberoi stirred his tea without sipping, eyes fixed on his son with quiet fury. He hadn't forgiven Vikas—not for the decision he made yesterday, and certainly not for approving Angel's relationship with Sachin Singh.

"Dad," Vikas began, his tone even but firm, "he's not an ordinary man. Sachin's capable, grounded. If anyone can take care of her, it's him. You should stop worrying."

Pankaj's hand trembled slightly as he set down his cup. "You've said that before, Vikas. Every time you make a choice for her, it ends in disaster," he said coldly.

Before Vikas could respond, the sharp rhythm of hurried footsteps echoed through the hallway. The next moment, Vineet stormed into the room—still in his work clothes, his tie loose, his expression carved in anger.

"Who told you to go there?" he demanded, voice cutting through the room like glass.

Both Pankaj and Vikas rose instantly from their chairs, startled. "Vineet—" Vikas began, but his son's glare silenced him.

Kaveri, seated near the window, turned sharply toward her son. Her poise cracked for a moment. "Vinnie, what is this tone? They just went to meet Angel," she said, her voice firm but quivering underneath.

Vineet's lips twisted bitterly. "Meet her?" he repeated. "You think you can just show up after everything? Without even asking me?" His voice shook with restrained fury.

"She's my daughter, Vineet," Vikas replied quietly but with iron beneath. "I don't need permission from anyone to see her."

Vineet scoffed—a sound more like pain than mockery. "You made her this way, Dad. You think you can walk into her life again as if nothing happened? She can't handle your presence." He clenched his fists, his voice rising. "You just went there—unannounced—and she broke down!"

Kaveri frowned, confusion flickering into worry. "Broke down? What are you saying?"

Vineet turned to her, eyes burning with a mix of anger and anguish. "She had a panic attack last night," he said, his voice unsteady now. "If Ruhana hadn't called me, I wouldn't have known. The doctor said it was severe—she couldn't breathe, Mom! It took her hours to calm down."

The room fell silent. Even the soft music from the corner seemed to fade into nothing.

Pankaj's face paled as he gripped the edge of the table. "How is she now?" he asked, voice trembling.

"She's stable," Vineet said after a pause. His tone was calmer now, but his eyes were red. "But no one is going

there. She needs peace. Not old ghosts showing up at her door.”

Kaveri’s hand flew to her mouth. “She’s my daughter, Vineet,” she whispered, tears spilling freely. “How can you tell me not to see her?”

Vineet’s jaw tightened, a bitter laugh escaping him. “You should’ve thought of that when she was five, Mom,” he said quietly but sharply. “When she was lying in a hospital bed after her first panic attack—while you were too busy hosting your kitty party.”

The words hit like a slap. Kaveri froze, her face draining of color. For once, even Vikas looked shaken.

“Vineet...” Pankaj murmured, trying to intervene, but Vineet cut him off with a raised hand.

“Enough. No one’s going. I’ll keep you updated about her health.” His voice softened only slightly, enough to show the pain behind the anger. He turned to leave, his footsteps echoing through the grand hallway.

Kaveri’s voice cracked behind him. “Vinnie... just once. Let me see her.”

Vineet paused for a heartbeat—but didn’t turn back. “It’s too late for just once, Mom.”

And with that, he walked out—his figure swallowed by the vast, cold corridors of the Oberoi mansion, leaving behind silence thick with guilt, regret, and unspoken grief.

Sachin’s Place

Kunal had already left for headquarters. Sachin had taken the day off, and Ruhana’s classes were off too. The house was unusually quiet. Sachin and Ruhana stood side by

side in the kitchen, cleaning up after breakfast while Angel still slept upstairs.

Ruhana glanced at her brother. His movements were mechanical, his brows furrowed deeper than usual. Those fine lines on his forehead—normally hidden beneath his stoic exterior—spoke of something heavier today.

He's tense... because of Angel, she realized. The thought oddly comforted her—it meant he truly cared.

A sudden clank shattered the silence. Ruhana turned. A glass lay broken on the counter, shards scattered near Sachin's hand.

"Bhaiya!" she rushed forward, catching his wrist before he could touch the pieces. "Leave it. You'll hurt yourself."

Sachin didn't meet her eyes. She noticed the faint shimmer of tears before he turned his face away.

"Bhaiya..." Ruhana's voice softened. "You don't have to hide your pain. At least not from me."

Sachin gripped the edge of the counter tightly, his knuckles pale. His voice trembled when he finally spoke. "I can't afford to lose my love again, Ruhana. Back then, I was too young to understand... but now I know exactly what people like them can do. I can't—won't—let them win this time."

