

In The
Still of
You

In the Quiet, We Found Each Other

GURSHEEN KAUR



BlueRoseONE^{com}
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Gursheen Kaur 2025

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



BlueRoseONE[®]
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7542-829-9

Cover Design: Aafiya Saifi

Typesetting: Manisha Rawat

First Edition: December 2025

Dedication



For the ones who loved deeply,

even when it broke them.

For those still learning how to let go and stay.

Preface



Grief doesn't always come dressed as loss.

Sometimes, it lingers in the corners of your mind, wearing the face of someone you once loved, whispering, convincing, refusing to leave.

This story began as an attempt to understand that silence. The kind that follows trauma, love, and everything in between. It's about a woman named Meher, but it could be anyone who has ever tried to rebuild themselves after the world shifted beneath their feet.

In the Still of You isn't a love story, at least, not the kind we're taught to chase. It's a story about the love that breaks you, the ghosts that stay, and the long, trembling journey back to yourself.

If you've ever carried someone in your head long after they were gone,

If you've ever mistaken pain for proof of connection,

If you've ever had to let go of a voice that once felt like home,

This is for you.

— Gursheen Kaur

Acknowledgement



This book would not exist without the people who held me when I could not hold myself.

To my parents, your love has been the quiet rhythm beneath every chapter of my life.

To Karan, for every conversation, every late-night reassurance, every moment you reminded me to breathe. Your friendship is the reason I kept writing.

And to every reader who finds a fragment of their pain here, I hope you also find a fragment of peace.

Prologue



The night he died, I heard his voice for the first time.

Not through the phone. Not in a dream.

Just a whisper, soft, fractured, slipping through the static of my mind.

"Meher..."

That was all. Just my name. But it was enough to split something open inside me.

The world outside my window was quiet, too quiet. The city had stilled, as though holding its breath with me. Somewhere, a siren wailed and faded into the dark. My hands wouldn't stop shaking. I didn't know yet that his car had crashed, or that his parents were gone, or that by morning, I would no longer know how to live without him.

I only knew that something had left or maybe something had stayed.

For days after, I could still hear him.

In the hum of the ceiling fan. In the rhythm of rain against glass. In the pauses between my breaths. His voice wasn't gone; it had just moved inward.

People said it was grief. Trauma. The mind's way of coping.

But I knew better.

Raman had never really left. He had just found another way to exist: inside me.

And sometimes, late at night, when the world went still again,

I could still feel him watching.

Waiting.

Contents



Chapter 1.....	1
Chapter 2.....	8
Chapter 3.....	14
Chapter 4.....	22
Chapter 5.....	28
Chapter 6.....	38
Chapter 7.....	42
Chapter 8.....	48
Chapter 9.....	54
Chapter 10.....	66
Chapter 11.....	77
Chapter 12.....	84
Chapter 13.....	91
Chapter 14.....	104
Chapter 15.....	116
Chapter 16.....	124
Chapter 17.....	136

Chapter 18.....	142
Chapter 19.....	153
Epilogue — Karan’s Voice	165

Chapter 1



The glass doors of Indira Gandhi International Airport sighed open, releasing me into the night. The air hit me like a body — thick, gritty, heavy with dust and heat. My lungs tightened, rebelling against it after hours of breathing the sterile chill of an air-conditioned plane. It wasn't pleasant, not exactly, but it was mine. My country's breath — stubborn, unapologetic, familiar.

I paused just past the exit, fingers tightening around the suitcase handle. Ahead of me, the crowd pressed forward — families, cab drivers with cardboard signs, hotel agents whispering promises. Everyone seemed to belong to someone. Children shrieked as they were scooped up into arms, aunties clucked over luggage trolleys, and cousins laughed while comparing who had grown taller.

And I stood still among them, my suitcase rattling beside me like a restless child.

Five years.

Five years since I'd walked out of this airport, swearing I wouldn't come back. I'd imagined this moment differently — a triumphant return, a grown woman who had made it on her own. Instead, all I felt was that tightness in my throat. Not sadness. Not joy. Something brittle in between.

My phone buzzed, and I snatched it up like a lifeline.

Raman: "Just a couple of hours."

I scowled, thumbs flying.

Me: "A couple of hours?? I'm starving now. Come fast, na."

Raman: "Coming, coming."

My lips curled despite themselves. Same old Raman. Same lazy excuses, same careless tone that somehow felt like safety. I slipped the phone back into my bag, hugging my scarf tighter. My eyes drifted over the crowd again, though I knew none of them were here for me.

Except him. Always him.

An announcement crackled overhead, distorted by static, a late-night departure to Dubai. I closed my eyes for a moment, listening. Those metallic voices, half-intelligible, had been the background score of my last five years. Airports, transit lounges, waiting halls. I knew their cadence better than I knew my father's voice.

My father.

The thought was an intruder. I stiffened, opening my eyes abruptly. I turned back toward the exit doors, refusing to give it more ground.

The crowd had thinned by now. Suitcases rolled away, embraces broke apart. I tapped my foot, growing restless. Checked my phone again. No new messages. I typed furiously.

Me: "Where are you??"

The reply came instantly.

Raman: “Don’t get hyper. I said I’m coming.”

I let out a huff — half irritated, half relieved. He hadn’t changed. Always unpunctual, always too casual, and yet I couldn’t remember a single time he hadn’t shown up eventually. That was Raman’s paradox: unreliable and dependable in the same breath.

“Oyee!”

The voice cut through the hum of the airport like sunlight through curtains.

I spun around, suitcase wobbling. There he was — tall, lean, weaving through the last stragglers with that loose gait that was more slouch than stride. His shirt was wrinkled, his hair slightly mussed, as he’d just woken from a nap instead of picking someone up from the airport. But his grin was wide enough to make the fluorescent lights look softer.

My throat tightened. For a heartbeat, I forgot how to move.

Then I marched forward, eyes blazing. “Where the hell were you? I’ve been waiting for an hour.”

“Traffic,” he said solemnly, as if it were the punchline to a private joke. “The universe was conspiring against me.”

“The universe, or just your laziness?”

“Maybe both.”

The years crumbled in an instant. It was like stepping back into an old pair of shoes, familiar grooves pressing against my soles. We didn’t need to warm up. We didn’t need to catch up. The pause button had simply unpaused.

“You’re still stupid,” I muttered.

“Excuse me?” He leaned closer, cupping his ear.

“Nothing.” I tried not to smile, and failed. “Come on. Our train’s in the morning. If I don’t eat soon, I’ll faint right here and embarrass you.”

He threw an arm dramatically around my shoulders, steering me toward the taxi queue. “Then let’s rescue your royal stomach before the tragedy of the century strikes Delhi.”

The cab smelled of half-burnt incense sticks and old upholstery. The driver barely glanced at us before pulling into the thick, humming traffic. I leaned against the window, forehead pressed to the glass.

Delhi at night was different — quieter, stripped of its usual roar, but alive in subtler ways. Stray dogs prowled in packs. Tea stalls glowed like tiny islands on street corners. The air was heavy with dust, exhaust, and a sweetness I couldn’t place — maybe jasmine, maybe smoke.

“It’s smaller than I remembered,” I murmured.

“What is?” Raman asked.

“Everything. The streets, the buildings. I thought they were massive when I was a kid.”

“Maybe you grew taller.” He smirked. “Now the world looks small.”

I shot him a look, but he only chuckled.

The cab bumped over a pothole, jolting me upright. Abroad, the roads had been smooth, predictable. Here, nothing was predictable.

"You missed it," Raman said softly, watching me.

"Missed what?"

"This. The potholes, the broken lights, the chaos. Admit it."

My lips twitched. "Maybe a little."

We stopped near Connaught Place, outside a small restaurant that looked half asleep. Its neon sign flickered like it was arguing with the dark. Inside, the fluorescent tube lights buzzed overhead like trapped insects. Plastic chairs scraped the tiled floor. A television in the corner played an old Bollywood movie at low volume.

I collapsed into a chair, sighing. My stomach growled audibly.

"See?" Raman leaned back with a smug grin. "I told you. Royal stomach."

"Shut up. Order something before I faint."

"Chow mein, pizza, sandwich, fries," he said automatically.

I blinked. "That's four meals."

"Correction: two meals each." He grinned. "I'm starving too."

"You're insane." I laughed despite myself. "Fine. But if I explode, it's your fault."

I flagged down a waiter, rattled off the order. The man scribbled without expression, then shuffled away.

I pulled out my phone, thumbing through notifications. Raman rested his chin on his hand, watching me with an unreadable expression. His eyes had always been like that — like he was about to say something that mattered but never quite did. I avoided his gaze, scrolling faster.

When the food arrived, the smell was glorious, greasy, spicy, and comforting. I grabbed a slice of pizza, bit into it, devouring it in two gulps.

Raman laughed so hard he nearly toppled the chair. “You’ve been away too long. Pizza’s not meant to be inhaled.”

I glared at him with my mouth full. “Hungry. Don’t judge.”

By 3:30 a.m., we sat on a wooden bench on the platform at New Delhi Railway Station. Our bags lay in a heap at our feet. The place was almost deserted, a few scattered travelers, a chai seller half-asleep, a drunk snoring two benches away.

I leaned back, exhaling slowly. The iron rails gleamed faintly under the dim platform lights. Somewhere in the distance, a train horn wailed, low and mournful.

I breathed in the smell of dust and iron and cardamom, carried on the steam from a nearby tea stall. For the first time in years, I felt... something. Not happiness, not relief, but a looseness in my chest as if the weight I’d carried across continents had shifted, even if only by an inch.

I glanced at Raman. He was humming an old tune under his breath, tapping his knee in rhythm. I remembered that habit he used to do in classrooms, on buses, and even during fights. The sound filled the silence, making it bearable.

My eyes softened. Maybe this was enough. Maybe this was what I'd come back for — not my family, not the city, but this. Him.

And yet, under it all, a strange unease pressed against my chest. A sense that something wasn't quite right, though I couldn't name it.

Maybe it was just the lateness of the hour. Maybe it was jet lag. Maybe it was him.

I shook the thought away and forced myself to smile. For tonight, I decided, I would let myself feel whole again.

Chapter 2



The rattle of the train seeped into my dreams — steel wheels grinding against steel rails, a metallic rhythm that seemed to enter my body, syncing with my pulse. I stirred, eyelids fluttering open.

My cheek was pressed against something warm. It took me a second to realize it was Raman's shoulder.

The intimacy of the position startled me awake. I sat upright so suddenly that the seat creaked. My hair fell into my eyes, and I brushed it back quickly, trying to hide the heat rushing to my cheeks.

"Finally awake?" Raman's voice was lazy, amused.

"I wasn't asleep," I muttered.

"Of course not. You were just... resting your entire head on me for two hours."

I shot him a look. "You could've woken me up."

"And miss the only time you're quiet? No way."

I tried not to smile, but failed. His grin widened in triumph.

Outside the barred window, the sky was just beginning to pale. The horizon glowed a soft orange field stretching endlessly, dotted with trees that looked like dark ink blots. Early morning fog clung to the earth like a ghostly shawl.

Occasionally, the train sped past villages' tiny stations with peeling paint, hand-painted boards, and stray dogs asleep under benches.

A chai vendor shuffled down the aisle, kettle swinging dangerously, cups clinking together. "Chai, chai, garam chai!" His sing-song voice cut through the sleepy compartment.

My stomach growled.

Raman smirked. "Royal stomach again?"

"Shut up."

I waved the vendor over and ordered two cups. The steaming liquid smelled of cardamom and ginger, strong enough to wake the dead. I cupped it carefully, savoring the heat against my palms. One sip burned my tongue, but I didn't care.

"This," I sighed. "This I missed."

Raman leaned back, watching me with a softness that made me uneasy. "See? India isn't so bad."

We sat in companionable silence for a while, listening to the clatter of wheels. Then his tone shifted.

"Are you going home?"

The words landed heavily. I stiffened.

"No." The answer came out sharper than I meant.

He tilted his head. "Then where?"

"I booked a hotel. Near the old neighborhood."

"You're seriously not going to tell them you're here?"

"Why should I?" I kept my eyes on the window, on the blur of mustard fields rushing past.

"Because..." He hesitated, his hand curling into a fist on his knee. "Because they're your parents."

"They stopped being my parents a long time ago."

The train clattered noisily, as if underlining the silence that followed. My mind betrayed me, dragging me back five years.

The night had smelled of kerosene and burnt food. My father had been shouting about my grades, my "attitude," the way I was wasting money on classes he didn't approve of. My mother had tried to intervene, but only with weak, useless phrases like, *"Let it be, she's young."* They did nothing to soften the blows.

And then came the words that sealed everything:

"You think you're too smart? Too independent? Get out then! Do whatever you want, but don't call this house your home!"

I'd stormed out with nothing but a backpack. No one had followed. Not that night, not the next morning, not ever.

I bit my lip until I tasted blood, forcing the memory back into its cage.

By the time the train screeched into Jaipur station at eleven, the sun was high and merciless. Heat shimmered off the platform. Porters shouted, passengers shoved, hawkers waved bottles of water and samosas in travelers' faces.

I gripped my suitcase, overwhelmed by the chaos. Abroad, stations had been orderly, sterile. Here, life spilled over everything: children weaving through legs, beggars tugging at sleeves, vendors balancing trays of snacks on their heads.

Raman stayed close, his hand hovering near my elbow like he might grab me if I stumbled. Protective, always. Sometimes annoyingly so.

“Hotel first,” he declared.

“I can go alone—”

“No chance.” His tone left no room for argument.

I wanted to snap at him, but the heat and noise drained whatever defiance I had left. I let him hail a cab.

The hotel was beautiful — all glass and gold accents, the kind that smelled faintly of jasmine and new linen. Warm light spilled across the marble floors, and the receptionist greeted me with a practiced smile that almost felt kind. As I gave my name, she nodded, swift and efficient. The soft clink of keys followed, a small, satisfying sound that promised comfort.

Raman leaned casually on the counter, making faces at me like a bored child. I almost laughed, signing the form. But something about the scene felt... off. The receptionist never once looked at Raman. Not when I entered with him, not when I gestured toward him. Her eyes slid right past him, like he wasn't there at all.

I shook the thought away. Maybe she was just tired.

The room was elegant with soft lighting, crisp white sheets, and floor-to-ceiling curtains that swayed gently in the air conditioning. I set my suitcase down, breathing in the faint scent of sandalwood. The AC purred quietly, wrapping the room in a steady, comforting coolness.

When I turned around, Raman was sitting on the bed, arms crossed, gaze fixed on me.

"What?" I asked.

"We need to talk."

"Not now. I'm tired."

"Meher." His tone sharpened. "Five years. You can't keep running. They're your parents. They made mistakes, but—"

My chest tightened. "Don't."

"You have to forgive—"

"Don't you dare tell me what I have to do!" My voice cracked. "Do you know what it felt like? To be told to leave, to never be called back? To hear everyone whispering, laughing—"

The words tore out of me, jagged and raw. "*Your boyfriend is now your brother*, they said. Do you know what that does to a person? To feel dirty for something that wasn't even your fault?"

My hands trembled. Tears burned behind my eyes. I pressed my palms to my ears, trying to shut out the echoes.

Raman rose quickly, startled. He knelt in front of me, gently pulling my hands down. "Hey. Stop. I know. I was there. I

heard it too. But we survived. That accident, those rumors, they don't define us. Please. Let it go."

"I can't," I whispered.

Silence settled between us. The AC hummed. Somewhere outside, a horn blared faintly.

Finally, Raman sighed. "Fine. I won't push. But this isn't over."

"Got it," I murmured, exhausted.

After he left the room or maybe after I simply stopped noticing him, I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

My phone buzzed. I snatched it up.

Karan: "Welcome back, Miss NRI."

Relief spread through me like warmth. "How do you know I am in India?"

"I know you better than you know yourself."

I smiled. "When are we meeting?"

"Whenever you're free."

"Four o'clock. Chai Bagh!"

"Done. And if you're late, I'll kick your ass."

I laughed. "Okay, baba. See you."

When the call ended, I stared at my reflection in the black phone screen. My eyes looked tired, older than they should be for someone in her twenties.

But for the first time that day, I felt steady.

Because tomorrow, there will be Karan.

Chapter 3



The hotel room's air felt fresh, tinged with the clean scent of jasmine and new linen. I'd tried to pass the hours by unpacking, then rearranging everything again, then lying down to watch the soft play of city lights filtering through the curtains. The city outside was alive, not too loud, but steady, like a heartbeat I could almost match my breath to. Still, sleep refused to come. By half-past three, I gave up, splashed my face with cold water, and pulled on jeans and a loose cotton kurta.

I hadn't dressed up — no lipstick, no jewelry, just kajal smudged lightly at the corners of my eyes, but when I caught my reflection in the mirror, a dull ache tugged at me. I looked older than I remembered: the skin around my eyes faintly creased, my mouth set in lines of habit. I touched my cheek as though smoothing out the years could undo them.

"Ready?" Raman's voice came from the doorway, his grin annoyingly wide, his shoulders cocked like he'd been waiting to tease.

"You don't need to come," I muttered.

"Who said anything about need?" He winked. "I want to see Karan too. Been forever."

I didn't bother answering. I grabbed my bag and brushed past him, ignoring the way his laughter followed me into the corridor.

The streets slapped me with heat and noise. Dust curled up in spirals from auto-rickshaws weaving dangerously close to one another. Vendors shouted over one another — chai, roasted peanuts, cheap toys — their voices tangled with honking buses and ringing cycle bells. The air smelled like frying pakoras, incense, and sweat. I hailed an auto, climbed in, and gave the driver directions to Chai Bagh. My words nearly vanished in the din.