Ruhana exhaled slowly. "It's just her health, Bhaiya. No one's coming to harm her," she said, trying to calm him.

He shut his eyes for a moment. A single tear slid down his cheek. "Am I not a good man?" he whispered. "I failed to keep her safe. She didn't trust me enough to share her pain. She was fighting alone... and I didn't even notice. What kind of man does that make me?"

Ruhana crouched before him, gently guiding him to a chair. She rested her hands on his shoulders, her voice steady but warm. “Bhaiya, you’re not incapable. She wasn’t hiding because she didn’t trust you. She just needed time—to open up, to feel safe. You were giving her that space. So please, don’t blame yourself.”

Sachin’s shoulders trembled slightly as Ruhana held him, the quiet of the kitchen filling once more with the sound of their steady breaths.

Sachin shook his head slowly, his chest tightening with a silent ache. Deep inside, he couldn’t accept that Angel had hidden something from him. The thought gnawed at him — not just as a lover, but as a man who believed he’d failed to protect her. Right now, he felt useless — a man who couldn’t even give his woman the sense of safety she deserved. “She hid it from me, Ruhana,” he muttered, voice low and strained. “Doesn’t that mean she doesn’t trust me?”

Ruhana immediately placed her hands on his shoulders, gripping them firmly. “Bhaiya, stop saying that,” she said gently but with firmness. “She loves you — you know that. But love doesn’t erase fear overnight. Maybe she trusts you... but her heart isn’t ready to open completely yet. Maybe she’s too scared to show her real self.”

Sachin’s hands trembled slightly as he tried to remove hers, his expression conflicted. “I understand what you mean,” he said quietly. “But still... I want her to trust me fully. I want her to feel safe enough to tell me everything.” He exhaled deeply, lowering his gaze.

Ruhana smiled faintly, softening her tone. “You both just need time, Bhaiya. Don’t rush it. Let her come to you when she’s ready. Everything will fall into place.” She ruffled his hair lightly.

Sachin managed a small smile and leaned forward, resting his head on the table. For a few seconds, he just sat there – silent, heavy with thought.

“Bhayia...” Ruhana called softly.

He lifted his head and looked at her, a questioning expression on his face.

“Do you still love Payal?” she asked suddenly. The question struck him like a cold wave. He blinked, startled, searching her face as if trying to understand what she meant.

“What kind of question is that?” he asked, baffled.

Ruhana pulled out the chair beside him and sat down. “I mean... have you really forgotten her? Or does a part of your heart still belong to her? And if it does, have you ever told Angel that?” She looked directly into his eyes, her voice calm but probing.

Sachin sighed heavily. The question dug into a part of him he hadn’t visited in years. He had never really thought about it – not this deeply.

“I... I don’t know,” he said honestly after a pause. “I know I can never completely forget Payal. But I don’t know what that means anymore.”

Ruhana shook her head lightly, half in disappointment, half in concern. “Bhayia, you should try to find that answer. It might help you clear your mind – and your heart.” She smacked his shoulder playfully to lighten the mood.

Sachin let out a faint chuckle. “Alright, I’ll try,” he said, standing up. “And in the meantime, make me a strong coffee.”

Ruhana rolled her eyes, smiling. “Always ordering me around.”

She walked to the kitchen, still smiling faintly – but her smile slowly faded as her mind wandered. As she brewed the coffee, old questions began to rise again – questions about the past she never fully understood. She had asked many times... but never received the answers she truly needed.

Morning light spilled softly through the kitchen window, catching on the steam rising from the coffee pot. The house smelled like toast, detergent, and freshly brewed coffee – warm, normal, peaceful. But inside her, nothing felt peaceful.

She stirred the coffee without thinking, eyes lost somewhere beyond the glass. Her brother's voice still lingered in her mind – *'I can never forget Payal.'*

That one line had unsettled her more than she wanted to admit.

Payal. That name felt like dust – something everyone in the house pretended had blown away years ago. But it hadn't. It still hung around, invisible but heavy. Every time the subject came close, Sachin grew quiet, Kunal grew restless, and the air grew thick.

And now, hearing him say it again after all these years... it stirred everything she tried to bury.

She poured the coffee into a mug, her hands steady but her heart uneven. She didn't remember much from before. She had been little – too little to understand the things whispered between adults. But she felt it. The tension. The loss. The silence that replaced laughter in their home.

Sometimes she tried to remember her mother's voice or her father's face, but the memories were blurry – like fogged glass. She could never hold onto them for long. And yet, there were those strange dreams...

She'd had one again just a few days ago. A palace. Bright and cold. White marble floors. A staircase that seemed to go on forever. Curtains swaying with wind she couldn't feel. And always — a faint voice calling her name.

Every time she woke up, her chest ached, like she'd been crying in her sleep.

She never told anyone anymore. The last time she tried, Sachin had just looked away and said, "It's nothing, Ruhana. You dream too much." But the look in his eyes had said otherwise — that kind of look people get when they recognize something but wish they didn't.

Now, standing in the morning quiet, she felt that same strange ache again — like her dreams were trying to remind her of something she wasn't supposed to know.

Her eyes drifted toward the hallway. She could hear faint sounds — Sachin's low voice and Angel's softer one, broken and tired. She smiled faintly to herself. "At least they're talking," she murmured.

She picked up the mugs, but paused before stepping out. Her gaze fell to the sunlight streaming across the floor — calm, golden, ordinary. Yet her chest tightened, heavy with questions that refused to fade.

"What really happened, Bhayia?" she whispered under her breath. "Who was Payal? Why do I keep dreaming about that place?"

No one answered, of course. The coffee pot clicked off, the sunlight shifted, and the moment passed like all others — quiet on the outside, storming on the inside.

She took a deep breath, forced a small smile, and lifted the tray. If she couldn't find her answers today, she could at least start the morning pretending things were fine.

That was what she'd always done best.

It was noon when Ruhana reached Vineet's office. The reception area buzzed with soft chatter and the rhythmic tapping of keyboards. A few employees greeted her with polite smiles as she walked past, her presence familiar to everyone by now.

Without waiting for anyone to announce her, she pushed open the glass door to Vineet's cabin.

Vineet was hunched over a thick project file, brows furrowed in concentration, pen tapping against the edge of the paper. The faint sunlight streaming through the blinds cut across his desk, highlighting the tired determination in his eyes.

He looked up at the sound of the door – and his whole face softened. The corner of his lips lifted into that small, lazy smile she secretly loved.

"Ruhana," he breathed, setting his pen aside. "You should've called. I would've picked you up."

She ignored his protest, walking straight in and sinking into the chair opposite him. "It's lunch time," she said, crossing her arms with mock authority. "Let's eat."

He chuckled quietly, leaning back in his chair. "That sounded more like an order than an invitation."

"It was an order," she said matter-of-factly, but her lips curved into a playful smile. "You've been skipping meals again, haven't you?"

Vineet raised his hands in surrender. "Caught red-handed."

“Good. Now no excuses,” she said, placing the lunchbox she’d brought on his desk. “You can work after you eat. I’ll even allow five extra minutes of your precious ‘project time’.”

He shook his head, amused, watching as she unpacked the boxes. The smell of home-cooked food filled the cabin, softening the sterile office air. It wasn’t just lunch — it was her way of taking care of him, quietly, stubbornly, in the middle of his fast, polished corporate world.

For a moment, Vineet simply watched her — the way she fussed with the containers, the way sunlight caught in her hair, the familiar warmth she carried with her. And suddenly, the file on his desk didn’t seem so important anymore.

“Vineet, I’m so confused,” Ruhana murmured, absently chewing her food.

Vineet looked up from his plate, puzzled. “Confused about what?”

She sighed, setting her spoon down. “I mean... Bhai told me to be more careful. And he said we might have to go back to where we truly belong.” Her brows furrowed as she spoke, the words lingering in her mind. “It means there’s more to this than I thought.”

Vineet watched her closely. The spoon she held was still midway to her mouth, forgotten as her thoughts drifted elsewhere.

He exhaled deeply. “Ruhana, we agreed we wouldn’t push this until Sachin tells us everything himself,” he said gently, trying to reason with her.

Ruhana’s jaw tightened, irritation flashing in her eyes. “Everyone keeps saying the same thing! How long am I

supposed to wait, Vineet? How much longer?" Her voice cracked under the weight of anger, hurt, and helplessness.

Vineet immediately stood up, walked over to her, and knelt down in front of her. His hands rested lightly on her shoulders. "Ruhana," he said softly, looking up at her. "You've already waited this long... just a little more, okay?"

His thumbs brushed against her arms in a quiet attempt to calm her down, but her eyes still shimmered with restless questions.

Ruhana said nothing as no one even tried to understand about her, her concern and eagerness to know the truth about her, her parents and previous life.

Vineet leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to Ruhana's forehead. "It'll be okay," he whispered, his voice steady but tired. She nodded quietly, trusting his words even when neither of them felt certain.