Raman plopped in beside me, his knee brushing mine, humming some tuneless song. I kept my eyes fixed outside at shuttered shops painted in peeling blues and reds, at new malls rising where old cinemas used to be, at cows chewing grass as though immune to human urgency. Jaipur felt strange yet familiar, like an old friend whose voice I knew but whose face had changed.

By the time the auto stopped, my palms were damp.

Chai Bagh stood like a relic that refused to move with time. The green paint had faded, the lettering chipped, but the smell hit me like a memory: buttered buns, strong chai, onions sizzling on a tawa. My knees almost weakened not from hunger, but recognition.

And then I saw him.

Karan leaned against the counter, a glass of chai in one hand, his phone in the other. His hair was neater than I remembered, parted carefully, and his shirt tucked crisply

into trousers, making him look like he was on his way to a client meeting. He'd always had that air of precision, as though he belonged in places larger than this tea shop.

But the moment he saw me, his face cracked into a grin, and he abandoned the phone. The seriousness melted away, and he raised both arms as though the years between us had been no more than days.

I laughed — a startled, unsteady sound, and before I knew it, I was walking straight into his hug.

"The NRI fairy returns," he said, squeezing so tightly I wheezed.

"You haven't changed at all."

"Liar. I've lost hair and gained patience. Both because of you."

I smacked his arm. "Still the same idiot."

We found a bench by the window, the wood polished smooth by decades of elbows. Before I could speak, he waved down the waiter and ordered bun maska and two chai. He remembered — too much.

"So," he said, leaning back, eyes glinting. "How does Jaipur feel?"

"Strange," I admitted. "Like I know it, but it doesn't know me anymore."

"That's what happens when you abandon us."

"Abandon?" I scoffed. "I left to work, Karan. To build a life."

"You call hiding a life?" His smile was playful, but something flickered in his eyes.

I rolled my eyes and tore into the bun maska. He shook his head, watching me wolf it down like I hadn't eaten in days.

"Still the same glutton," he said.

"Better than being the same neat freak," I shot back, pointing to the way he wiped the edge of his glass before drinking.

We fell into rhythm quickly. We teased, remembered, and laughed at things no one else would have understood. He asked if I still got sick on buses. I asked if he still corrected teachers. Then I suddenly burst out laughing so hard I choked.

"Do you remember CPT class?" I gasped.

He groaned. "Please don't."

"You forgot your book," I giggled. "The teacher threw you out. And you sat outside pretending to be busy on your phone."

"You were staring at me," he said smugly.

"I was not!"

"You were. And when I caught you, you looked like you'd swallowed a bug. That was the start of our friendship — me being right, you being embarrassed. Same dynamic ever since."

Suddenly, Raman slid into the seat beside me, giving me a grin.

"I told you—" I began, but he waved me off. "I was bored. And you know you can't survive without me."

Karan's smile faltered. His eyes darted in suspicion. He said nothing, but the air thickened.

I tried to shake it off. "So, tell me about work," I said too brightly.

He obliged, launching into a story about a disastrous client meeting, the projector failing, the internet dying, and his boss fainting in the heat. His mimicry was perfect, and I doubled over laughing until my eyes watered. Raman slapped the table, howling exaggeratedly.

But when my laughter quieted, I saw Karan's face. He wasn't laughing. He was watching me, really watching, like he was trying to see what had changed.

"What?" I asked.

"You're... different," he said.

"Different how?"

"Distracted."

"I'm jet-lagged," I lied.

He didn't argue, but the silence lingered.

I stood abruptly. "Let's walk. I want to see the streets again."

Outside, twilight had wrapped the city in pink-orange and indigo. Vendors shouted louder, oil hissed in deep pans, and lanterns swayed gently in the warm air.

We walked without purpose. Karan pointed out the new malls, banks, and mobile stores. I pointed out the stubbornly old — the tailor's signboard, the same cracked pavement. Raman made faces at cows until I doubled over laughing. For a few minutes, it almost felt easy.

Then the pani puri vendor called out, and I darted forward. "Challenge time. Loser pays."

Soon we were both leaning over the cart, mouths open as the vendor filled puris and popped them one after another. I coughed after the first — the chili burned my tongue, but I refused to give up. Karan egged me on. Water dripping down his chin as he devoured his fifth.

Raman stood aside, arms crossed, amused but uneasy. "Some things don't change," he murmured.

When I finally surrendered, sputtering, Karan crowed in triumph. "Still the champ!"

I smacked his arm, laughing breathlessly until I caught Raman's eyes. His smile was thin.

"Want some?" I asked, offering a puri.

"I'll pass," he said softly. But the way he looked at me made my chest tighten.

Later, as we passed a narrow bookstore wedged between two clothing shops, I slowed. The dusty window and crooked sign pulled me back to afternoons spent thumbing through books I couldn't afford. I pushed the door open, inhaling that musty scent of paper and nostalgia.

I ran my fingers along the spines, smiling. Raman leaned close. “You still read this cheesy stuff?”

“It’s not cheesy,” I protested.

Karan’s gaze softened. “You used to hide them inside your course books.”

My cheeks warmed. I remembered — the teasing, yes, but also the day he’d defended me when a classmate mocked my poems. His voice had sliced through the room, and I’d never forgotten the silence that followed.

I almost wanted to thank him now, but the words stuck.

When we stepped out again, strings of yellow bulbs had lit up the street. We passed our old coaching center — shuttered now, weeds curling around the gate. Something cracked open inside me. I remembered waiting there with Karan, notebooks balanced on our knees, him teasing my handwriting. The fear, the exhaustion, the wild hope of leaving this city — all of it rushed back.

“It feels like another lifetime,” I whispered.

Karan’s hand brushed mine. “We were kids.”

“And look at us now,” Raman cut in, grinning. “Still the same.”

But his grin looked too sharp.

We ended up at a chai stall, sitting on a low wall as the city hummed, traffic roaring, cups clinking, a faint hymn drifting from a temple. For a moment, I wanted to tell Karan everything — what pressed at the edges of my silence.

But before I could speak, Raman draped his arm around my shoulders, tugging me close.

“Don’t get sentimental,” he teased. “You’ll scare him away.”

Karan’s eyes flicked; he said nothing, but his gaze said enough. He saw me slipping, even if he didn’t yet know what.

So I laughed, because laughter was easier than truth.

But the city didn’t laugh with me. It hummed restless, waiting, as if holding its breath for what came next.

Chapter 4



The night had softened into velvet warm air carrying the weight of roasted corn and incense. Streetlights flickered, casting long ribbons of shadow across the pavement. I felt caught between past and present, clinging to laughter as if it could hold the night steady, as if I could freeze this fragile return.

We wandered from one crowded lane to another, weaving through the press of people. Karan walked beside me, tall and silent, his face unreadable. Raman lingered close, his shoulder brushing mine every now and then, his grin sharper now, edged with something almost challenging.

At a kulfi cart, the vendor shaved ice into a steel mold, syrup spilling over in jewel tones. Without thinking, I ordered two and handed one to Karan.

"You still hate sweets?" I teased, the old rhythm spilling out of me before I could stop it.

He gave the faintest smile. "I don't hate them. Just never saw the point."

"Still the boring Investment Banker."

"Still the reckless dreamer."

We moved on. At a corner stall, balloons swayed overhead — animals, hearts, stars; glowing softly under the yellow

bulbs. I slowed, half-laughing at the sight of a pink elephant bobbing above the vendor's head.

"You always wanted one," Raman said. "Let's get one now. Tie it to your wrist like when you were sixteen."

I started to reply, but Karan's voice cut in, low. "You've outgrown balloons, Meher."

Something inside me tightened. I looked between them — Raman's smirk, Karan's calm, and suddenly the air felt thinner. Raman's smile slipped into something else, sharp and almost smug.

We didn't buy a balloon.

Eventually, we found a low wall by the old city gate and sat down with clay cups of chai. The tea was scalding, fragrant with cardamom. The rough wall scraped beneath my palms, grounding me, though not enough.

Karan cleared his throat. "Why didn't you tell anyone you were coming back?"

My stomach sank. I kept my eyes on the cup. "You know why."

"They're still your parents."

"They were never mine."

Raman's knee pressed against mine, his hand curling around my fingers — firm, protective. "You don't have to answer him," he murmured. "He doesn't understand."

I opened my mouth to respond, but Karan's voice rose slightly, as if pushing through something unspeakable. "I do

understand. You're running. And sooner or later, you'll have to stop."

"Don't," I whispered.

"Don't what?"

"Don't start this. Not tonight."

Raman's grip on my hand tightened. "See? She doesn't want to talk about it."

I blinked at Karan, waiting for him to argue, but he didn't. He just stared, his jaw tight, his silence louder than anything he could've said. He didn't even acknowledge Raman, and for a moment, something in the air shifted — dissonant and strange.

When the cups were empty, Karan stood abruptly. "I'll walk you back."

The walk to the hotel felt different from before. The neon lights seemed harsher, the noise more suffocating. Raman filled the air with jokes about billboards and passersby, but Karan stayed silent, each step heavier than the last. I tried to laugh, to keep the rhythm alive, but even to my own ears, the sound rang false.

At the hotel entrance, Karan paused. The glow from the sign overhead carved his face into shadow and light.

"Sleep well," he said finally.

"You too."

His gaze lingered, searching mine for something. I opened my mouth to say... I don't even know what. But he only nodded once, turned, and disappeared into the crowd.

Raman leaned against the doorway, his smile thin. "He worries too much. Always has. You don't need him."

I said nothing. My eyes stayed fixed on the spot where Karan had vanished, a dull ache pressing behind my ribs — one I didn't want to name.

Inside, the hotel room felt larger than before — too empty despite Raman dropping lazily onto the bed, stretching like he owned the place.

"You let him get under your skin," he said.

"I didn't." I set my bag down harder than I meant to.

"You did. Always defending him. Always listening to him. What about me, huh?" His voice was playful, but there was an edge beneath it that made my stomach twist. "I'm here too."

"You're overthinking," I muttered, kicking off my shoes.

He sat up sharply, grabbing my wrist as I passed. "No. You're underthinking. He's not the one who stayed, Meher. I did. Remember that."

My pulse thudded against his grip, but when I looked at him, there was no anger on his face — only that crooked smile, the one that used to make me feel safe. I pulled my hand free gently and sank into the chair by the window.

Outside, the city buzzed horns, footsteps, a distant temple bell — indifferent to everything burning inside me. I pressed my forehead to the glass, eyes stinging.

My phone buzzed. A message from Karan:

You don't have to talk now. But you can't keep running forever. I'm here when you're ready.

I stared at the screen until my vision blurred. Behind me, Raman's laugh curled low but soft, mocking, possessive.

"You don't need him," he said again. "You only need me."

I turned the phone face down on the table.

I didn't answer. My throat felt dry. I crawled under the sheets, phone still buzzing faintly against the table, my body heavy with exhaustion. The last thing I remember was Raman's silhouette against the window, city lights bleeding through him like smoke.

I must've drifted off for a few hours — or maybe I didn't. My head ached. The curtains hadn't moved, but the light outside looked different now.

My phone buzzed again. Karan's name blinked on the screen.

"Hey," he said, his voice cutting through the static. "You sound off. You okay?"

"Yeah, just... Raman said I—" I stopped mid-sentence.

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"I said," Yeah, why?"

"Idiot, before that. You said *Raman*, right?"

My pulse stuttered. "Of course!"

Silence. Then his voice, uneasy. "Are you serious? You came with Raman or... someone else?"

"You think I'm crazy? Of course, I came with Raman."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"Meher," Karan said slowly, "did you stop taking your depression meds?"

I tried to laugh. "Yeah, it's been a year. The doctor said I didn't need them anymore."

"Oh."

"Leave it," I said quickly, forcing lightness into my tone.

Behind me, Raman's voice brushed my ear, almost playful.

"See? He can't see me."

My hand froze around the phone. The line crackled softly.

"Meher?" Karan's voice came distant. "Are you still there?"

I stared at the window — empty. Or maybe not.

"Yeah," I whispered. "Still here."

Chapter 5



The hotel room was too quiet when morning came. Jaipur sunlight forced its way between the curtains, bright and merciless. I buried my head under the pillow, groaning.

A weight pressed down on my arm. “Up,” Raman’s voice teased. “Lazybones. Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

I peeked out, hair in disarray. “Don’t remind me.”

“Back to the grind, back to the glorious world of missed deadlines and coffee stains. How thrilling.” He yawned theatrically. “Want me to come? I can heckle your boss from the corner.”

“Please don’t,” I muttered, pulling myself upright. My stomach swirled with nerves. It had been so long since I’d sat at a desk, written something that mattered to anyone but myself. Karan had been the one pushing me toward it. “Routine will help. Work will give you back your anchor,” he’d said. I wasn’t sure he was right, but I’d said yes anyway, if only to quiet him.

The agency occupied the twelfth floor of a sleek glass building, the kind that caught the morning light and scattered it like silver. The moment the elevator doors slid open, the scent of fresh coffee and polished wood filled the air.

Inside, the office was a quiet hum of order — minimalist and modern, all clean lines and soft lighting. Rows of workstations glowed under warm pendant lamps, and the glass-walled meeting rooms gleamed with the names of global clients etched on their doors. The walls were dotted with framed campaign posters, sharp, clever, award-winning.

A digital screen looped the latest ad reels near reception, while soft lo-fi music played in the background. People moved with purpose — headsets on, laptops open, words like “strategy,” “insight,” and “pitch” floating through the air. The whole place smelled faintly of ambition and roasted coffee beans: the perfume of every big MNC that thrived on deadlines and dreams.

I hesitated just inside the door, my tote bag clutched to my side, until a girl with electric-pink lipstick and a dozen bangles jingling on her wrist waved me over.

“Hi! You’re Meher, right? First day?” The girl was all warmth. “I’m Sunita. Come, I’ll rescue you from looking lost.”

Sunita led me through the wide, open floor, a maze of glass partitions, sleek desks, and glowing monitors. “That’s finance in the corner. Talk to them only if you enjoy Excel trauma. That’s the social media team, they speak fluent hashtags. And this—” She stopped beside a polished workstation tucked near the window, sunlight spilling across dual monitors and a tiny succulent in a white ceramic pot. “This is you.”

I set my bag down on the ergonomic chair, glancing around at the minimalist setup — a neatly coiled charger, a framed quote about storytelling, and a faint trace of perfume from whoever had used the desk last. “It looks... perfect,” I said, half in disbelief.

Sunita smirked. “Don’t get too comfortable. The espresso machine breaks down every Monday, and our Slack never sleeps.”

From behind her, Raman leaned against the shelf, arms folded. “Charming. Truly, the empire you deserve.”

My hand froze halfway to the desk. For a second, I thought I’d misheard him. But then he shifted — the faint scrape of his shoe against the floor, the glint of amusement in his eyes. My stomach lurched.

What was he doing here? How had he even gotten in? The security desk downstairs, the scanners, the ID checks — no one could just *walk* into this place. I darted a glance at Sunita, but she was scrolling through her phone, completely unfazed. No flicker of recognition, no sign that she’d seen him standing right there.

“Sunita,” I started, voice thin, “who—”

She looked up, eyebrows raised. “Hmm?”

But Raman was still there. Still smirking. Still watching me like he always did.

A chill crept up my arms. Either everyone was ignoring him... or they couldn’t see him at all.

I blinked hard. Once. Twice. When I opened my eyes again, he was gone.

Just... gone.

By noon, I was drowning in introductions. Names slid over me like water — Ankit from design, Neha from SEO, someone called Deep who already wanted to borrow my charger. The work culture was easy, too easy, like everyone was part of a loud extended family.

In the break room, the smell of Maggi noodles and cutting chai clung thick to the air. A faded poster about “TEAM SYNERGY” flapped against the wall every time the fan groaned.

That’s when I noticed him.

Square-jawed, dark hair combed with precision, sleeves rolled neatly to his elbows, Raj stood at the head of the table as he belonged there. Phone in one hand, a marker in the other, he pointed to a whiteboard crowded with scribbles.

“This week’s campaign won’t carry on SEO keywords alone. We need sharper hooks. Narrative, not noise.” His voice was steady, clipped, practiced without sounding rehearsed.

Then his eyes swept the room, pausing on me. Not a casual glance — a pause, deliberate. “New face?”

Sunita nudged my elbow. “This is our fresh blood. Meher, content.”

Raj nodded once. “Welcome.” His mouth quivered, just short of a smile. “Hope you don’t get scared easily.”

The room chuckled. I ducked my head, but my cheeks burned.

Beside me, Raman scoffed. “Formal shirt, formal tone. He’s trying too hard.”

But something in Raj’s presence unsettled me, not in a bad way, but in a way that made my pulse quicken.

Back at my desk, Sunita perched on the edge, gossip spilling from her like confetti. “That’s Raj Malhotra, our Digital Marketing Manager. Doesn’t laugh much. Talks like a textbook. But he’s sharp, really sharp. Clients eat from his hand.”

I pretended to jot notes.

“He’s single, by the way,” Sunita added casually, watching my face.

I nearly choked. “I didn’t ask.”

“You didn’t have to.” Sunita winked. “I see faces.”

From the shelf behind her, Raman leaned in, his arms folded, his voice low — too familiar, too calm.

“See? Even office gossip thinks you should date Mr. Spreadsheet. Don’t bother, Meher. He’s not your type.”

My stomach dropped. The sound of his voice—sharp, casual, *alive*—cut through the background hum of the office. I froze. The pen slipped from my fingers and rolled off the table, landing with a dull clink.

Sunita didn’t react. Neither did anyone else.

“Raman?” I whispered, turning slightly.

He smirked. "Missed me?"