They finished their breakfast in silence, the clinking of cutlery filling the void between them.

"Ruhana, let's head out," Vineet said at last. His tone lacked its usual warmth; he sounded distracted, weighed down by thoughts he wasn't voicing.

Ruhana gave him a small, teasing smile. "Why don't you go and check on her?" she asked gently. She knew he was worried about Angel—anyone could see that—but he hadn't once asked about her since Ruhana arrived.

Vineet sighed and buried his face in his palms. "I can't," he murmured. "I was never there for her when it really mattered. Not once. I wasn't allowed to contact her, and even when I could have, I didn't try enough." He paused, his voice roughening with guilt. "She deserves better now. Maybe... maybe that means she deserves a life without me in it."

Ruhana's expression softened. She could see it—the way his voice trembled when he spoke about Angel, the way his eyes carried that quiet ache. He loved his sister deeply, and it was breaking him that love had turned into distance. Angel never complained, and somehow, that made it worse.

"Vineet," Ruhana said gently, placing her hand over his. "She never hated you. She loves you just as much. She'll feel better seeing you around."

Vineet shook his head slowly. "I can't go," he murmured, leaning back in his chair with a weary sigh. "At least now, with Sachin around her, I can be at ease." His eyes closed briefly, as if to shut out the weight pressing on his chest.

Ruhana let out a quiet chuckle. "That's surprising. You've always given my brother such a hard time whenever it comes to Angel."

Vineet cracked one eye open, giving her a faint look. "Stop teasing," he muttered. "I never said I dislike him. I just don't want to see him with Angel. There's something about his secrets... it worries me." He exhaled and leaned back again, lost in thoughts.

Ruhana nodded quietly. Then, after a moment, Vineet straightened up. "Let's go somewhere," he said suddenly.

She frowned. "I can't. I have an exam tomorrow—I really need to study." Her voice carried a hint of regret.

He made a face, feigning disappointment. "Fine," he grumbled. "I'll pick you up after college tomorrow."

Ruhana smiled softly. "Okay."

"Also, tell your brother to pick up Angel after the exam. You won't be going back with her." He sank into his chair with a resigned sigh.

Ruhana nodded and turned toward the door. But just as she reached it, something tugged at her heart. She turned back, crossed the room, and wrapped her arms around him.

Vineet stiffened at first, startled, but then slowly relaxed. Ruhana held on a moment longer, blinking back the sudden sting in her eyes.

She stepped back, wiped away a tear before it could fall, and smiled.

“Bye,” she whispered. And before he could say a word, she turned and walked out of his office—still wondering why her heart had felt so heavy all of a sudden.

Chapter 35

Some Ties Never Die

It was evening when Ruhana entered the house. The lights were soft, and the faint smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the air. She followed it into the kitchen, where Sachin stood by the counter, calm as always, stirring a pot.

“Good evening, bhaiya,” she said softly, her voice carrying the tired sweetness of the day.

Sachin smiled faintly without turning. “Evening. Want some?” he asked, already reaching for another mug. He didn’t need to see her; he could always tell it was her — the rhythm of her footsteps, the tone of her greeting, even the way she sighed.

Ruhana nodded and leaned against the counter. “Hmm.”

He handed her a mug a moment later. “It’s your last exam tomorrow,” he said, stirring his own cup. “I’m planning a short trip after that — all five of us together.”

Ruhana’s face instantly lit up. “A trip? Seriously? That sounds perfect.” Then, after a beat, a teasing smile tugged at her lips. “Wait a second... when you say five, does that include Angel?”

Sachin gave her a side glance, trying to hide a faint smile. “Of course it does. Why wouldn’t it?”

Ruhana bit back a laugh. “Oh, no reason. Just making sure this ‘family trip’ isn’t secretly an Angel’s trip.”

Sachin exhaled through a quiet chuckle, shaking his head. "You think too much."

She smirked. "No, I just observe too well. My cold-blooded brother suddenly turns into a charming gentleman whenever her name comes up."

He raised an eyebrow, amused. "You're starting to sound like Kunal."

"That's a compliment," she said proudly. "At least I'm not blind to the obvious."

Sachin chuckled softly and handed her the sugar jar. "You need to focus on your last paper, not my life."

Ruhana took it with a playful grin. "I am focusing. Just multitasking."

He rolled his eyes, but his lips curved faintly — the rare kind of smile that softened everything about him. For a few quiet moments, they both sipped their coffee. The hum of the refrigerator, the ticking clock, and the aroma of roasted beans filled the silence between them — a peaceful, familiar silence that only existed between people who truly understood each other.

Ruhana looked at her brother — the man who once seemed unreachable even when standing right beside her. Now, he looked different. Still strong, still composed, but somehow gentler. The kind of calm that comes after years of holding everything together.

She smiled faintly, hiding it behind her mug. "You know, bhaiya... you're not that cold anymore."

Sachin raised an eyebrow. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," she said, half-laughing, half-serious, "you've finally started acting human. Maybe Angel's rubbing off on you."

Sachin chuckled again, low and genuine this time. “You’re impossible.”

Ruhana leaned back against the counter, watching him laugh — unguarded, warm, and real. “It suits you,” she said quietly. “Smiling like that.”

He looked at her for a moment, then said softly, “Maybe that’s because of you.”

Her grin faded into something tender. She didn’t answer — just smiled and took another sip of coffee to hide the sudden sting in her eyes. Sachin reached out and ruffled her hair gently. It was a small gesture, but it carried everything he never said aloud — affection, apology, pride.

And as the evening light spilled across the kitchen floor, with two coffee mugs between them and quiet laughter lingering in the air, Ruhana felt like — just for that moment — everything in their world was finally right again.

Sachin looked at Ruhana quietly, studying her expression. “What are you thinking about?” he asked, taking a slow sip of his coffee.

Ruhana turned toward him, her voice calm but sincere. “Bhaiya, I think you should stop fearing the things from the past. You have a happy future now... and we’re a happy family.” She reached out and gently patted his hand, a small but steady reassurance.

Sachin watched her for a moment, the corners of his mouth lifting in a faint smile. “Ruhana... you’ve become so mature,” he said softly. Then, after a pause, his tone dropped, more to himself than to her, “Don’t be like your mother.”

He sighed, his gaze lingering on her face — the same innocence, the same quiet strength that once belonged to

their mother. For a second, the silence between them felt heavier, lined with memories neither of them spoke about.

Ruhana looked at him, startled by the sudden mention. Questions flickered in her eyes, but she held them back. Some things, she knew, were better left unasked — at least for now.

She forced a smile, lightening her tone. “I’m an adult now, bhaiya. I’ve got to study,” she said playfully, picking up her books. “So... you’re on dinner duty tonight.”

Sachin let out a quiet chuckle. “As if I had a choice.”

Ruhana grinned, waving as she walked toward Angel’s room. The sound of her footsteps faded down the hallway, leaving behind a calm silence.

Sachin stood there for a moment, holding the empty mugs. He glanced toward the direction she’d gone, a small, content smile touching his lips — pride mixed with something softer, almost wistful.

Then, quietly, he carried the mugs back into the kitchen, the clink of porcelain echoing gently through the evening stillness.

Somewhere in another city, a middle-aged woman sat in a vast leather chair that seemed too large for the dim office. The room was half-shaded, lit by a single desk lamp that caught the sheen of her limited-edition dress. In one hand she balanced a sleek, advanced pistol; in the other, a phone that glowed against her knuckles.

A cluster of men stood before her; four others knelt, faces pale, eyes wide with fear. She leveled the gun at them with slow, practiced contempt—anger tightened the line of her mouth until it looked almost carved.

“We’re sorry, Your Highness,” one of the kneeling men whispered, voice shaking. “We failed to complete the task.”

She laughed once—short, cold. “You want me to forgive you?” Her voice snapped through the room like a whip. “You failed to abduct that child. And now she’s loose. I told you I wanted her here—alive.” The words landed like blows; the men flinched.

“Twenty-four hours,” she said, watching their faces. “It’s twelve here. Midnight tomorrow. If she isn’t here by then, consider this your last day on earth. Scram.”

Relief and terror warred on their features as they scrambled to their feet and fled. One man—her assistant—caught the pistol as it slipped from her hand and held it with bowed head; no one dared look up in her presence.

“They will not survive if they fail,” he muttered, voice low. “I’ve already sent more men.”

She only nodded, expression unreadable, then rose. Her silhouette moved through the dim room with the quiet certainty of a predator. The others fell in step behind her, their footsteps swallowed by the hush as the door closed on the faint glow of the desk lamp.

It was already past one in the night. Ruhana was still buried in her notes, her last exam looming tomorrow. Her eyes burned with exhaustion, but she refused to stop. The quiet rustle of pages filled the room until soft footsteps entered — unnoticed at first.

A familiar voice broke the silence. “Didn’t sleep yet?”

Ruhana turned and found Kunal standing there, holding two steaming mugs. A smile instantly brightened her

tired face. “You didn’t sleep either!” she teased as he placed one mug on her side table and sat beside her.