Something twisted inside me. My mouth opened, but no sound came out. How was he standing there? His shirt, the same one from that night. His watch, the same scratch near the dial. Every detail is too vivid to be remembered.

I glanced around, expecting someone to look up, to ask who I was talking to. Nothing. People typed, scrolled, and laughed. No one even glanced his way.

My pulse hammered in my throat.

He wasn't real. He *couldn't* be.

"Stop it," I muttered. "You're not here."

His expression softened. "You always say that when you're scared."

The air thinned around me. The fluorescent light above my desk buzzed, flickering slightly. I pushed my chair back and stood up, heart pounding so loudly I could hear it in my ears.

"I need some air," I told Sunita. My voice didn't sound like mine.

She nodded absently, scrolling through her phone.

I walked out in quick, unsteady steps through a blur of glass partitions and half-heard laughter. The corridor stretched longer than it should have. The floor felt uneven beneath my shoes.

By the time I reached the washroom, I was trembling. I locked the door and pressed my palms against the cold marble sink.

The air was too still, too quiet. Just the sound of my breathing — uneven, shallow, catching at the edges.

I looked up. The mirror reflected a face I almost didn't recognize, pale, eyes wide, strands of hair stuck to damp skin.

"Get it together," I whispered.

But the words didn't help. They just sat there, heavy, useless.

A thousand tiny memories began flickering, him laughing in a café, him slamming a door, him saying "you're overreacting" for the hundredth time. They came too fast to separate, merging into one long ache.

My chest tightened. I gripped the edge of the sink until my fingers hurt. A tear slipped out before I could stop it, then another. I let out a short, broken laugh, half disbelief, half surrender.

"This is insane," I said out loud. "He's gone. He's not."

But I couldn't finish. Because even as I said it, I felt the shape of his absence like a weight in the room, a silence so specific it felt occupied.

I turned on the tap, splashed water on my face again and again until the cool sting pulled me back to now. I forced myself to breathe, count, steady.

When I finally lifted my head, the mirror looked normal again. Just me.

Just me and a pair of eyes that no longer looked sure of what was real.

When I walked back, the office was unchanged, with laughter, clicking keyboards, and someone arguing over a brief. The same fluorescent calm, the same clatter. But I moved more slowly now, quieter, as the sound itself could bruise me.

Sunita waved me over, saying something about lunch orders. I nodded automatically, sitting down, hands trembling as I opened my laptop.

My first assignment landed like a challenge: twenty product descriptions for a new eco-friendly clothing line. I opened the document, stared at the blinking cursor. Words came slowly, stilted, each line reading like a cardboard box.

Raman sprawled across the desk opposite me, yawning. "Seriously? 'Made from organic cotton, feels soft on skin.' Riveting. Why don't you just type 'boring' twenty times?"

"Shut up," I hissed under my breath, typing harder.

"What was that?" Sunita looked up from her phone.

"Nothing. Talking to myself."

Sunita smiled knowingly. "Writers do that."

By the time the printer sputtered to life, coughing out someone's invoice, I had managed half the list. I was rewriting one sentence for the twelfth time when Raj's shadow fell across my desk.

"Your draft's in already?"

I glanced up, startled. "Just notes."

He rested a hand on the shelf, glancing at my open notebook. His scent was clean, sharp — cologne and starch. “Better messy than late,” he said. “Email me whatever you’ve got before six. We’ll polish it.”

Before I could answer, he was gone.

Raman snorted. “He’s not impressed, you know. Just ticking a box.”

But my heart was still racing.

The day dragged into the evening. Sunita insisted we split a packet of bhujia at her desk, crumbs scattering across keyboards. Someone burst out laughing over a meme in the WhatsApp group chat, and for a moment, the office felt less like work and more like school: messy, noisy, alive.

My phone buzzed. A message from Karan:

First day done? Proud of you. Don’t let them work you into the ground.

I smiled faintly, replying: Survived. Will call later.

Raman leaned over my shoulder, reading. “Proud of you. How sweet. He’ll chain you to therapy next.”

I turned my phone face down.

As I packed up, I glanced across the room. Raj was still at his desk, jacket off, sleeves rolled, typing furiously into his laptop. For a second, as though sensing my gaze, he looked up. Our eyes met briefly, charged before he returned to his screen.

Outside, Jaipur buzzed with rickshaws, street hawkers, and neon-lit stalls. I stepped into the night with a strange feeling I hadn't carried in years: the sense that something had shifted, subtle but undeniable, like a page had just turned and a new chapter was already waiting.

Chapter 6



The hotel room looked different when I came back that evening. Smaller somehow — the ceiling lower, the shadows thicker in the corners. I dropped my bag on the chair, kicked my shoes off, and sat cross-legged on the bed with my laptop.

The cursor blinked on a blank document. Patient. Mocking.

I cracked my knuckles and started typing:

“Skincare is not just about products. It is about —”

I stopped. Deleted.

“Skincare is a ritual. Ritual that reminds you of...”

My fingers hovered, then stilled.

Raman was already there, leaning against the desk with folded arms. His eyes gleamed in the dim yellow light of the bedside lamp.

“It reminds you of being a fraud,” he said lazily.

“Pretending you’re some storyteller when you can barely string two sentences together.”

I gritted my teeth and typed faster.

“Every product ties to a moment. Morning ritual. Evening ritual. Each step —”

Delete. Rewrite. Delete.

Raman pushed off the desk, pacing slowly. “You think Raj is impressed? He’s laughing at you, Meher. Laughing at how desperate you are for approval. Look at you — blushing like a schoolgirl because he said *‘better than expected’*. That’s not praise. That’s a pity.”

“Shut up,” I muttered aloud, slamming the keys harder than necessary.

The hum of the ceiling fan filled the silence.

I tried again: *“Skincare is the language we speak to ourselves...”*

Then the phone rang. Not a buzz, a sharp, sudden ring that sliced through the quiet.

Karan.

I picked up, relief loosening something tight in my chest. “Hello?”

“Why do you sound like you’ve been fighting with your keyboard?” His voice was warm, teasing, but I could hear the worry beneath it.

I laughed weakly. “Because I have. I’m writing. Or trying to.”

“At this hour?” He sighed. “Meher, you just started this job. Don’t burn yourself out on day two.”

“I don’t have a choice. Raj wants a narrative draft by tomorrow.”

A pause stretched between us. Then he asked, “And what do *you* want?”

The question caught me off guard. I stared at the blinking cursor, my lips parting before I could think. "I... I want to prove I can do it."

Raman's laugh sliced in, cruel and low. "No, you want Raj to notice you. To look at you the way you keep hoping he will. Pathetic."

I pressed a hand to my forehead, squeezing my eyes shut. "Karan, can we not do philosophy right now? I just need to finish."

His voice softened. "Fine. But eat something. Promise me you won't starve yourself over this."

"I had a samosa from a street cart."

"That doesn't count."

"It does to me." I smiled faintly. "Thanks for calling. I needed that."

"Always," he said simply.

When the call ended, the room felt emptier than before. Raman was still there, of course, lounging on the bed now, watching me with narrowed eyes.

"You're hiding things from him," he said. "Just like you always do. One day, he'll stop picking up. And then you'll only have me."

My fingers shook as I went back to typing. I forced myself to focus. Paragraph by paragraph, I built something out of the chaos: a story of mornings bathed in light, evenings washed in calm, a ritual that made time itself slow.

When I finally stopped, the clock glowed past two. My eyes burned, my shoulders ached, but I had a draft. Messy, imperfect, but mine.

I saved the file, closed the laptop, and lay back against the pillows.

Raman stretched beside me, close enough to touch. “You think words will save you? They won’t. He’ll tear them apart tomorrow. Just wait.”

I pulled the blanket over my head like a child warding off monsters. Only the faint hum of the fan answered.

Sleep didn’t come. Just the cursor blinking in my dreams and Raman’s voice echoing over it, steady as breath.

Chapter 7



The office smelled faintly of brewed coffee and printer ink when I slipped in that morning, a little earlier than the rest. Sunlight pooled across the polished floors, reflecting off glass partitions and neat rows of workstations. I set my bag down carefully, as though making no noise might let me blend into the quiet hum of the place, just another early riser in a world that hadn't quite woken up yet.

The draft weighed heavily in my hands — pages smudged with my notes, coffee stains at the corners. I kept running my thumb over the margin doodles, half-afraid of what Raj would say when he saw them.

"Madam Dracula," Sunita whispered dramatically, sliding into her seat with a paper bag dangling from one wrist. Her bangles sang a little tune as she leaned over. "You look like you haven't slept since Partition. Eat."

She shoved a foil-wrapped paratha into my hands. Steam curled from it, buttery and warm.

My throat softened. "You're an angel."

"Correction: a demon who believes in carbs." She unwrapped her own and took a vicious bite. "And you'll need the energy. Today is Raj-day."

I raised an eyebrow. "Every day is Raj-day here."

“True, but today he’s in a *mood*. He sent three emails at 3 a.m. — *three!* — and none had emojis. That’s when you know he’s dangerous.”

Before I could reply, a shadow cut across the aisle. Raj walked past, sleeves rolled, tie loose, black eyes unreadable.

“Meher. Meeting room. Ten minutes.”

He didn’t even break stride.

Sunita waggled her eyebrows the moment he was gone. “See? Raj-day.”

The meeting room was already warm with sunlight that pooled on the table. Raj sat at the far end, scrolling through something on his laptop. His glasses caught the light. He didn’t look up when I entered, just gestured toward the seat opposite.

“Draft?”

My fingers fumbled as I handed him the pages. The silence that followed was agonizing — paper turning, the faint honk of scooters outside, the creak of the old fan above.

Raman lounged in the corner, invisible to everyone else. “Watch him,” he said. “He’s enjoying this. The power. He’ll shred you to pieces.”

Finally, Raj set the pages down. His gaze fixed on me. “This is... not bad.”

My breath caught.

“But it’s not good enough.”

My pulse sank.

"You start strong with ritual, but you lose focus," he said. "Too much vague sentiment. Be sharper. Give me images that the client can own." He tapped a pen against the page. "Don't tell me it's calming. Show me the morning light on someone's face. Show me the steam rising from a cup of tea."

He slid the pen toward me. "Go on. Show me."

My hand trembled as I scribbled a line in the margin: *Evenings scented with rose water, mornings clean as lemon.*

Raj read it, then nodded once. "Better. Rewrite this section by tonight." He leaned back. "And eat something before you faint."

He shut his laptop and left as abruptly as he'd begun.

Raman smirked from the corner. "See? He's playing you like a violin."

Back at my desk, Sunita pounced instantly. "Well? Are you alive? Do I need to draft your obituary?"

I managed a small smile. "He told me to be real."

"Raj, the philosopher." Sunita fanned herself with a file. "Careful, Meher. That's how it begins. Next thing you know, you'll be writing haikus for him."

"Don't be ridiculous." I hid my blush in the rim of my water bottle.

Raman lounged across my desk, whispering with venom. "She's not wrong. You're already glowing. Pathetic."

My phone buzzed. A text from Karan.

Survived the dragon?

I smiled faintly, typing back: *Barely. He made me rewrite everything.*

Almost instantly: *That's because he knows you can. Don't let him scare you quietly.*

Warmth spread through my chest.

Raman scoffed. "You run to Karan for comfort. Like a child clutching a toy. Do you even hear yourself?"

I shoved my phone into my bag and tried to drown him out with the clatter of keyboards around me.

By late afternoon, the office was buzzing with a new task: client prep. Desks littered with printouts, mockups, and discarded coffee cups. Raj stood at the center of it all, orchestrating without raising his voice.

Then his gaze landed on me. "Meher. You're coming with me."

My breath snagged. "Where?"

"To meet the client. You wrote the draft — you'll hear their reaction firsthand."

Sunita mouthed *Oh my god* as Raj strode toward the elevator. I scrambled to grab my notebook and followed.

The café was chic in a way I wasn't used to, with glass walls, industrial lamps, and everything smelling of espresso and ambition.

Raj ordered black coffee for himself, glanced at me, and added, "And a cappuccino."

My cheeks warmed. "You didn't have to—"

"You'll need it." He was already pulling out a chair at a corner table.

We sat across from the client, a woman in a navy pantsuit with a diamond nose pin that sparkled when she frowned at the draft.

"This is... interesting," the client said. "But a little dreamy. I want something grounded. Something people remember after one line."

Raj gestured toward me. "She'll fix it. She's got the instinct for story."

The spotlight landed on me like a blow. I swallowed hard, forcing words out. "What if we anchor it in habit? Instead of vague beauty, we make every step tangible. Like... 'your mornings smell of lemon, your evenings of rosewater.' Something you can almost taste."

The client paused. Then smiled. "Now that I like."

Raj's lips twitched — the faintest ghost of approval.

Raman was on my shoulder, seething. "Of course she likes it. You sold yourself out for their applause. Do you even hear yourself groveling?"

I gripped my notebook tighter under the table, knuckles white.

After the meeting, Raj didn't take me straight back to the office. He led me instead to a quieter café down the block, one with dim lighting and bookshelves stacked against the walls.

“Sit,” he said, already setting his laptop down. “We’ll refine the pitch here.”

I hesitated, heart racing. Sitting with him like this felt... different. Intimate, almost.

We went line by line, his pen slashing through fluff, my words stumbling and then finding rhythm again. The world outside blurred into nothing but the scrape of pens and the hiss of the coffee machine.

At one point, Raj leaned closer, pointing at my notebook. His sleeve brushed my arm. The contact was brief, accidental, but my skin tingled with the aftershock.

Raman’s voice exploded in my ear. “Enough! You’re letting him touch you, look at you, control you. You’re mine, Meher. *Mine.*”

My chest tightened. I scribbled furiously, anything to keep my hands busy, my mind steady.

Raj didn’t seem to notice. Or if he did, he said nothing. Only: “Better. You’re finding your rhythm now.”

When we finally packed up, it was dark outside — the street buzzing with headlights and vendors. Raj hailed a cab, held the door for me, then vanished into the night with his usual abruptness.

I sat in the cab clutching my notebook, my heart torn between exhilaration and dread.

Raman’s whisper followed me like smoke. “I won’t let you slip away from me. Not for him. Not for anyone.”

Chapter 8



The office smelled of damp paper and fried food that morning — old files and the canteen's samosas seeping in through the glass partitions. I sat at my desk, staring at the cursor blinking on a draft headline. The words blurred, dancing just out of reach.

A sudden thud made me jump. Sunita had dropped her lunchbox on my desk with enough force to rattle the stapler. The lid popped open, steam curling upward.

"You'll thank me later," she declared, collapsing into the chair opposite with theatrical exhaustion. "Because if you think you can survive on that terrible vending-machine tea and those cardboard samosas, you're already half-dead."

I couldn't help smiling. "Do you always ambush people with food, or just the ones who look pitiful?"

"Only the ones who look like they might faint before noon." She snapped her fingers, then leaned closer, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Besides, somebody has to feed the orphans around here. Our digital king doesn't notice if people starve."

"Who?" I asked.

She gave me a look. "Raj, obviously. Who else? He practically runs the whole department. Doesn't eat, doesn't

blink. Drink coffee like it's IV fluid. I swear he's not even human."

I stifled a laugh. I hadn't really watched Raj before, not consciously, but now that she mentioned it, I realized I'd never actually seen him eat. Always coffee in hand, always that faint crease between his brows as he scanned a screen.

"Does he really not eat?" I asked, too quickly.

"Oh, he eats," Sunita said, flicking open the foil wrap to reveal golden parathas glistening with ghee. "Just not like us mortals. Like some mythical creature that feeds once a century. You'll see. At lunch, he always vanishes."

She tore a paratha in half and shoved it at me before I could refuse. The smell hit me instantly with butter, potato, and a whisper of ajwain.

"Go on," she said, waving her hand. "Trust me, this will fix everything wrong in your life."

The first bite was heaven — soft and spiced, the achar tangy against my tongue. I closed my eyes for a moment longer than I meant to.

"See?" Sunita crowed. "Look at your face. Bliss. You'd never survive here without me."

"Clearly not," I said, licking a smear of achar from my thumb. For a brief moment, the tightness in my chest eased.

Later, when Raj returned from wherever he'd vanished to, Sunita muttered just loud enough for me to hear, "See? Vampire hours."

Raj raised an eyebrow at us but said nothing. His eyes lingered on me a beat longer than necessary before he slid into his chair. I bent over my notebook quickly, pretending to read my own scribbles, though the warmth in my cheeks gave me away.

The afternoon was a blur of tension. The client meeting loomed, and Raj had everyone double- and triple-checking the slides. His voice cut through the office in measured instructions — never raised, never hurried, but impossible to ignore.

My draft, just a single line on the closing slide, glowed like a warning light every time I looked at it: *Stories shape trust. Trust builds everything else.* I wanted to delete it, run, and hide.

When the meeting began, I sat two chairs down from Raj. The glass-walled conference room felt too exposed — every reflection of myself showing how nervous I was.

Halfway through, Raj gestured toward me without warning. “Meher wrote the closing line,” he said smoothly, his eyes cutting briefly to mine. “I think it captures what we’re trying to say better than anything else.”

My breath snagged. For a moment, I thought I wouldn’t be able to speak. But then the words tumbled out, shaky at first, then steadier, filling the room.

The clients nodded. Someone even scribbled something on a notepad. But all I saw was Raj’s glance of approval, warmth, something almost proud. It lodged deep in me, unsettling and grounding all at once.

Afterward, the team spilled back into the corridor. Sunita nudged me with a grin so obvious it burned. I wanted to vanish.

But Raj lingered by the elevators, laptop under his arm, expression unreadable. As the others drifted away, he looked at me.

“Coffee?” he asked. Just one word.

The syllables vibrated inside my chest. Before I could think, I nodded.