“Thank you, Bhaiya,” she said, grabbing the cup. “Exactly what I needed—caffeine and moral support.” She chuckled, taking a long sip.

Kunal smiled, ruffling her hair fondly. “Done with your revision?” He glanced at the chaos on the floor—books, notes, and sticky pads scattered everywhere. Ruhana had turned her mattress into a tiny battlefield of learning.

“Almost done,” she muttered, pouting. “But I’m stuck on one topic. It’s not sinking in.”

Kunal lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry, science is beyond me. I was a commerce guy, remember?” He smirked. “Go ask Angel—she’s your savior in these things.”

Ruhana gave him a dramatic look of disbelief. “Are you serious right now? I want to ask her, but Sachin Bhaiya will murder me if I interrupt their ‘couple time.’” She made a face, half teasing, half scandalized.

Kunal couldn’t help but laugh, shaking his head. “You and your imagination, Roo.”

Ruhana smiled, then suddenly her expression softened. “Angel must’ve slept by now, with those medicines. I’ll ask her in the morning.” She paused, growing oddly serious. “But... I actually wanted to ask you something.”

Her tone changed—calm, yet sharp. Kunal looked at her curiously. “What’s with you?” he asked, though a flicker of unease crossed his face. He wasn’t ready for questions that brushed against the past—a promise to Sachin bound him in silence.

Ruhana studied him closely. "Sachin Bhaiya had Payal in the past... destiny was cruel, but at least he had someone once. What about you? You've been alone all this time?"

The question hit harder than she realized. Kunal froze for a second before masking it with a half-smile. "What kind of question is that, Ruhana?" His tone came out sharper than intended.

Ruhana raised a brow. "Oh, so you do have a secret," she teased, folding her arms with a grin. "You could've just said no—but that defensive tone? That only happens when someone's hiding something."

He forced a smile, struggling to steady his voice. "It's nothing like that. You just caught me off guard, that's all."

Ruhana sighed. "Fine, keep your secrets. But I just want you to be happy, Bhaiya—to be loved like Sachin Bhaiya. See? He and I both have someone, but you're still single. Find me a sister-in-law soon, okay?" She tried to lighten the mood with a grin.

Kunal chuckled softly, but the heaviness in his eyes lingered. "I'll think about it," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Bhaiya..." Ruhana wasn't done.

He looked at her with a tired smile. "Hmm? Now what?"

"I asked Sachin Bhaiya, but he never answered. Maybe you can tell me..." She leaned closer, pleading with her eyes.

Kunal arched his brow. "Tell you what?"

"Do we have any family left? Anyone out there?" she asked, her voice small but hopeful.

The question froze him again. His jaw tightened, and the silence stretched heavy between them. He sighed and

shut his eyes for a moment before answering softly, "Ruhana, it's almost two. You've got an exam tomorrow. Go to sleep."

He stood quickly, his tone firm but his steps unsteady, and walked out before she could say anything more. Ruhana stared after him, confused and disappointed. She gathered her books quietly, switched off the lamp, and lay down on her mattress. Her heart felt oddly heavy. Within minutes, her tired eyes closed—but her mind wouldn't stop whispering the questions that no one ever answered.

Next Morning

The morning sun spilled softly through the curtains as the city woke to a new day. Ruhana and Angel left early for their final exam, while Sachin and Kunal headed to headquarters after dropping them off.

By noon, the two girls were walking out of the examination hall, exhausted but relieved. Angel's phone buzzed just as they stepped outside. She frowned while reading the message.

"Your brother deserves a strict scolding," Angel sighed. "He just texted — says he'll be late. Ask me to wait here."

Ruhana chuckled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Yeah, yeah. Just throw some tantrums when I get home tonight. That'll teach him." Then she smiled, spotting someone at the gate. "Anyway, I've got to go. Vineet's waiting."

Angel nodded with a grin. "Of course he is. Go, romantic girl. I'll wait till your brother comes."

Ruhana hesitated. "You sure? I can stay till he arrives."

“Don’t worry,” Angel started to say, but her words trailed off as a man in a crisp police uniform approached them.

“Ma’am,” he said politely, glancing at Angel. “Sir has sent me to pick you up.”

Angel and Ruhana exchanged a brief look. Angel smiled faintly. “Alright then. Bye, Ruhana.”

“Bye! Call me once you reach home,” Ruhana said, waving as Angel walked away with the officer.

As soon as Angel disappeared into the crowd, Ruhana turned toward the gate – and her eyes instantly lit up. Vineet stood beside his car, waiting with that familiar easy smile.

She couldn’t help it – she ran straight to him and threw her arms around his neck. Vineet laughed and lifted her off her feet, twirling her in a circle.

“Finally!” Ruhana squealed, her voice full of joy. “My graduation is officially over!”

A few students nearby turned their heads, whispering and recording the scene on their phones.

“Isn’t that Vineet Oberoi—the business tycoon?”

“Who’s the girl?”

“They look so cute together!”

Ruhana noticed the stares and tapped Vineet’s shoulder, whispering, “Put me down! Everyone’s watching.”

Vineet grinned, setting her gently on the ground. He glanced around at the curious crowd and spoke calmly, “Please – no photos or videos, if you don’t mind.”

The students lowered their phones, murmuring apologies. Vineet smiled faintly, then opened the car door for Ruhana with his usual quiet charm.

She slipped into the passenger seat, and he joined her behind the wheel. The car glided smoothly out of the campus gates – her laughter fading into the hum of the city as they drove away.

Evening – Sachin's House

It was almost evening when Ruhana returned home. The golden light filtering through the curtains gave the house quiet, sleepy warmth. She dropped her bag on the sofa and kicked off her shoes, her voice echoing softly through the hallway.

“Angel?”

No answer.

She frowned. The air felt strangely still. She checked Angel's room – the bed neatly made, her books still open on the table, the faint scent of her perfume lingering. No trace of her anywhere.

Ruhana peeked into every room – balcony, kitchen, even the garden – nothing.

Finally, she sighed and shook her head, a teasing smirk curving her lips. “So... madam went out on a date with Bhaiya, huh? How thoughtful.”

Smiling to herself, she went to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. The kettle hissed softly, filling the silence. Just as she took her first sip, the doorbell rang. She walked to the door, half expecting Angel or a food delivery. But when she opened it, her smile froze. Sachin and Kunal stood there. Their expressions were sharp, tired – but something in their eyes already felt wrong.

“Where's Angel?” Ruhana asked immediately.

Sachin frowned, confused. “She's not here?”

“What do you mean?” Ruhana blinked. “Your officer picked her up after the exam. She said you sent him.”

For a second, no one spoke. Then Sachin’s face changed — the warmth in his eyes vanished, replaced by something darker. “Ruhana,” he said slowly, his voice low and cold, “I sent no one.”

The coffee mug trembled in her hand. “What?”

“She was gone when I reached the college,” Sachin said, his voice now sharp with rising panic. “Whoever that was — it wasn’t my man.”

Ruhana’s breath caught. “But I saw him! He was wearing your department’s uniform!”

Kunal slammed his hand on the table. “Then where the hell is she now?”

The words hit the air like gunfire.

Sachin’s eyes narrowed, mind racing. His silence said more than his words ever could. “I know,” he finally whispered, almost to himself — but his voice carried dread. “I know exactly who’s behind this.”

The air thickened with tension. Just then, the front door opened again — Vineet stepped inside, his expression casual at first. But one look at them — Sachin shouting into his phone, Kunal frantically typing on his laptop, Ruhana pacing restlessly — and his face turned pale.

“What happened? Why does everyone look like this?” he demanded.

Ruhana turned toward him, her eyes wide and wet. “Angel’s missing.”

The words hit him like a slap. He froze, then staggered a step back before collapsing onto the couch. “Missing?” His voice cracked. “What do you mean, missing?”

Sachin barked into his phone, his tone like steel. “I want her exact location in fifteen minutes – check every highway camera, every city exit!”

Kunal’s eyes flicked up briefly. “This can’t be them... right?”

Sachin clenched his jaw. “It shouldn’t be. But if it is...” He trailed off, the unfinished thought hanging heavy in the air.

Elsewhere – Unknown Location

Angel’s head throbbed. She blinked slowly, her vision blurred – the world spinning around her in dizzy fragments of gray light and concrete walls.

A dull metallic sound echoed nearby—the slow drip of water hitting the floor. Her wrists ached; she looked down and saw them tied together with a thick plastic cord. Her mouth was dry, throat raw.

“Where... am I?” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

She was sitting on a metal chair, inside what looked like an old warehouse. The air smelled of rust and diesel. Shafts of pale sunlight filtered through cracks in the ceiling, catching the dust that hung heavy in the air.

Angel struggled, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. “Hello? Is anyone there?”

No answer.

She tried again, louder this time — fear cutting into her words. “Who are you? Why did you bring me here?”