In the cab, the silence was thick. The driver’s radio hummed faintly with an old Kishore Kumar song distorted by static. I stared out the window, Jaipur’s evening lights blurring into orange streaks. Every time the cab turned, Raj’s sleeve brushed mine. Each accidental touch felt like a spark crawling up my arm.

At the café, the air smelled of roasted beans and burnt sugar. Only a handful of students with laptops occupied the space. We found a corner table.

He ordered black coffee. I asked for masala chai, grateful for something familiar.

“So,” he said, stirring his cup, “was that your first client meeting?”

I nodded, twisting my spoon. “I kept thinking I’d mess it up.”

“You didn’t.” His eyes didn’t waver. “You held the whole room. Even the client who was half-asleep.”

I laughed, though it came out shaky. No one had ever looked at me that way, like my words mattered. I took a sip of chai to break the intensity.

Then Raman's voice slipped in like a whisper. *He's watching you. He wants you.*

My hand trembled slightly, but I forced it steady.

We talked for half an hour about books, music, and half-formed jokes. I admitted to writing terrible poetry as a teenager. He confessed he knew every Jagjit Singh ghazal by heart, though he never sang.

Our words drifted into silence. I reached for my notebook, and our hands brushed.

The contact jolted me. Warmth shot up my arm. For a moment, I didn't move.

Mine, Raman hissed. *Not his. Don't you dare.*

I yanked my hand back. The spoon clattered loudly, making me wince.

Raj tilted his head. "You're tired," he said softly.

"I should go." My voice came too fast. I fumbled for my bag.

He paid before I could protest. Outside, the night air was sharp. We walked toward the line of cabs. When I stumbled on a loose stone, his hand brushed my elbow, steadying me.

My whole body reacted.

"Do you need a ride?" he asked — careful, as if he sensed the tension.

I shook my head. "I'll manage."

He hesitated, then said, "Goodnight, Meher." The way he said my name stayed in my ears long after.

In the cab home, Raman sat beside me — invisible but heavy. *You're betraying me*, he whispered. *Laughing with him. Letting him touch you.*

My phone buzzed. Karan.

Still awake?

Yes. Just got back from coffee.

The phone rang almost instantly. I stared before answering.

"Coffee?" His voice was familiar, steady. "With who?"

"No one," I whispered.

"You're lying," he said gently. "But fine. Just don't disappear when things get messy, okay?"

"I won't."

When I hung up, the silence was filled with Raman's low laugh. *Fire burns, Meher. And you're playing with it.*

I curled into myself on the bed, chai still clinging to my tongue, Raj's eyes still burning in my mind.

Chapter 9



I arrived ten minutes late. Again.

The office lobby smelled faintly of filter coffee and disinfectant — that odd combination that made my stomach churn and settle at the same time. I hurried across the polished floor, clutching my bag against my chest, heart racing. Sunita spotted me from behind the reception desk and raised one perfectly threaded eyebrow.

“Madam, Madam,” she said, clicking her tongue like an elderly auntie, “late entry again. Were you at another midnight coffee meeting?”

I rolled my eyes, too breathless to reply. I swiped my access card — the machine chirped green and pushed through the glass door. But Sunita wasn’t done. She leaned over the counter and called after me in a singsong voice. “Tell me at least— was it with him?”

“Shut up, yaar,” I hissed over my shoulder, cheeks burning as a couple of interns looked up from their phones. I walked faster down the corridor, heels clicking against the tiles, praying Raj hadn’t heard.

Of course, he had.

He stood near the glass partition of his cabin, a file tucked under his arm, posture composed but eyes sharp. The

faintest flicker of a smile ghosted over his lips as I slipped into my cubicle, pretending not to notice. He didn't say a word. That was worse.

My desk was its usual battlefield of sticky notes, highlighters, and yesterday's half-eaten biscuit. I sank into the chair and pulled my laptop open, fingers flying across the trackpad as though speed could erase lateness.

"Calm down," a low voice murmured near my ear.

I froze.

Raman's reflection flickered on the black screen before it lit up. His chin rested just over my shoulder, casual as ever, as if five years hadn't passed.

"Why are you always so nervous around him?" he teased. "Didn't I tell you, he watches you too closely?"

My throat tightened. I shook my head minutely, like brushing away a fly. "Not now," I whispered, lips barely moving.

From the next cubicle, Sunita's voice rose cheerfully. "So, Raj sir, any news? People are saying you stayed late yesterday, too."

Heat rushed to my face. I prayed the earth would swallow me.

Raj's measured reply floated across the partition. "Deadlines don't keep office hours."

Laughter rippled through the room.

I ducked lower over my keyboard. I could still feel Raman's phantom warmth at my shoulder, his voice coiling around my thoughts. "See? He didn't deny it. Everyone thinks you and him—"

I stabbed at the keys until the laptop whirred awake, scattering the shadow of his face.

The morning dragged through meetings and scattered chatter. Raj assigned tasks in that calm, clipped tone of his, the kind that made people listen without realizing they were obeying. I caught myself watching him too often: the way his square jaw tightened when he frowned at numbers, how his black hair curled slightly near his ear, how he wrote notes in small, sharp letters.

At eleven, Sunita wheeled over with a stack of client briefs and dropped into the armrest of my chair without invitation.

"Coffee?" she asked. "Or should we starve until lunch?"

"I have work," I muttered.

She leaned closer, whispering. "He notices you, you know. The way he calls your name is different from the rest of us. Did you see how he looked at you in the meeting?"

I shoved the pile of briefs against her stomach. "Go gossip somewhere else, please."

She laughed loud enough for the entire row to hear. "Fine, fine. But don't say I didn't warn you." She rolled away, her chair squeaking across the tiles.

I exhaled hard and turned my screen brighter, letting words blur into meaningless lines. Inside, Raman chuckled darkly.

“She’s right, you know. He does look at you differently. And you—” his voice softened, almost tender, “—you’re blushing like a schoolgirl.”

My fingers clenched around my pen until the plastic cracked.

By lunch, the office buzzed with chatter. The glass-walled pantry filled with the smell of cumin, butter, and reheated food from microwaves lined along one wall. Colleagues gathered around the long island counter and high stools, steel tiffins clicking open in a practiced rhythm.

I sat at the edge of the counter with my plate balanced on my knee, half listening to Sunita’s story about her flatmate’s disastrous date. Across the room, Raj sat at one of the bar tables, eating with the same quiet precision as always, each bite measured, deliberate, his lunchbox as neatly packed as his sentences.

“You know what’s scary?” she whispered theatrically. “I’ve never seen him spill food. Not one grain of rice. Who eats like that?”

I bit into my paratha, trying not to smile.

Raj looked up then, as though he’d heard. His gaze brushed over us, resting half a second too long on me. I dropped my eyes to my plate, suddenly aware of every smudge of ghee on my fingers.

Raman’s voice was immediate. “He thinks you’re clumsy. Look at you smearing oil on your chin. Disgusting.”

My appetite evaporated. I shoved the plate away.

“Not hungry?” Raj’s voice came from beside me. He had crossed the room without me noticing, tiffin in hand.

I was startled. “I-I’m fine.”

“Eat,” he said simply, pushing the plate back toward me. “We have three hours of edits after this. Don’t faint on me halfway.”

My throat tightened. The kindness was too much. I forced myself to pick up another bite.

Raj returned to his chair, calm as ever. But Sunita nudged my knee under the table, wagging her eyebrows. I glared.

The afternoon stretched with work. Raj assigned me a draft for a new client campaign, then pulled a spare chair to sit beside me while we mapped it out.

The proximity was unbearable. His cologne — clean, faintly woody, mixed with the ink of our printouts. His sleeve brushed mine each time he leaned closer to adjust the layout. I tried to focus on the document, but the curve of his wrist, the measured rhythm of his pen, distracted me.

Raman perched on the edge of my desk, smirking. “Look how close he sits. Doesn’t even care if people might notice. What will they say about you, Meher? That you’re easy? That you’re desperate?”

My chest tightened. I typed faster, nails clicking against the keys. Raj glanced sideways.

“Slow down,” he said softly. “You’ll mistype.”

I froze. For a second, it sounded like he knew — as he could see through everything.

Evening neared. The office thinned out, people calling goodbyes over cubicle walls. Sunita waved dramatically at me, mouthing something about “Don’t stay too late with him,” before disappearing through the glass doors.

Raj stood, stretching slightly, file under his arm. Then he paused at my desk.

“You’re free?”

I blinked. “Now?”

“There’s a bookstore café near C-Scheme. Good place for brainstorming. We need the tagline nailed by tomorrow.” His voice was casual, but his eyes searched mine.

My pulse fluttered. I opened my mouth to invent an excuse, but Raman’s low warning sliced through me.

“Don’t you dare. Don’t you dare go with him.”

I clutched the edge of the desk until my knuckles whitened. Then I heard myself say, “Okay.”

The cab ride was awkward at first. Raj scrolled through his phone, replying to messages. I stared out the window at the blur of honking rickshaws and neon signs. The city felt both overwhelming and familiar, like a place I used to belong to.

Raman sat between us, arms crossed, expression thunderous. “Traitor,” he hissed.

I bit my tongue hard and dug my nails into my palm until the pain steadied me.

Raj finally slipped his phone into his pocket. "You're quiet," he said.

"Long day," I murmured.

He nodded, as though that explained everything. But his gaze lingered, too steady, too searching.

The bookstore café smelled of old paper and freshly ground beans. Wooden shelves lined the walls, fairy lights strung above. A quiet hum of music wrapped around the space.

He ordered black coffee. I, flustered, asked for masala chai. We found a table near the window.

For a while, we worked — notes spread out, pens scratching but slowly, the conversation drifted.

"You always write late at night?" he asked.

"Yes," I admitted. "It's... quieter then."

"Or lonelier," he said softly.

I looked up sharply. His eyes held mine, calm but intent. I couldn't look away. My heart thudded painfully.

Then, in the glass of the window, Raman's reflection appeared — dark, furious, lips curling. "He wants to take you away from me."

My pen slipped from my hand, clattering against the table.

Raj's brow furrowed. "You okay?"

I forced a laugh, bending to retrieve it. "Just clumsy."

He didn't look convinced, but he didn't push. Instead, he leaned back, sipping his coffee, watching me with that unreadable calm.

We spoke about books, about Jaipur's winters, about deadlines that never ended. For a while, it felt almost normal, almost safe.

But then, silence fell — not the easy kind, but the kind that hummed with something unsaid. The air thickened between us. I fiddled with my straw wrapper, twisting it into shreds.

Finally, Raj spoke. His voice was lower, more deliberate.

"You know... I don't usually talk about this." He gave a dry laugh. "In fact, I avoid it. But maybe it's easier with someone who isn't part of my past life."

I stilled.

"My father," he said, staring into his mug, "was a military man. Discipline was everything. Lights out at ten, shoes polished like mirrors, every word accounted for. I think I spent my teenage years learning how not to breathe too loudly."

A wry smile flickered, then faded. "When I told him I wanted to work in marketing, he didn't speak to me for months. Thought it was frivolous. A waste of discipline." He shrugged, but not casually. "Sometimes I still hear his voice when I'm making decisions. Like I'm waiting for him to call me a fool."

Something shifted inside me. Recognition, not pity — the ache of someone who knew what it meant to be shaped by silence.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly.

"Don't be," he replied. "He came around eventually. But it left a mark." He looked at me then — really looked and his eyes were steady, vulnerable. "I guess I learned early how much approval can shape you. And how much silence can wound."

The words pressed against places in me I didn't want touched. I wanted to tell him I understood that silence could be worse than screams, but the words stuck in my throat.

Raman leaned closer in the reflection, whispering venom. "Don't you dare. Don't tell him. He hasn't earned your trust. I'm the only one who knows you."

My chest ached. I gripped the table edge until my knuckles whitened.

Raj tilted his head. "You get it, don't you?"

My lips parted. For a second, I almost said yes. Almost. But Raman's shadow loomed larger, and I forced a smile instead.

"Maybe," I whispered.

The silence that followed wasn't empty anymore. It was charged — humming with the weight of everything unsaid.

Raj leaned back, finishing his coffee. "Anyway. Sorry. That was heavier than intended."

"No," I said quickly. "Thank you. For trusting me."

Our eyes held a moment longer than necessary. Something twisted low in my stomach.

Raman's voice was a hiss now, sharp and brittle. "He's stealing you from me, Meher. And you're letting him."

I looked away, staring at the fairy lights strung across the bookshelf. My tea had gone cold.

That night, when Raj dropped me off outside my hotel, my hands trembled as I fumbled with the keys. I told myself it was the caffeine. Or the late hour. Or the strain of deadlines.

But deep down, I knew it wasn't any of those.

It was him.

And the echo of his voice, steady and raw, saying: *I guess I learned early how much approval can shape you. And how much silence can wound.*

Back in my room, the silence was unbearable. I paced, opened my laptop, closed it again, pulled my hair loose, and tied it back twice. Raman lingered by the curtain, arms crossed, sulking like a wounded child.

"You think he understands you," he muttered. "He doesn't. He never will."

My phone buzzed. Karan. For a moment, I considered ignoring it, but I knew better.

"Hello?" I said, voice too bright.

"Why do you sound like that?" Karan asked immediately. His tone wasn't sharp, just steady- the way it always had

been when he could read me better than I wanted. "Tired, or guilty?"

I laughed too loudly. "Both?"

"Hmm." The pause stretched. "Where were you?"

"In the office. Then... coffee."

"Alone?"

My throat closed. "With Raj. Work stuff."

The silence on his end was telling. I could picture him leaning back, eyes narrowed, mouth set in that half-disbelieving line.

"Be careful, Meher," he said finally. "Don't lose yourself trying to be seen."

My stomach knotted. "I'm fine, Karan. Really."

"I didn't say you weren't," he said softly. "Just... be careful. And remember, you can tell me anything. You always could."

I wanted to. God, I wanted to spill everything, about Raj's story, about the way my pulse tripped when our eyes met, about Raman's shadow hissing at me even now. But I couldn't. Not tonight.

"Goodnight," I said instead.

"Goodnight," he replied, but it sounded like a warning disguised as a farewell.

I ended the call and sank onto the bed. The room felt too small for the storm inside me.

Raman smirked from the shadows, vindicated. "That's right," he whispered. "He'll never understand you like I do."

I buried my face in the pillow, as though I could smother the truth along with the sound of his voice.

Chapter 10



Raj's story about his childhood kept replaying in my mind, not the words themselves, but the way he had told them. The pause before he spoke, the careful choice of language, as though revealing something private and fragile. I had watched his profile in the café's dim light, the way his eyes had dropped to the rim of his cup and then risen again, steady, seeking my reaction. And I had wanted, for a reckless second, to reach across the table and put my hand over his.

That night I barely slept. Raman's whispers cut in and out—taunting, warning, his voice thick with the anger of a jealous brother, a phantom lover, a ghost of my own guilt. He's not for you. He'll leave you like the rest. You'll end up alone again. But his words carried less weight than usual. Raj's quiet presence at the café seemed to have formed a shield around me, a warmth that stretched beyond the boundaries of that evening.

So when Sunita poked her head over my desk the next morning and chirped, "Pack your bag, we're going on a client visit. Guess who's driving us?" my heart skipped.

Raj appeared from his office, car keys swinging loosely from one hand, jacket already on. "We need to leave in fifteen minutes," he said, looking directly at me before sweeping the room with his usual calm authority.

Sunita smirked openly at me. “You’re in luck. Our sir is behind the wheel today. Try not to get lost staring at him.”

I flushed and pretended to focus on stuffing my notebook and pen into my bag.

The car ride out of Jaipur began in silence, broken only by the shuffle of traffic and the occasional honk. I sat in the passenger seat, window cracked to let in the morning air. Raj drove with both hands steady on the wheel, posture relaxed, his eyes fixed on the road. I studied the way his jaw flexed when he checked the mirrors, the smoothness of his movements. He seemed made for control—not harsh, but assured, like the kind of person you could trust to carry you across a storm without panic.

Sunita, seated in the back, chatted about the client we were visiting—an old textile house on the edge of the city. I tried to listen, but my mind kept wandering. When the traffic cleared and we rolled onto the open highway, Raj turned slightly toward me.

“Do you get carsick?” he asked.

“No,” I replied quickly.

“Good. Some of these roads aren’t forgiving.”

His tone was neutral, but something in the question felt like care, a tiny thread stretched between us.

We drove on, sunlight slanting over the horizon, the scent of roadside tea stalls drifting in through the window. Raman’s voice flickered once—He’s pretending. He doesn’t care. He’ll laugh about you later, but it was faint, like static in

another room. I gripped my pen tighter and kept my gaze on Raj's profile, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the way his hand rested against the gear shift.

The meeting at the textile house stretched longer than expected. Swatches of fabric were spread across a long wooden table, the air thick with dye and starch. Raj handled the negotiations with ease, his voice firm but never raised. I noticed how the older men leaned toward him, how they listened. When it was my turn to present content angles, I spoke with more confidence than I had in weeks, buoyed by the way Raj nodded at me, as if to say, Go on, I trust you.

By the time we wrapped up, it was well past lunch. Raj checked his watch. "We'll stop on the way back. Too late to go hungry."

Sunita groaned in agreement.

We found a roadside dhaba under a rusted tin roof, smoke curling from a clay oven. The smell of ghee and fried onions hit us before we even sat down. We chose a low wooden table by the open side, trucks rumbling in the distance.

Raj ordered aloo parathas, dal fry, and tall steel glasses of lassi. I watched him wipe the rim of his glass with a napkin before sliding it toward me without a word, keeping the other for himself. The gesture was so casual I almost missed it.