Her mind raced — replaying the last thing she remembered. The man in uniform, the polite smile. “Ma’am, Sir has sent me to pick you.” She’d trusted that voice.

Her heart clenched. Sachin would never— A faint click broke her thought. A door creaked open somewhere behind her.

Stilettoes approached—slow, deliberate, their echoes slicing through the hollow silence. Angel’s pulse quickened, each click drawing closer, heavier, like a countdown she couldn’t stop.

A shadow fell over her.

“Finally awake?” The voice was calm, almost amused.

She lifted her gaze — a tall woman stood before her, dressed in some limited edition dress. A faint smile at her lips — elegant, almost deliberate. Her eyes were cold, calculating.

Angel glared. “Who the hell are you?”

The woman tilted her head slightly, studying her like a scientist examining a specimen. “I’m someone your boyfriend should have remembered.”

Angel’s stomach dropped. “Sachin?”

The woman smirked. “Interesting, Your thoughts, I meant him?” She stepped closer, crouching to meet Angel’s eyes level. “Yes sweetheart. I meant him, your protector — Senior Inspector Sachin Singh.”

Angel froze. “What... What do you want from me?”

“Not you,” the woman said softly. “You’re just the message and your absence already reaches his ears and the message is loud enough to shake him.” She laughed bitterly.

She stood, turning toward a table nearby. Angel’s eyes darted to it — several files, a burner phone, and a gun lay in neat arrangement. The woman picked up the phone and snapped a photo of Angel — bound, terrified, sitting in that dim light.

Angel’s voice trembled. “You think this will scare him?”

The woman turned back, her smile fading into something almost pitying. “Oh, I don’t want to scare him. I want to wake him up. He’s forgotten what he once was — and I’m here to remind him.”

Angel’s breath caught. “Who are you?”

The woman stepped closer, her eyes burning with quiet vengeance. “Someone he left behind,” she whispered.

Before Angel could speak again, a man pressed a small syringe into her arm. Angel gasped, her vision blurring. The last thing she saw was the woman’s cold, unwavering stare — before the world dissolved into blackness.

Sachin was barking into the phone, demanding Angel’s whereabouts. Kunal worked rapidly on his laptop, tracking her location. Nearby, Ruhana hovered anxiously while Vineet spoke urgently—calling the DIG to help search for his sister.

Amid the chaos, hurried footsteps echoed from outside. The door swung open.

Vikas and Pankaj Oberoi rushed in—breathless, shaken. Pankaj’s face was flushed with fury. Without a word, he

strode straight toward Sachin and raised his hand, ready to strike.

Then he stopped.

Sachin's eyes — cold, hollow, and brimming with restrained pain — froze him in place. The anger melted into silence.

For a long moment, no one moved.

Then Sachin turned to his brother. His voice was calm, but it carried quiet command.

"Kunal. Ruhana. We're leaving. Call Kshitij." Kunal nodded instantly, already dialing.

Ruhana—silent until now—stood frozen. It wasn't only Angel's sudden disappearance that unsettled her; it was the way her brother was reacting. The certainty in his voice made it clear—he already knew who was behind it. There was pain in his tone, sharp and unquestionable. And Kunal, who never followed blindly, obeyed without a word.

A chill ran through Ruhana. Fear for her friend mixed with something deeper... unfamiliar. For the first time, she felt uneasy—not about what was happening, but about who her brother had suddenly become.

Vikas stepped forward, his voice trembling with desperation. "Sir... please. Save her. She can't be another Payal." The name Payal didn't just silence the room—it unsettled it, like a door that should have stayed locked.

The room fell still. Vineet's head snapped up. Ruhana froze mid-breath. Neither had ever heard the name from Sachin's past spoken aloud by anyone else.

Sachin looked at Vikas, his expression unreadable — but his eyes, for a moment, betrayed the shadow of an old

wound. He took Vikas's hands quietly. "Nothing will happen to her," he said, every word heavy with conviction.

"I can arrange my private jet for you," Vikas offered quickly, almost pleading.

Sachin gave a faint, humorless smile. "Do you really think I need that?"

Vikas swallowed. "I thought... after all these years, you'd cut yourself off from everything."

Sachin turned toward the door, slipping his jacket on, his voice a low murmur as he walked past. "Some ties," he said, his tone chillingly calm, "never die."

The door shut behind him — leaving behind silence, fear, and the echo of the man he once was.

Author's Note (Part One)

Some truths don't disappear. They wait.

What you have witnessed is not the beginning of the hunt—it is the return of a man who once buried himself to survive.

In Part Two, the past will no longer stay silent.