"See, this is why we like traveling with him," Sunita teased, scooping dal onto her plate. "He takes care of the smallest things. Gentleman boss."

Raj gave her a look but didn't respond.

I broke a piece of paratha and dipped it into the dal. The food was hot, spicy, simple, but better than anything I had eaten in months. Raj ate steadily, quietly, but every few minutes his eyes flicked to my plate, checking without asking if I had enough.

Halfway through the meal, Sunita's phone buzzed. She excused herself to take the call outside, leaving Raj and me alone at the table. The dhaba felt suddenly quieter, the clatter of utensils fading into the hum of flies.

I lowered my voice. "You really notice everything, don't you?"

He looked at me, puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"The glass. The food. The way you listen in meetings. It's like... You catch details other people miss."

Raj shrugged, but his gaze held mine. "Details matter. They tell you who someone really is."

My stomach fluttered, though it wasn't the food. Raman hissed faintly in my ear.

"He's only pretending. Don't fall for it"—but I pressed the voice down, focusing on the warmth of the paratha in my hands, the steadiness in Raj's eyes.

When Sunita returned, conversation resumed, lighter, easier. But the undercurrent remained, a silent tether stretched across the table between Raj and me.

The drive back into the city was slower, traffic thick with evening commuters. Sunita dozed in the backseat, head

lolling against the window. Raj and I sat in silence, the kind that wasn't uncomfortable but heavy with unspoken things.

I glanced sideways once, catching the faintest smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he drove. He must have felt me looking, because he asked softly, "What?"

"Nothing." I turned back to the window, heart hammering.

But nothing was exactly everything.

The sky was turning violet by the time we pulled into Jaipur again. Streetlights flickered on one by one, and cars honked in the thick evening rush. Sunita woke up with a start when Raj braked at a signal, her hair stuck to her cheek.

"Ugh, I'll just take an auto from here," she mumbled when we neared the main junction. "No point dragging you two out of the way. Anyway, you both can manage."

Before I could object, Sunita was already waving us off, sliding out of the car with a grin. "Good night, sir. Good night, madam. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Her laugh trailed behind her as she melted into the crowd.

I swallowed, suddenly aware of how quiet the car had become without a third voice. Only the thrum of the engine and the muted chaos of the city outside filled the air.

Raj glanced at me. "Hotel?"

I nodded.

The drive there was short, but every second felt stretched, as though the silence itself was charged. I could feel the heat of him in the space between our seats, the faint brush of his

sleeve when he shifted gears. Raman's voice rose faintly—Don't let him in. Don't betray me.—but it was weak, unconvincing, almost drowned by the pulse in my ears.

When Raj pulled up in front of my hotel, he killed the engine and reached for the handbrake. "Alright," he said softly, "you're home safe."

Something inside me twisted at the word safe. I didn't want the night to end here, in the sterile safety of a hotel lobby, with him leaving into the blur of headlights. The thought of watching him drive away felt unbearable.

Before I could stop myself, I blurted, "Come inside. Just for a while."

His hand stilled on the gearshift. He turned, eyes searching my face. "Meher..."

"It's not—" I cut myself off, biting my lip. "I just don't want to be alone yet. Please."

For a long second, he didn't move. Then, slowly, he nodded, switched off the ignition, and followed me inside.

The hotel corridors smelled faintly of disinfectant and stale carpet. I fumbled with my keycard at the door, palms damp, heart racing. I could hear my own breath too loud in my ears, feel the ghost of Raman's hiss—This is wrong, this is betrayal.—but my fingers didn't falter.

The lock clicked, the door swung open, and we stepped into the dim room.

The door shut behind us with a soft click, muting the hum of the hallway. For a moment, silence pressed down, broken

only by the faint whirl of the air conditioner and the shallow rhythm of our breathing. I stood with my back against the door, my hand still resting on the handle, as if unsure whether to bolt it or open it again. Raj lingered a few steps inside, his posture careful, deliberate, like a man entering a shrine he had no right to disturb.

My eyes roamed over him—the loosened tie, the faint crease at his jaw where fatigue had left its mark, the quiet steadiness in his gaze. He looked as if he might speak, to excuse himself, to keep the distance safe. The thought sent a sudden wave of panic through me, sharp and breathless. If he left now, the space between us would stretch back into its old shape, and I wasn't sure I'd survive it.

"Stay," I whispered, my voice breaking into the hush. "Just... stay."

Raj's throat moved in a hard swallow, but he didn't move closer. He was waiting, I realized, waiting for me to step forward, to choose. And something inside me, a part that had been frozen for years, decided I would not run this time. I pushed away from the door and crossed the small room in slow, deliberate steps until I stood before him. The faint scent of his cologne, worn thin after the long day, mixed with the warmth of his skin. My hand lifted almost on its own, brushing against the fabric of his sleeve, testing the weight of contact. He didn't flinch, didn't pull back. He only looked down at me, his dark eyes wide and unguarded.

"Meher..." he said softly, but I didn't let him finish. My fingers found him, tentative at first, then curling fully,

tugging his hand toward me. The gesture was simple, almost childlike, yet it set the air on fire between us.

The first kiss was barely a kiss at all—my lips grazing his, hesitant, fragile, like I was testing the possibility of touch. His breath caught, his body stiffening under the shock of closeness, but then he exhaled, slow and deep, and bent his head lower. The second kiss carried weight, warmth, and hunger carefully reined in. His hand lifted, resting at my cheek, thumb brushing my skin as though memorizing its texture. I shivered at the contact, a tremor running through me that he must have felt.

The room seemed to narrow around us—the bland beige walls, the sterile hotel curtains—all dissolving into the singular awareness of mouths, breath, the press of bodies leaning nearer. I felt his hesitation in the way he paused, drawing back fractionally, searching my face for refusal. Instead, I slid my hand up to the back of his neck and held him there, my own silent answer.

Our kisses deepened, becoming longer, bolder, until I found myself pressed against his chest, my heartbeat hammering through my ribs. I could taste the faint bitterness of coffee on his tongue, feel the roughness of stubble along his jaw scraping my lips. The sensations grounded me, anchored me in a reality I had been too long denied. For once, Raman's voice didn't cut in. His shadow lingered at the edges of my mind, but it couldn't pierce the heat blooming in my chest.

Raj pulled back just enough to look at me. His brow was furrowed, his breath uneven. "Are you sure?" he asked, his voice low, urgent. "Tell me now, Meher, before—"

“Yes,” I said quickly, almost fiercely. “I want this. I want you.”

Something broke in him then—the restraint, the careful distance he’d always maintained. His arms wrapped around me, lifting me slightly off my feet, and I clung to him, laughing against his mouth at the unexpected strength of it. He carried me to the bed and lowered me gently onto the sheets, his hands never leaving me. I lay back, staring up at him, my breath coming fast. The sight of him above me, tentative yet unable to hide his desire, sent a wave of heat flooding through me.

His touch traced along my arm, down to my wrist, then up again, slower this time, savoring. He leaned down to kiss the hollow of my throat, each brush of his lips coaxing my body into awareness. My fingers tangled in his hair, tugging him closer, desperate for more. He obliged, his kisses trailing across my collarbone, his hands sliding to my waist. Every movement was careful, reverent, as though he feared breaking me. That gentleness undid me more than anything else. I hadn’t known I could still be touched like this—without pity, without demand, only with aching tenderness.

Clothes became an obstacle, shed in pauses and stolen glances. His shirt was the first to go, and I marveled at the warmth of his skin beneath my palms, the play of muscle under my fingers. He helped me with my own, but never rushed—each button, each shift of fabric marked by another kiss, another whispered reassurance. By the time we lay skin to skin, I was trembling, not from fear but from the sheer

shock of intimacy. I hadn't realized how starved I was until now.

"Look at me," Raj murmured, brushing my hair back from my face. I obeyed, meeting his gaze, and what I saw there nearly broke me—the raw devotion, the care, the unspoken promise that he would never hurt me. Tears pricked at the corners of my eyes, but he kissed them away, his mouth soft against my lashes, my cheeks, my lips.

When we finally joined, it was not with urgency but with infinite slowness. He moved carefully, giving me time to adjust, watching my expression as if every flicker mattered. I gasped, my body tensing, but then his hand found mine, our fingers interlacing, and the fear eased into something else—something startlingly sweet. He filled me in more ways than one, not only body to body but heart to heart, grounding me in this present moment.

Every movement was a conversation without words. My sighs, his murmurs, the rhythm we found together—it all spoke of release, of need, of a yearning neither of us had dared to voice before tonight. The sensations built slowly, like a tide rising, cresting higher with each wave. I arched into him, clutching at his shoulders, my voice breaking on his name. He held me, guided me, cherished me, until the tension within me snapped, spilling over into a shuddering rush of relief. My cry was muffled against his neck, but he heard it, felt it, and followed me over the edge with a groan that seemed torn from his very soul.

After, we lay tangled in the sheets, our bodies slick with sweat, our breaths ragged but slowly steadying. Raj's arm

curled around me, pulling me against his chest. I rested my head there, listening to the steady thump of his heartbeat, grounding myself in its rhythm. For the first time in years, the storm inside me was quiet. Raman's voice was nowhere. Just silence, warm and safe, broken only by the sound of Raj's breathing.

I closed my eyes, tears sliding silently down my temples. I believed him. For this one night, at least, I truly believed.

Chapter 11



I woke to the sound of curtains rustling faintly in the draft of the air conditioner. The pale yellow light of morning pooled through the fabric, soft but insistent, as though reminding me that the world beyond this room had not stopped while I had. I blinked, my lashes sticking together from the heaviness of sleep, and it took a moment to realize I wasn't alone.

Raj's arm was draped across my waist, his hand splayed lightly over my stomach as though it had fallen there by accident. His breathing was steady, deep, the kind of sleep that comes only after exhaustion. I turned my head, just slightly, to study him in this unguarded moment. His hair was mussed, a dark tumble across his forehead, his mouth parted. He looked younger, almost boyish, like this.

My chest tightened. I had thought I would feel shame in the light of day, regret at having crossed a line I'd been afraid of for so long. Instead, I felt fragile warmth, the kind that made me want to curl back into the sheets and stay suspended here, in this private bubble.

But as soon as the thought surfaced, another voice cut through, low and scathing.

Look at you. Clinging to him like some lost child. Do you even remember who you are?

Raman. His presence came like a chill draft under the door, invisible but undeniable. I stiffened, my breath catching.

Raj stirred at my sudden tension. His fingers flexed slightly at my stomach, then slid away as he blinked himself awake. "You're up already," he murmured, his voice hoarse with sleep.

I forced a smile. "Not really. Just... couldn't keep my eyes closed."

He pushed himself onto one elbow, looking down at me with a softness that made me want to cry. "Are you okay?"

My throat bobbed. "Yes," I whispered. Then, louder, "Yes. Just... hungry."

The corner of his mouth lifted. "Then we should fix that. Come on, let's get breakfast before the lobby fills up."

It was such an ordinary thing to say that I almost laughed. Ordinary. As though last night hadn't happened, as though I hadn't bared myself to him in a way that terrified me. Maybe that was exactly what I needed—that ordinariness, that lack of spectacle.

We dressed slowly, awkwardly polite about giving each other privacy. I tugged my dupatta more snugly than usual, as if the fabric could shield me from the weight of memory. Raman's voice whispered in my ear again, sharper this time.

Hungry? You were starved last night, weren't you? Do you even know what he thinks of you now?

I clenched my fists, nails digging crescents into my palms, and walked toward the door without glancing back at the mirror.

The hotel dining hall was buzzing by the time we arrived, filled with families, tourists, and the clatter of dishes. The smell of parathas and masala chai wound through the air. Raj guided me toward a corner table, his hand grazing the small of my back, protective without being possessive. I both longed for the touch and flinched under it, though I hoped he didn't notice.

We sat. A waiter poured tea into two cups, steam rising between us. I wrapped my fingers around the porcelain, needing the burn to anchor me.

"So," Raj said lightly, as if testing the air. "Big day ahead. That client call is at noon. Are you ready?"

I nodded, forcing a bite of paratha into my mouth so I wouldn't have to answer right away. The buttery crispness, the heat of pickle on my tongue—it should have comforted me, but I felt Raman on my shoulder.

He doesn't really want you, Meher. He wants your body, that's all. See how easy it was?

My jaw tightened as I chewed.

Raj studied me for a moment, then reached across the table and brushed his thumb against my knuckles where my hand rested near the cup. The contact was light, a question more than a gesture. I looked up, and the concern in his eyes undid me.

"I'm fine," I said too quickly. "Really."

"Okay," he replied softly, not pushing. But he left his hand near mine, not pulling away either.

We ate mostly in silence. Around us, children squealed, chairs scraped, and a waiter dropped a spoon with a clatter. The ordinariness of it all was jarring, as though the rest of the world refused to acknowledge the earthquake inside me.

After breakfast, Raj settled the bill before I could protest, then walked me to the cab stand outside. The morning sun was already sharp, throwing everything into unforgiving clarity.

"I'll come by the office after the client calls," he said. "Maybe we can go over your draft together."

I nodded, grateful for the excuse to keep the connection alive, terrified of what it might mean.

When he leaned in, just slightly, to brush a kiss against my forehead, I felt the eyes of the world on us—even if it was only my imagination. I pulled back quickly, murmured a goodbye, and slipped into the waiting cab.

Inside, as the vehicle jolted forward, Raman slid into the empty seat beside me. I didn't look at him, but I could feel the burn of his stare.

Slut, he whispered. *How long before he leaves you, too?*

My throat ached with the effort not to scream.

At the office, life tried to fold itself back into routine. Sunita was already at her desk, her bangles clinking as she typed,

humming a filmi song under her breath. When I walked in, Sunita gave me a sly grin.

“Madam is late today. Stayed up working, or... something else?”

I forced a laugh, sliding into my chair. “Working, of course. What else?”

“Hmm.” Sunita’s eyes glittered with teasing. “Then why is our boss humming too, eh? Did he suddenly find God?”

I bent over my keyboard, cheeks burning. Sunita chuckled and turned back to her screen, mercifully distracted.

The morning dragged on. I tried to lose myself in editing, in the click of keys and the glow of the monitor, but Raman would not be silenced.

He'll never look at you the same way again. Can't you feel it? He's pretending, but inside he's disgusted.

I pressed my palms hard against my thighs under the desk, grounding myself. Every sentence is blurred. I had to re-read the same line three times before it stuck.

At one point, Raj passed my desk, his hand brushing the edge lightly in greeting. The contact was brief, professional, but my pulse jumped. I risked a glance up, and for a moment our eyes locked. His expression was steady, reassuring. I wanted to believe it.

By noon, I was drained.

My phone buzzed. Karan's name lit the screen. Relief flooded my chest at the sight of it. I slipped into the empty conference room to answer.

"Hello?"

"Why do you sound like you've run a marathon?" Karan's voice was teasing but warm.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Just... office chaos."

"Hmm." He paused. "You sure? You don't sound fine."

My throat tightened. I looked out the window at the glare of traffic below, blinking hard. "I'll survive."

"You don't just survive, Meher," he said gently. "You live. Remember that."

The words cracked something in me. For a moment, I couldn't breathe. I bit my lip hard, holding back the sob clawing up my chest.

"Thanks," I managed. "I needed that."

"Anytime. Call me later, okay? Don't disappear."

"I won't," I promised, though I wasn't sure if it was true.

When I hung up, I felt both steadied and hollowed out. Karan was my anchor, but he didn't know what had happened last night, what new line I had crossed.

As I returned to my desk, Raj glanced up from his office, our eyes meeting through the glass. His gaze was calm, steady, like a hand extended across a gap. I lowered my eyes quickly, afraid of what I might reveal.

And in the corner of my mind, Raman laughed. Low, cold, certain.

The day crawled until evening. I went through the motions, typing, nodding at meetings, pretending to listen. Raj kept his distance, professional but present, as though he knew I needed space. Sunita teased him once more in passing, and he brushed it off with a wry smile.

But I felt the weight of every look, every unspoken word. The memory of last night pulsed inside me like a bruise—tender, impossible to ignore.

As I packed up my bag, Raj appeared at my desk. “Need a ride?” he asked, his tone casual.

I hesitated, Raman’s whisper hissing at my ear. *Say no. End it before you make it worse.*

But I couldn’t. I nodded. “Yes. Please.”

Our eyes held for a moment, longer than they should have, before I looked away.

The drive back was quiet, filled with unsaid things. Streetlights streaked across the windshield, carving our faces in alternating shadow and glow. I stared out the window, my heart hammering, while inside my head Raman’s voice coiled tighter, waiting.

I didn’t know how long I could keep balancing between the warmth I had found and the shadow that refused to release me.

But for now, I let the silence stretch, clinging to the fragile comfort of Raj’s presence beside me.

Chapter 12



The morning at the office dragged itself awake in the usual way: the hum of the ceiling fans, the click of keyboards, the metallic shriek of a chair being dragged across the tiled floor. I arrived earlier than usual, partly because I hadn't really slept after Raj dropped me back at the hotel two nights ago. I told myself I wanted to get a head start on the day's edits, but the truth was that the office was safer than the quiet of my room, where shadows shifted and voices pressed too close.

Sunita was already at her desk, a half-eaten paratha balanced on a tissue beside her mouse. "Look at you," she said the moment I walked in. "Fresh like jasmine at this hour. Don't tell me you've been out late with our dear Raj again."

I rolled my eyes and set my bag down, but my fingers fumbled longer than they should have with the zipper. "I just couldn't sleep," I muttered, pulling out my notebook.

"Couldn't sleep," Sunita echoed, wagging her eyebrows, "is usually code for someone keeping you awake."

Before I could retort, Raj appeared in the doorway, crisp in his shirt, sleeves folded neatly to the elbow. His hair was damp, the faintest whiff of shaving cream trailing with him. He carried his laptop against his side as if it weighed nothing. "Morning," he said, his voice even. His eyes flicked

to me, no longer than a second, but long enough for Sunita to notice.

“See?” Sunita whispered loudly, leaning toward my desk. “He looks at you like he’s writing a poem in his head. My God, I can feel the shayari.”

I shushed her with a sharp hiss, cheeks hot, but she only laughed and went back to her paratha.

The day unrolled in small tasks and little interruptions. I buried myself in drafting a copy for a campaign on sustainable fabrics, but every time I tried to find the right phrasing, a whisper licked at my ear. *That line is weak. He won’t be impressed. Don’t you see how he’s watching you fail?* Raman’s voice, slinking in like oil under a door.

I pressed my pen too hard against the page, tearing the paper.

“Need coffee?” Raj’s voice broke the moment. He was standing by my desk, his smile easy but not careless. “You look like you’re about to strangle that notebook.”

My laugh came out jagged. “Maybe I should.”

“I’ll make it double strong,” he said. “You’ll thank me later.” He left before I could object, and the empty air where he had stood seemed to mock me. *See how he pities you. He fetches coffee because he thinks you can’t manage simple work.*

“Shut up,” I whispered under my breath.

“What?” Sunita asked, not looking up from her screen.

“Nothing,” I replied quickly, twisting my pen between my fingers.

The coffee arrived, scalding hot, in a mug from the break room. Raj placed it on my desk with the same quiet attentiveness he always carried, like he was careful not to touch me but wanted me to know he could. I avoided his eyes, afraid they’d reflect too much of what I was hiding.

By lunchtime, the office was buzzing with chatter. Boxes of samosas had been ordered in for a client meeting, and everyone crowded around the conference table. Sunita balanced two on her plate and jabbed my side. “Eat, yaar. You look like a ghost.”

“I’m fine,” I said, but my stomach grumbled loudly enough to betray me. Raj was across the table, tearing a samosa in half and dipping it into the chutney. His tie was slightly loose now, a shadow of weariness around his eyes. He caught me staring and offered me the other half without a word.

I took it, fingers brushing his for the briefest second. Warmth jolted up my arm, so sharp it almost hurt. And just as quickly: *He’s only kind because he doesn’t know what you are. Once he sees it, he’ll run. They always do.* Raman’s voice, curling smug around my ribs.

The rest of the day blurred into endless emails and drafts. Around four, Raj appeared at my desk again, leaning one shoulder against the partition. “We’ve got the Sharma client dinner tonight. They asked if you could come. It’ll help, since you understand the content side better.”

My throat went dry. Dinner. With him. Outside the neat walls of the office. I nodded, too quickly. “Of course.”

“Good,” he said softly, almost like it was just for me. “I’ll pick you up at seven.”

Sunita, who had been pretending not to eavesdrop, grinned like a cat when he walked away. “Dinner with the boss. Officially, client dinner. Unofficially—well, may the gods of romance bless you.”

I smacked her arm with a file, laughing despite myself. But the laughter cracked as I gathered my things at the end of the day. In the quiet bathroom mirror, while reapplying my lipstick, I heard Raman’s voice again, low and deliberate: *Dinner is just another word for betrayal. Don’t forget who’s been with you when no one else was.*

My hand shook, smearing the lipstick at the corner of my mouth.

I scrubbed the corner of my mouth with a tissue until my skin stung, then forced my hand steady enough to fix the color. The fluorescent light above the mirror hummed like an insect trapped in a jar. I told myself to breathe, to focus on the small, ordinary rituals—lipstick, comb, earrings. The armor of normalcy.

By seven sharp, Raj was waiting downstairs in the car. He wasn’t flashy—no showy vehicle, just a clean, practical sedan—but he stood outside it as if it were a chariot. When he saw me, his face softened, the lines of fatigue smoothing.

“You look... good,” he said simply, as though the words had weight.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, muttered something about it being just a dinner, and slid into the passenger seat. The leather was cool beneath my palms, but the space felt charged, a capsule carrying us into something neither of us had named yet.

The restaurant was warm and low-lit, all polished wood and muted conversations. The Sharmas were already seated, a cheerful couple whose enthusiasm for digital marketing outpaced their understanding of it. Raj handled them smoothly, his tone balanced between authority and charm. I filled in when needed, my words steady despite the anxious buzz in my chest.

Every so often, his knee brushed mine under the table—not intentional, not withdrawn either. Each time, my breath snagged.

But the whispers came, threading through the candlelit air: *Look at you, pretending. Do you think he won't notice the cracks? He'll see you for what you are, and he'll leave. Just like everyone.*

I pressed my hands together under the table, hard enough that my knuckles whitened. Raj glanced at me once, concerned about flickering, but didn't press. Instead, he kept the conversation flowing, steering the dinner until the Sharmas were laughing and promising to sign off on the campaign.

After they left, the table felt strangely private, as though the city had dimmed around us. Raj leaned back in his chair, loosening his tie. "You did well," he said, not as a boss but as something gentler.

"I barely said anything."

"You said what mattered." His eyes lingered on me, serious now. "You always do."

The silence that followed was not the easy kind. It stretched, pulling at my ribs, making me hyper-aware of the rise and fall of his chest, the way his fingers tapped once against the glass before stilling. I thought of the hotel room, of the closeness that had already tipped into something irreversible.

And then: *You think he loves you? He pities you. He doesn't know the filth you carry.* Raman's voice, curling acidic in my ear. I flinched.

Raj noticed. "Hey," he said softly. "You okay?"

I nodded too quickly, my throat too tight to form words. He let it be, paid the bill, and walked me back to the car.

The ride was quiet, filled only with the rhythm of traffic and the occasional hum of the engine. I wanted to tell him to stay, to not leave me in the silence of my room. But when we reached my hotel, I couldn't force the words past my lips.

"Goodnight," he said. There was warmth in it, but also restraint, as though he understood the fragility of what held us together.

I watched the taillights disappear, my body aching with the weight of unsaid things.

Inside my room, the walls closed in almost immediately. I set my bag down, sat on the edge of the bed, and pressed my palms to my eyes. Raman's voice came clearer than ever.

Pathetic. You'd let him touch you and then send him away. You belong to me, not to him.

"No," I whispered, shaking my head. "You're not—"

My phone buzzed. Karan's name lit the screen. Relief flooded me as I answered.

"Hey," he said, his tone casual but threaded with concern. "You sound... different. Is everything alright?"

I forced a laugh. "Just tired. Long dinner."

"Dinner with Raj?" His pause carried more weight than the question itself. "Just—be careful. I don't mean don't trust him. I mean... don't lose yourself."

My throat tightened. I wanted to tell him everything—about the whispers, about the shadows, about how I wasn't sure where reality ended. But the words stayed locked. "I'll be fine," I said instead.

"Promise me you'll call if it gets too heavy."

"I promise."

We said goodnight, and the silence returned.

I lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling fan spinning lazily. The echo of Raj's voice, the steadiness of Karan's, the venom of Raman's—they tangled together until I couldn't tell which one was real. My chest hurt with the pull of them, my body suspended between desire, guilt, and longing for peace.

When sleep finally came, it was fractured, full of shifting faces that blurred into one another.

Chapter 13



I woke with my cheek pressed to the pillow in a damp crescent of sweat. The fan above ticked in uneven rotations, the sound more grating than soothing, as if it were mocking my sleeplessness. Dawn seeped through the hotel curtains in thin blades, yellowing the walls and catching on the rim of the glass water tumbler I'd left half-drunk on the bedside table. My body ached from twisting through nightmares I couldn't remember, though I knew exactly who had been speaking to me through them. Raman had been there—his voice, cutting and familiar, repeating my name until it throbbed in my skull.

"Up already?" The whisper came from the far corner, casual, teasing. He leaned against the mirror as if he'd been waiting all night. His reflection was wrong—his body looked a little too straight, his head tilted at an unnatural angle. "Big day with your boss, hmm? Or are you planning to keep staring at him from your desk like a schoolgirl?"

I sat up quickly, clutching the thin blanket to my chest, though I knew it was pointless. He wasn't really there. I dragged my fingers through my hair, forcing myself to breathe. "You're not here," I muttered under my breath, a mantra I had been practicing. "You're not real."

But his laugh filled the room anyway, rich and familiar. “Say it all you want. Doesn’t change a thing.”

I pushed out of bed before he could say more. The tile was cold beneath my feet. I shuffled into the tiny bathroom, locked the door even though I knew locks meant nothing, and stood under the harsh white light. My own face looked fragile in the mirror, the skin beneath my eyes puffy and bruised from lack of sleep. I washed quickly, letting the water run longer than necessary just to drown him out.

Dressing took longer. The blouse I had ironed the night before had developed a crease across the shoulder from how I’d left it. I smoothed it uselessly with my palm, hissed at myself under my breath, then reached for a different one—a pale lavender that still smelled faintly of starch. I paired it with black slacks and tied my hair in a low bun, though strands already threatened to fall free. Raman watched all of it, perched now on the edge of the sink.

“Lavender, huh?” he said, tilting his head like he was considering a chess move. “Trying to impress Raj? Bet he’ll notice. He notices everything about you. Don’t think I have seen.”

My stomach tightened. I ignored him, slipped on my flats, and reached for my bag. The pen at the bottom clicked against my phone. The phone vibrated a moment later—Sunita, a simple “Don’t be late today, boss has his sharp eyes out 😊.” I smiled faintly at the emoji, but the smile was brittle. I left quickly, the door shutting with more force than I intended.

The streets outside were already awake. A milkman pedaled past, balancing two rattling cans on either side of his bicycle. A vegetable vendor hollered the day's prices into the haze of auto horns. The air smelled of fried kachoris, petrol, and damp newspaper. I flagged down a rickshaw and climbed in, hugging my bag to my lap. As we jerked forward, Raman slid into the seat beside me, elbow brushing mine.

"You could walk, you know," he said, as though we were children again, daring each other to skip tuition. "But no, you like rushing, pretending you have important places to be. Pretending you belong."

I clenched my jaw, fixed my eyes on the rickshaw driver's turbaned head. I whispered, so soft only my lips moved, "Not real. Not real."

But he grinned wider, leaned close, and breathed against my ear: "Raj would disagree."

At the office, the lobby smelled faintly of disinfectant and brewing tea from the canteen tucked at the back. The security guard nodded, scribbling my name into the register. I adjusted my bag strap and made my way to my floor, the lift mirrors showing me a woman trying hard not to look frayed.

The open office hummed already—keyboards clacking, phones ringing, snippets of Hindi and English tangled in deadlines. Sunita spotted me instantly, waving like a windmill. "Madam late-latif! Just on time for the lion's roar."

I let myself smile, tension easing a little. I dropped my bag onto my desk and turned my computer on. Across the room,

Raj stood by his workstation, head bent over a printout. He wore charcoal trousers and a pale shirt rolled at the sleeves. His hair was neatly combed, his jaw clean-shaven. When he raised his head, his eyes brushed across the room almost by accident—catching mine. He nodded once, a quiet acknowledgement, then turned back to the paper.

“God, look at him,” Sunita whispered, leaning across the divider. “Even his cuffs behave like soldiers. How does anyone stay that tidy in this heat? I sweat if I blink too hard.”

I laughed softly, shaking my head, but the sound died when Raman appeared behind Raj, mimicking his posture, tilting his head. “You really think he’s looking at you? He looks past you, Meher. Through you. He wants someone else, someone whole. Not you.”

My fingers froze on the keyboard. Sunita didn’t notice, already busy complaining about her commute. I forced myself to log in, the password slipping from my fingers twice before it took.

The morning dragged into a fog of emails, tracked changes, and red-highlighted comments. Every time I settled into a sentence, Raman muttered something from just beyond my shoulder: “That’s clumsy phrasing. Raj will think you’re slow.” Or: “You’re stammering again, even in text. Embarrassing.” My cursor blinked like a rebuke. Twice, I caught myself whispering rebuttals under my breath, only to see Sunita glance sideways with a curious look. I quickly coughed and pretended to read aloud from the screen.

By noon, my head throbbed. I rubbed at my temples, aware of Raj's footsteps as he moved through the aisle. He paused at my desk, setting down a folder. "Draft for Sharma & Co.," he said, voice calm, even kind. "I thought you'd want to take the first pass."

My throat caught. "Yes, of course," I managed. I reached for the folder, but my hand trembled just enough that the edge slipped. He steadied it for me without comment, eyes lingering for a heartbeat longer than necessary. Then he left, already dictating notes into his phone.

Raman's laughter scraped inside my skull. "See? He pities you. He holds things for you like a child. Pathetic."

I pressed my nails into my palm until it hurt.

Lunch break came as a relief. Sunita dragged me down to the street stalls, chattering about a TV serial twist that apparently everyone but me had seen. The paratha stands are steamed with oil and butter. A man slapped dough flat with his palms, flipping it onto the tawa where it hissed and browned. The air smelled of coriander, fried onions, and heat. We found a spot at the side, balancing steel plates on a cracked plastic table.

"Eat, na," Sunita urged, tearing into her paratha with chutney. "You always nibble like a bird."

I smiled faintly, tearing a corner of mine. Raman sat opposite, elbows on the table, smirking. "She eats carefully when Raj might walk by. Don't want him to see her chewing, poor thing."

I tried to ignore him, but the food thickened in my throat. I forced myself to chew, nodding at Sunita's story about her landlord. Midway, Raj appeared, having bought tea from the vendor two stalls down. He inclined his head in greeting. "Mind if I—?" He gestured at the spare chair.

Sunita brightened. "Of course! Come, boss ji. Sit and scold us for carbs."

Raj smiled faintly and sat, placing his paper cup down. He didn't scold—just asked how the paratha was, whether the chutney was too spicy. His voice carried no judgment, only simple politeness. Yet I felt Raman's nails trace invisible lines across my wrist. "He's watching your mouth," he whispered. "He notices how you lick your fingers. Shameless."

My hands trembled as I set the paratha down. Raj noticed. "Too spicy?" he asked gently. I shook my head quickly, managing, "Just hot." He nodded, sipping his tea. Conversation circled around us, Sunita carrying most of it, while Raman's whisper burned in my ear.

Back at the office, the afternoon pressed heavier. The Sharma & Co. draft loomed like a test I was bound to fail. Raj stopped by again, leaning against my divider, asking if I'd be ready by evening. His tone was neutral, but I read the expectation in it. I promised I would. After he left, Raman crouched by my chair, his mouth level with my ear. "You'll embarrass yourself. He'll never look at you the same."

My vision swam. I typed anyway, each keystroke an act of defiance. But halfway through a paragraph, I realized I had

been whispering—not the words on the page, but replies to Raman. Sunita glanced up, eyebrows raised. “Haan? What did you say?”

“Nothing,” I said too quickly. My cheeks burned. I bent back to the screen, praying for the clock to move faster.

By the time five approached, the document blurred. The client meeting loomed in thirty minutes. Raj’s voice carried from the conference room, calm and composed. Sunita packed up noisily, muttering about traffic. Raman’s figure loomed larger now, his face sharper, his words louder. “You don’t belong in that room. You don’t belong anywhere.”

I gripped the edge of my desk, nails white. The fluorescent lights hummed, the air conditioning rattled, and my own pulse roared in my ears. The breakdown hovered just behind my ribs, waiting.

The conference room was a square box of glass and steel, smelling faintly of marker ink and old air-conditioning. On the far wall, a whiteboard gleamed, crowded with half-erased graphs. A long table stretched across the room, bottles of water set neatly at each seat. Raj stood at the head, sleeves still rolled up, his notes laid out in crisp stacks. His calm presence filled the room, unhurried and precise, as though he had already planned for every possible question the client might throw at us.

I sat three chairs down, my laptop open, cursor blinking on the Sharma draft I had polished until my temples screamed. I had rehearsed silently for hours, telling myself I could

handle just five minutes of reading aloud. Just five minutes, then I could sink into invisibility again.

But Raman was already there, crouched on the tabletop in front of me, smirking with cruel delight. “Ready to embarrass yourself? He’ll regret giving you this chance. He’ll see what I’ve seen all along—you’re nothing without me.”

I clenched my fists beneath the table. Across from me, Raj looked up, gave me a quick nod of reassurance. It should have steadied me. Instead, Raman leaned forward until his face eclipsed Raj’s. “He doesn’t care. He only wants your failure.”

My chest grew tight. I flipped through my slides, barely registering the text. Sunita whispered encouragement from my right, a subtle “Don’t worry, yaar, you’ve got this.”

The client walked in then, two men in buttoned shirts, one already scrolling through his phone. Chairs scraped, greetings were exchanged. Raj opened with calm confidence, setting the stage, drawing their attention with the measured ease of someone used to command. Then he gestured toward me. “Meher will walk you through the content draft.”

I swallowed hard, standing. My knees nearly buckled, but I forced myself upright. The screen glared with my first slide. Words I had written stared back, suddenly foreign. I cleared my throat. “Good afternoon. Our approach with Sharma & Co. is to—”

“Pathetic,” Raman cut in. His voice was sharp, merciless, threading through my own words.

I faltered, covered with a cough, and tried again. “—to build a digital strategy that emphasizes—”

“Louder,” Raman barked. “You sound like a scared child.”

My voice cracked. One of the clients raised an eyebrow. Raj’s gaze flicked to me, subtle but watchful.

I tried to keep reading, but the sentences twisted as Raman kept pace. “They’re bored already. Look at their eyes. They’re mocking you. Raj is ashamed—see how he won’t meet your eyes?”

My throat constricted. Sweat prickled beneath my blouse. The words blurred.

“Stop,” I whispered, too low for anyone else.

“What did you say?” one of the clients asked.

I blinked rapidly. “Sorry—just... clearing my throat.”

Raj stepped in smoothly, filling the silence, guiding the discussion back on track. For a moment, I was grateful—until Raman snarled, his face inches from mine. “You’re weak. Always needing someone to save you. Without me, you’re nothing.”

I whispered it again, louder this time, before I could stop myself. “Stop.”

The word hung heavy. Everyone looked at me. Sunita’s eyes widened, confused. Raj’s lips parted, searching my face with concern.

My hands trembled around the laptop. I tried to recover, stammering, “I—I meant stop the slide. Move to the next—” but the lie was brittle.

Raman laughed, triumphant. “They see it now. All of them. You’re crazy.”

Something inside me snapped. I shoved the laptop shut with a loud clap. “Shut up!”

The room froze.

I realized too late that my voice had rung out into the silence, not just in my head but into the air, clear and undeniable. Raj’s brow furrowed. One of the clients leaned back in his chair, startled. Sunita pressed a hand to her mouth.

My breath came shallow, panicked. My eyes darted wildly, as though I could still see Raman there on the table, grinning at the chaos he’d caused.

Raj rose slowly, his voice calm, steady. “It’s alright, Meher. You don’t have to—”

But I couldn’t hear him. I heard only Raman’s laughter, saw only his shadow leaning close. I stumbled back from the table, chair legs screeching. “Leave me alone!” I cried, my voice breaking.

Raj’s hand twitched as though to reach me, but he stopped, his eyes softening instead. He saw something the others didn’t—the way my gaze fixed on a presence that wasn’t there. The realization darkened his face, not with judgment but with sorrow.

“Meher,” he said gently, but with finality, “you should rest. I’ll handle this.”

I shook my head violently, tears spilling. “No—no, you don’t understand. He won’t let me—”

But Raj didn’t argue. He turned toward the clients, smoothing over the moment with professional grace, excusing my sudden illness. His voice was even, practiced, but his eyes followed me as I fled the room, wide and pained.

I stumbled down the hallway, breath tearing through my chest. Raman followed, triumphant, his laughter echoing. “See? Even Raj knows you’re broken. Even he won’t touch you now.”

I pressed my palms over my ears, but the voice came from inside. Tears blurred the world. I barely registered shoving through the stairwell door, descending too fast, my foot nearly slipping on the last step.

By the time I burst into the street, the air was thick with exhaust and noise, but none of it drowned him out. My breath came in short, ragged bursts as I pushed through the crowd, not knowing where I was going — only that I had to move.

Behind me, I heard someone shouting my name. Once. Twice. Louder.

“Meher!”

I turned for a split second, disoriented, and through the blur of traffic and headlights, I saw him, Karan, weaving through people, his face etched with panic.

When the knock came later, I had curled myself into the corner of my bed, knees hugged tight, hair damp from the shower I'd taken in a futile attempt to wash him away.

"Meher," came Karan's voice, muffled but steady. "Open the door."

I froze. He knocked again, firmer. "I saw you running, Meher. You scared the hell out of me. Please, open the door."

My chest ached. I dragged myself up, feet heavy, and cracked the door. His face was tired, worried, but not surprised. He stepped in without asking, shutting the door behind him.

For a moment, he just looked at me, really looked. His jaw was tight, his hands clenched. Then he spoke, voice low but hard.

"Enough."

I flinched.

"You can't keep doing this," he said. "Pretending he's here. Pretending you're fine."

I shook my head, tears spilling over. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't," he said softly, stepping closer. His voice broke a little. "But you can't keep running. You need help. Real help."

He reached for my hands, holding them still, his touch warm and steady. "Look at me," he said quietly. "Look. At. Me."

My eyes met him through the blur of tears. He didn't flinch.

"You're going back to therapy," he said simply. "Tomorrow. No excuses."

Raman's voice hissed immediately: "Don't listen. He'll take me from you. He'll erase me. You'll be nothing."

I sobbed, clutching Karan's hands as if they were the only solid thing in the world. "He won't stop," I whispered.

Karan pulled me against his chest, holding me tight. His voice rumbled low, steady in my ear. "Then we'll make him stop. Together."

Raman raged, shouting, spitting words I couldn't untangle. But Karan's arms held firm, steady, like an anchor in a storm. For the first time in years, I let myself collapse completely—body trembling, tears soaking his shirt—while Raman's laughter cracked and faltered in the corners of my mind.

Chapter 14



I woke late, my head pounding as if someone had been hammering nails into my skull all night. Sunlight streamed through the hotel's thin curtains, slicing into my eyes with a brightness that felt cruel. I rolled over, burying my face in the pillow, but the ache didn't retreat. My stomach twisted. The memory of yesterday clung to my skin like sweat — the way I had screamed, the way people had stared, the way Raj had stood frozen, helpless, while Karan grabbed me by the shoulders and refused to let go.

"You embarrassed yourself," Raman's voice murmured in my ear, silk covering a blade. "In front of everyone. In front of him. Raj knows you're damaged goods now."

I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I could drown the voice, but it only grew sharper.

"You think Karan saved you? He dragged you out like a child having a tantrum. You should be ashamed."

The hotel door clicked open. I flinched. Only Karan had a key. I pulled the blanket over my face, muffling the sound of his footsteps. The bed dipped as he sat beside me.

"You didn't eat dinner," Karan said softly. No scolding, no judgment — just the fact. "So I brought parathas and tea. Fresh, hot. You'll feel better."

I stayed silent. Raman snickered in my mind. Tell him to go away. He doesn't understand. He'll force you into that room with the doctor again, and you'll lose me forever.

The smell of ghee and spiced potatoes wafted through the blanket. My stomach growled, betraying me. Karan chuckled faintly, and the sound cut through my tension like warm water.

"See? Even your stomach knows I'm right." He tugged at the blanket until my face peeked out. His eyes were tired, but steady. Not pitying. Not frightened. Just... there.

I sat up slowly, leaning against the headboard, my hair a tangled mess. He broke a paratha piece, dipped it in curd, and held it out. I wanted to refuse, but the hunger gnawed deeper. I took it, chewing mechanically. The food felt heavy but grounding, something solid against the chaos in my chest.

When the plate was empty and the tea cooled, Karan finally spoke the words I dreaded. "Meher... today we try again. Therapy."

My throat closed. I shook my head once, sharply. "No."

"Yes," he said, just as firmly. "I was patient yesterday. I let you cry it out, I let you sleep. But we can't keep running in circles. This is destroying you."

Raman's laughter was acidic. Destroying you? Therapy will destroy you. Don't you see? They want to erase me. They want to cut me out like a tumor. Without me, you're nothing but a hollow body.

I clutched the blanket. "I can't," I whispered. "They'll ask me questions, they'll... dig. I don't want to dig."

"You've already been digging alone for years," Karan said, his voice low but unyielding. "And every time, you bury yourself deeper. Let someone else hold the spade for once."

Tears blurred my vision. I hated how he could always corner me with logic wrapped in gentleness. I hated even more how part of me wanted to give in.

Two hours later, I found myself in the waiting room of a clinic tucked into a quiet neighborhood. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic and sandalwood. A framed watercolor of mountains hung on the wall, as if serenity could be painted into being. I sat stiffly in the chair while Karan filled out forms at the reception. Raman loomed beside me, invisible to all but me, arms crossed.

"You look pathetic," he whispered. "Dragged here like a prisoner. Do you think talking to a stranger will undo what we've been through? Do you want to betray me like that?"

My heart pounded. I wanted to run. But then Karan's hand brushed mine lightly, steadying. His presence was an anchor I hadn't asked for but desperately needed.

"Meher?" a voice called. A middle-aged woman in a plain cotton sari stood by the door, her smile professional but warm. "I'm Dr. Malhotra. Please, come in."

My legs felt like stone, but somehow I moved, Karan's nod pushing me forward. Raman followed, muttering curses. The therapist's room was simple — two chairs angled toward each other, a shelf of books, a small fountain trickling

in the corner. No harsh lights, no intimidating desk. Still, it felt suffocating.

Dr. Malhotra gestured for me to sit. "Take your time," she said, voice like a lullaby. "We don't have to rush."

I perched on the chair's edge, my eyes darting everywhere but the therapist's face. My pulse raced. I wanted to scream. Raman crouched near me, his hand brushing my knee — cold, possessive.

"So, Meher," Dr. Malhotra began softly, "tell me what brought you here today."

"She didn't bring herself," Raman sneered. "He did. Karan forced her."

My lips trembled. "I... I don't know."

"That's okay," the therapist said. "Sometimes not knowing is where we start. Maybe you can tell me how you're feeling. Right now."

"Trapped," I blurted. "I feel trapped."

Raman smiled cruelly. Good girl. Tell her how you're trapped with me.

Dr. Malhotra nodded slowly. "Trapped. By what?"

My throat closed. I wanted to tell him, but my tongue froze. I twisted my fingers together, nails biting into skin. "By... memories," I managed.

The therapist didn't press. "Memories can feel heavy, yes. Sometimes they stay with us longer than we want. Do these memories... talk to you?"

I stiffened. Raman's grip on my knee tightened, icy. Say no. Say no, or she'll take me away.

"No," I said quickly, too quickly. My voice cracked.

The therapist tilted her head, watching gently. "It's okay if they do. There's no shame in it."

Tears burned my eyes. I wanted to confess. I wanted to shout that Raman was sitting right here, breathing down my neck. But the fear of losing him — the fear of the emptiness that would follow — strangled me.

Raman leaned close, whispering, "Good. Don't betray me. You and I, we've survived everything together. Without me, you're nothing."

I stood suddenly, chair scraping the floor. "I can't. I don't want this." My chest heaved. "I can't sit here and... and talk."

Dr. Malhotra didn't move, didn't panic. "That's okay too, Meher. We'll go at your pace. If all you can do today is sit in this room for five minutes, that's still progress."

But I was already backing toward the door, tears blurring the bookshelves into smudges. I stumbled out into the waiting room where Karan leapt to his feet, alarmed. He caught my shoulders, but I shook him off.

"I'm not doing this!" I gasped. "I can't. Don't ever bring me here again."

I bolted outside into the humid street, the noise of traffic crashing against my ears. Raman followed, smug. "See? I told you. You don't need them. You only need me."

My vision swam. I wanted to collapse. I wanted to scream until my lungs tore. Karan caught up, grabbing my hand, forcing me to stop. His grip was steady but not cruel.

“Meher, listen to me,” he said, his voice fierce now, breaking through my storm. “You walked into that room. That was brave. That was something. Don’t say you can’t because you just did.”

I sobbed, shaking my head, but his words stuck like thorns. Raman hissed furiously, but for the first time, his voice wavered under Karan’s strength.

By the time we reached the hotel again, I was trembling so violently I could barely fit the key into the lock. Karan took it from me, opened the door, and guided me inside without a word. I collapsed onto the bed face-down, my body a bundle of raw nerves. Every muscle ached, every thought scraped at my skull.

Raman sat cross-legged on the chair by the window, smirking. “That was pathetic. Running out like a scared little girl. Did you see Karan’s face? He’s wasting his time on you.”

I groaned and shoved my face deeper into the pillow. “Shut up,” I whispered. “Just shut up.”

Karan, misinterpreting, said gently, “Alright. No talking. Just rest.” He covered me with a light blanket, turned off the harsh overhead light, and let the room settle into a dim quiet. The sounds of traffic outside pulsed faintly through the window, distant but real — a reminder that the world kept moving, uncaring of my collapse.

He didn't leave. I sensed him sitting at the small table, shuffling papers from his bag, probably responding to emails, maybe reviewing code or client briefs. The mundane rhythm of him tapping keys, scribbling notes, shifting in the chair — it was maddeningly ordinary. And somehow, it kept me tethered.

Raman leaned forward, sneering, "See how boring he is? Always working, always hovering. He doesn't know how to see you like I do. He'll never understand you."

But Karan's presence pressed steadier against my panic than Raman's voice. I drifted in and out of shallow sleep, each time waking with a start, half expecting to find the room empty. But Karan was always there. The laptop glow softened his face, his brow furrowed in concentration, his glasses slipping down his nose. Every so often, he looked over at me, checking without making it obvious.

When I woke up again properly, the clock read past midnight. The smell of food tickled my nose — not parathas this time but khichdi, warm and simple. Karan appeared at my side with a bowl.

"You haven't eaten since morning," he said quietly. "This is light. Try a little."

My stomach was cramped with both hunger and dread. "I'm not—"

"You are," he cut in. "Just a few bites. Please."

I obeyed. The rice and lentils slid down easier than I expected, comfort masquerading as blandness. Karan didn't

press me to finish, just set the bowl aside when I shook my head.

For a long while, neither of us spoke. I stared at the shadows the curtains made on the wall. Finally, my voice came out, raw and small. "Why do you keep doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Taking care of me. Putting up with this. With me."

Karan leaned back, exhaling slowly. His face was unreadable in the half-light. "Because you matter to me, Meher. Even when you're breaking apart. Especially then."

My throat tightened. Raman rose from the chair, pacing, his eyes burning. "He's lying. He pities you. He'll abandon you when it gets too heavy. I'm the one who stays."

I pressed my palms to my temples. "Stop it," I muttered.

"Meher?" Karan's voice sharpened, alert.

"Nothing," I whispered. I wanted to explain, wanted to scream that Raman was poisoning everything, but the shame was unbearable.

Karan didn't push. He stood and adjusted the blanket around my shoulders, a gesture so gentle it made me ache. "Sleep. Tomorrow will be better."

The next few days blurred, but not in the usual suffocating haze. Karan imposed a rhythm on my life, subtle but steady. He made sure I ate at least one proper meal a day, dragged me out for short walks when I wanted to curl up indoors,

even bought me a small notebook and insisted I scribble something in it daily — a word, a sentence, anything.

Raman hissed at every act. “He’s training you like a pet. Don’t you see how pathetic this is? You used to have dignity.” But the routine anchored me, even when I hated it.

On the third morning, Karan spoke over breakfast, his tone deliberately casual. “Dr. Malhotra called. She can see you again today. Late afternoon.”

My spoon froze midair. “No.”

“Yes,” he said simply.

My chest tightened. The memory of the last session clawed at my ribs. “I can’t—”

“You can,” Karan interrupted. “Not because it’s easy. But because I’ll be with you before and after. And because hiding from this hasn’t worked.”

Raman slammed his fist on the windowsill, though only I flinched. “Don’t you dare go back there. She’ll rip me out of you. She’ll erase me. You’ll be empty.”

I shut my eyes. “What if I fail again?”

Karan reached across the table, covering my hand with his. His skin was warm, grounding. “Then you fail again. And we tried a third time. And a fourth. Until one day, you don’t fail. That’s how this works.”

My breath hitched. I wanted to believe him. I wanted the certainty in his voice to be mine.

By four o'clock, I was back in the softly lit room, heart hammering. Raman loomed larger than ever, pacing like a caged beast, his fury palpable. "Don't do this, Meher. Don't you dare."

Dr. Malhotra greeted me with the same calm smile. "I'm glad you came back. That already means something."

I sat, hands knotted in my lap. I couldn't meet the therapist's eyes.

"Last time was hard," Dr. Malhotra said gently. "That's normal. Facing pain is frightening. But you came back. That tells me part of you wants something different."

My throat burned. "I don't know what I want."

"Sometimes we don't. That's alright. Let's start smaller. Can you tell me about one moment this week that felt unbearable?"

Raman snarled. "Don't answer. Don't betray me."

But something cracked in me. The memory of screaming in the café, of Raj's stunned face, of Karan's desperate grip — it surged up.

"I... lost control," I whispered. "I screamed. In public. People stared. I saw... things. People didn't understand."

Dr. Malhotra leaned in slightly. "What did you see?"

My lips trembled. Raman crouched beside my chair, seething. "Say nothing. If you expose me, I'll never forgive you."

My hands shook violently. "I saw someone who isn't... isn't really there. But he felt real. He felt closer than anyone."

The words hung in the air like broken glass. Tears spilled before I could stop them.

Dr. Malhotra's voice was steady, careful. "That must feel very confusing. And very lonely."

I nodded frantically, sobbing now. "He's always there. He won't leave me alone. Sometimes he's kind, sometimes he's cruel. But he never leaves."

Raman's face twisted with rage. "Liar. You love me. You need me. Don't let her poison you against me."

Dr. Malhotra asked softly, "What's his name?"

My chest seized. I opened my mouth — and Raman slapped me across the face. The sting wasn't physical, but my whole body jerked.

"Don't you dare," he hissed.

Karan, waiting outside, must have heard something because the door creaked. But I shook my head violently. "No," I gasped. "Don't come in."

Dr. Malhotra didn't flinch at my outburst. "It's alright, Meher. You're safe here. If you can't say it now, that's okay. Just know that whatever this figure is, he doesn't define you."

Something shifted. Raman's outline flickered, as if the edges of him blurred. His eyes burned with betrayal. "You're choosing them over me?"

I covered my face, sobbing. "I'm so tired," I whispered. "I don't want this anymore."

Dr. Malhotra's tone softened further. "That's a powerful truth. You don't want this anymore. That's where we begin."

The session ended with tissues soaked through and me trembling like a leaf, but a strange lightness clung to my ribcage — fragile, alien, but real. As I walked out, Karan stood instantly, his eyes searching my face.

I shook my head, unable to form words, but he read the smallest shift in me. Relief, exhaustion, a beginning. He slipped his arm lightly around my shoulders and guided me out.

Raman followed, but his shape was thinner, his steps unsteady. He glared at Karan with venom but said nothing.

For the first time, his silence was louder than his voice.

Chapter 15



It had been two weeks since I moved into the new flat, and everything felt different—perhaps because it had to. The walls were unfamiliar, the floors echoed with every step, and even the smallest tasks felt amplified, as if I were learning to navigate a landscape that didn't yet know me. The days after the second round of therapy folded into one another like crumpled sheets: small rituals, appointments, quiet arguments that dissolved into exhausted silences. Karan kept a calendar on his phone with blocks of time colored in—appointments with Dr. Malhotra, calls he'd promised to make, walks we would take. He moved through the schedule like someone shepherding a fragile animal through a world that had suddenly grown strange.

Living here, everything was sharper, more immediate—the way sunlight pooled on the floor, the echo of my footsteps, the air that sometimes tightened around my ribs until each breath was work. I lived inside a bruise. Sometimes the world felt too bright: a coffee shop's reflected light, a child's laugh in the street. Other times, it pressed down so hard I could barely move. I had learned to live with the small tremors—the way my hands shook when I tried to pour tea, the way a familiar song could pull me into a place where voices crowded the edges of my mind. I knew the pattern of warning now, the small tunnel of quiet before the storm. I

tried to tell myself I could predict it; I also knew how quickly prediction failed when the voice inside grew teeth.

Raman was louder in the mornings. He prowled the edges of sleep and waking, a tide of scathing commentary that hissed in my ear the instant I opened my eyes. He called me names under his breath, rewrote my memories into accusations, convinced me that every small kindness I accepted from Karan or Raj was charity—and that charity meant pity, and pity meant abandonment.

Karan would make me tea, watch me eat, and when I faltered, he would say something small and true—“We made it through this morning,” or “You’re still here” and those phrases stitched me back together in thin, temporary seams.

The office days were a game of small victories. I answered an email without dissolving. I sat through an hour of edits and contributed a line that Raj liked out loud. I felt proud in quick, flashing bursts, and then Raman would call me ugly names or tell me that the compliment had been cruelly given because they all wanted to be rid of me. Those thoughts rolled through like pebbles, and I picked them up and carried them in pockets heavy with shame.

One evening, as August pressed the city with humid heat, Karan stayed late at work and meant to come by my flat to check in, but a last-minute client call stretched, then stretched again.

He texted: *I'll be there by eleven. If you're awake, leave the light on.*

Minutes turned into an hour. I read and reread the message, the words failing to contain the small panic braiding through my chest.

The corridor outside my room hummed with the quiet sound of late arrivals and the distant thump of a television someone else left on. I stood by the window and watched the city lights, streaks of passing cars—feeling both removed from it and swallowed by it. The terrace outside my flat was flat and low, a slab of concrete with a railing that had rusted along the top. I had never thought of heights as anything more than a view, until that night when the air felt too tight and my thoughts bent toward an end I had been carrying for years.

Raman was at his most persuasive then, a velvet rope that tightened with every inhale. Jump. Stop pretending. Finish this mess so you can stop feeling ashamed. They'll all move on, and you'll finally be quiet.

I told myself no. I told myself a thousand tiny reasons to stay. I thought of Karan in his neat shirt, the way he leaned his elbow on the kitchen counter and asked if I remembered the name of a vegetable I liked as a child. I thought of Sunita's ridiculous gossip and Raj's steady, watchful patience that was not banality but care. The memories crowded and recoiled at once.

I climbed the stairs mechanically. The terrace door was cool when I pushed it open; the air outside hit my face like a slap. Somewhere below, a late bus belched exhaust; the lullaby of the city sounded indifferent. I walked to the edge, hands

gripping the rusted railing, and looked down at the lights as the horizon blurred.

For a while, I simply listened to the beat of the city and the beat in my own ears. The thought of stepping forward was not cinematic; there was no sudden swell of music, no clear revelation. It felt like an ache that had been settling for years, finally coming to a point. The voices became a chorus, sharpening into one imperative: Stop, now. I closed my eyes and let the wind feel like an answer.

I did not think in sentences. I thought in images: my parents' framed faces from years ago that I had dragged my guilt behind like a stubborn animal; the reflection of laughter that did not belong to me. I sensed Karan's absence as a physical lack—his phone buzzing in another room, his shoulder not there in the bed beside me, and realized how much I had been counting on that shoulder to be a shore.

Raman crowned that moment in honeyed reason. It is a kindness to them. A kindness to end the trouble you are in.

The railing under my hands was cold. Concrete scraped on my palms. The air smelled of dust and something fried nearby. For a beat, nothing moved. Then the chair of memories slid as if someone had given it a push. A part of me moved forward—not quite falling, not yet, and in that second the world seemed to tilt, small and finite, and endless.

I did not hear footsteps at first. The edge of the building was soundless in that way that makes small noises—shoes on concrete, a gasp—snap like glass. When I did hear him, it

was as if he arrived from a long way off. “Meher,” Karan called, voice raw.

I did not turn. “Leave me,” I said. My voice was small, but it carried across the terrace.

“No,” he answered. His voice was anchored, immediate. “I’m not leaving.”

He reached out and closed the distance between us faster than I had expected, his hand catching mine—gentle, not frantic, as if he were afraid to bruise. For a moment, I expected his grip to be the same pattern as all the hands that had pushed me away: brutal, urgent, wanting to be rid of the problem. Instead, his fingers were careful as if they were cradling something that might break. He did not pull or scold. He simply took hold and put his shoulder against me, a small weight.

“Don’t do this,” he breathed. The words were not a command but an excavation of steadiness, of fatigue, of grief. “Please, come back with me.”

Raman’s voice roared, angry and betrayed. You coward. You break promises with me. Don’t you dare choose him over me.

I felt the soft friction of his grip and how my knees had forgotten their names. I felt the sun drop behind the skyline and the city flatten out like a sheet of black glass. For a moment, all I wanted was silence, total and final. But the hand on mine was warm and patient and real.

“You can’t leave like this,” Karan said. “Not tonight, Meher. Not like this.”

I tried to pull free, and my body turned on its own; it did not obey. For a breathless second, I imagined the cool rush of air and the last wordless relief. Then Karan, patient and unhesitating, slid his other arm around me, not yanking but steadying, and folded me into him. The terrace shrank until the only things that existed were his heartbeat and my sob.

He did not shout or plead. He held. He moved with the soft authority of someone who had decided not to let what he loved go. His fingers tightened on my wrist—not to punish but to root me and I felt my knees weaken and collapse inward onto his shoes until he sank slowly down with me, holding and breathing as if every inhalation could tether us both to the world.

Below us, the city continued its indifferent business—bus brakes, distant music, someone laughing too loudly, but up here it was all precise and aching and immediate. I sobbed into his shoulder, shaking with a grief that had been building for years and would not be quieted with a single rescue.

“Why didn’t you call me?” he asked after a while, his voice low and ragged.

“I thought it would be easier if you weren’t there,” I said at last, words between sobs. “I thought if I did it alone, then it would be done. That everyone could move on quicker.”

“Move on?” He tightened his hold as if he could compress the weight of the sky into his arms. “You think losing you is easier on anyone? You think it’s a kindness? Don’t ever say that again.”

I clung to him as if remembering how steady a hand felt. Raman shrieked in fury and in grief, a sound like a thing being torn. You never helped, you never saved—how can you choose this life?

Karan pressed his forehead to the top of my head. “Listen to me,” he said. “I’ll go to the ends of the earth with you. I will sit in every waiting room. I will stand outside every office. I will be so persistent that you will be sick of me. But you will be here. We will keep trying. You don’t have to be brave alone.”

His resolve was not the bluster of a romantic rescue; it was a weary, bone-deep determination that matched the tiredness in my throat. I trembled and let the floor take my weight.

After a long time, Karan stood and offered his hand. I took it. He did not let go. He led me down from the terrace with the same patience he used when helping people cross a busy street—slow, attentive to the small stumbles. We walked to the elevator in silence. I pressed the button with fingers that had stopped shaking, and every floor that dropped was a small surrender to the fact that I was not finished.

In the room, he made tea, as if normal routines could redraw the world. When the kettle hissed and steam curled, he moved through gestures that were practical and ordinary. He brought the cups to the bed, set one in front of me, and sat across. He watched me like someone taking inventory of what remained—careful, exact.

“Do you want your parents to know?” he asked finally, voice quiet.

For the first time that day, I did not reflexively say no. The question landed somewhere he could touch. “I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe... later.”

He nodded, accepting that as a beginning. “We’ll tell them when you’re ready. For now, this—” he tapped the cup between us, steadying— “this is enough.”

That night, Karan sat up, eyes red but open, while I slept in fits and starts. He could not erase the images that had driven me to the terrace, but he could be an anchor in the minutes that followed. When I woke at odd hours, he would be there, and when the world blurred and Raman hissed, he would name the voice out loud, call it what it was—a ghost, an echo—and ask me to step away from it.

Chapter 16



The morning light found me before I was ready. Thin threads of dawn slipped through the curtains of my new flat, brushing against my closed eyelids until I stirred. I turned my head against the pillow, my body heavy with the ache of sleepless hours. My lips were dry. A faint metallic taste lingered in my mouth — leftover fear.

For a moment, I thought I was still on the terrace. My heart skipped, my stomach dropping, until the scent of boiled milk and cardamom drifted in from the kitchenette. The ordinary smell cut through the nightmare. I opened my eyes fully, blinking at the pale cream walls of my flat, the rumpled sheets around me, and then Karan's back as he leaned over the tiny stove.

He didn't turn when he spoke. "You're awake."

His voice was even, casual, almost, but I heard the fatigue under it. He had not slept either.

I pushed myself upright, the sheet falling from my shoulders. My limbs trembled as though I'd run for miles. "I—" My throat closed. Words felt dangerous.

Karan set two cups on the counter, poured the steaming chai into both, and brought one to me. He didn't meet my eyes. Instead, he watched the cup as he placed it carefully in my hands.

“Slowly,” he said.

I lifted it, tried to sip, and nearly spilled it because my hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Karan reached to steady the cup, our fingers brushing. I wanted to pull away, ashamed, but his hold was firm without being forceful. He guided the rim back to my lips. “Drink.”

The warmth slid down my throat, burning a little. My eyes watered. It was only tea, but it felt like fire against the frost that still clung to my chest.

The silence stretched. I hated it. I hated the way it pressed against my ribs. I set the cup down, staring at the steam curling upward.

Finally, I whispered, “I didn’t... I didn’t mean—”

“Yes,” Karan interrupted gently. “You did.”

My head jerked up, stung, but he still wasn’t looking at me. He folded his arms, leaned against the desk, and stared at the floor.

“You meant it,” he repeated. “Last night, you wanted to go.”

The words lodged in me. Anger pricked at my throat, but I couldn’t summon it. My shoulders sagged. “Maybe,” I admitted.

He looked at me then, finally. His eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep, but steady. “You’re alive. That’s what matters. And because you’re alive, you’re going to see Dr. Sahani today, your new therapist.”

My stomach twisted. “No. I’m not—”

“You are.”

The firmness in his voice startled me. He rarely spoke that way, as if there was no room for my protests.

“I don’t want—” I began, but he cut me off.

“You don’t have to want it. You just have to go.”

I pressed my hands against my temples. My pulse throbbed under my fingers. “He’ll be there,” I muttered.

Karan didn’t ask who. He knew. “Then we’ll let her hear him, too.”

The idea chilled me. Raman — exposed, spoken of — felt like betrayal. Already, in the corners of the room, I could sense him stirring.

Pathetic, the voice sneered. *Running to strangers to talk about me. Do you think she’ll believe you? Do you think Karan isn’t laughing behind your back right now?*

I flinched. Karan’s hand landed gently on my wrist. I hadn’t noticed him move closer.

“Finish your tea,” he said softly. “We leave in an hour.”

The clinic was a small bungalow converted into offices, painted pale yellow with bougainvillea creeping across the gate. It looked too gentle to hold the storm inside me. I hesitated on the threshold, fingers curled tight around my bag strap.

Karan walked beside me without a word. He didn’t touch me, didn’t guide me, but his presence felt like a wall I could lean against if my legs buckled.

The receptionist smiled, took my name, and asked me to wait. The waiting room was too quiet. The clock ticked too loudly. I sat rigid, my breath shallow.

She'll peel you open, Raman hissed, crouching beside my chair. His dark eyes glittered, furious. She'll know every filthy thing you've thought. Do you want Karan to hear it too? Do you want him to see what you are?

I squeezed my eyes shut. I pressed my nails into my palms until little half-moons burned my skin.

Then a door opened, and a calm voice called, "Meher?"

Dr. Ananya Sahani was not what I expected. She wasn't severe or gray-haired or cold. She was in her forties, maybe, with warm brown skin and a streak of silver in her bun. She wore a soft kurta and glasses that slipped down her nose when she smiled.

"Come," she said, gesturing toward her office.

My knees locked. I couldn't move.

Karan leaned down, murmured, "I'll wait right here."

My eyes darted to him, searching. He gave a small nod. Not pushing, not pleading. Just there.

I stood. Walked stiffly into the office. The door closed behind me.

The office was tidy but not sterile. Bookshelves lined the walls. A potted plant drooped slightly in the corner. There was a sofa, not a couch with straps like in movies, just a simple two-seater with a bright cushion.

Dr. Sahani motioned to it. "Sit wherever you're comfortable."

I perched on the edge, rigid. My hands twisted in my lap.

The doctor took the armchair opposite me, notepad balanced on one knee, pen uncapped. She didn't start right away. She let the silence sit, watching me with steady eyes.

At last, she said, "Karan told me you had a difficult night."

My throat clenched. I stared at the rug, at the woven diamonds. My voice barely scraped out: "I didn't— I wasn't—"

"You don't have to explain it yet," Dr. Sahani said gently. "You're here. That's a start."

Raman crouched by my knee, hissing. *Don't you dare. Don't you dare put me in her mouth.*

I parted my lips, then closed them.

"Why don't you tell me what brought you back to India?" the therapist asked, tone casual, as if we were having tea.

The question startled me. I glanced up, then away. "Work."

"And?"

My jaw tightened. "Old friends."

Dr. Malhotra smiled faintly. "One in particular?"

My stomach flipped. I dug my nails into my palm.

Say nothing, Raman snarled. *She's baiting you.*

"I don't know," I muttered.

“Would you like to tell me about him?”

My head snapped up. The doctor’s eyes were calm, not prying, but the word hung between us. Him.

My chest tightened. Heat climbed my neck. “He’s... he’s not—”

My voice cracked. I bent forward, clutching my temples.

Don’t you dare, Raman thundered. *His voice filled my skull. I’m not your sickness. I’m the only one who’s stayed. Tell her that. Tell her I’m the only one who never left you.*

Tears stung my eyes. I shook my head violently.

“Meher,” Dr. Malhotra’s voice cut through, soft but firm. “Look at me.”

I forced my gaze up.

“You don’t have to tell me everything today,” the therapist said. “But you can start with one word. His name.”

My breath hitched. Raman loomed larger, shouting now. *No. No, no, no—*

“R—Raman,” I whispered.

The room seemed to tilt. My ears roared. I half-expected lightning to strike.

But nothing happened. Only the plant in the corner drooped. Only the clock ticked.

Dr. Malhotra nodded once. “Thank you.”

Raman’s scream tore through my skull. I clamped my hands over my ears, sobbing, “Stop, stop, stop—”

The therapist's voice stayed calm. "You're safe here. No one can hurt you here."

But Raman's fury didn't ebb. He paced, raging, smashing invisible fists against the walls of my mind.

By the end of the session, I was trembling, sweat-soaked, my throat raw. I stumbled out into the waiting room, where Karan leapt to his feet. His face drained when he saw me, but he didn't ask questions. He just guided me outside, one hand steady at my elbow.

Outside in the sunlight, I gulped the air like it might drown me. My whole body buzzed with exhaustion.

I turned to Karan, eyes wild. "I can't— I can't go back."

"You can," he said softly.

"I won't."

"You will."

I wanted to scream at him, claw at him, anything to make him stop sounding so sure. But my throat closed around the words. Instead, I sagged against the arm of the sofa, trembling, as he opened the door for me.

The ride back to the flat was silent, except for Raman's distant muttering, a storm I carried in my skull.

The drive back to the flat was nearly wordless, broken only by the rhythm of the traffic outside — rickshaw horns, bicycle bells, the low hum of scooters weaving past. I sat with my arms wrapped tightly across my chest, head leaning against the cool window. My reflection wavered with every

bump of the road. I barely recognized the girl looking back at me — hollow-eyed, hair loose around my face, lips swollen from biting them raw.

Karan didn't try to speak. He drove steadily, both hands firm on the wheel. The silence between us was heavy, but not hostile. It was the kind of silence that said, *I'm here when you're ready.*

Back at the flat, he followed me up the stairs, not close but close enough. He didn't say anything as we entered the room.

I collapsed onto the bed face-first, clutching the pillow. My body felt wrung out, hollow. Tears I hadn't realized I'd been holding soaked the pillowcase.

I expected Karan to lecture, to press, to insist on talking. But after a moment, I heard only the sound of the kettle being filled in the kitchenette. A faint clink of spoons. The pop of a biscuit packet.

When I rolled over, he was setting a tray at the foot of the bed: a steaming cup of tea, two Marie biscuits, and a small steel bowl of poha he must have grabbed on the way back.

"Eat a little," he said simply.

My lips trembled. "I can't."

"You can."

"I'll vomit."

He sat in the chair by the desk, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. His eyes were tired, but not unkind. "Then vomit. But try."

Something in his tone broke me. Not pity, not pressure — just quiet stubbornness. I dragged myself upright, picked at the poha with trembling fingers, and forced one bite into my mouth. It was bland, slightly dry, but the warmth spread down my throat like mercy. Another bite followed. Then another.

Halfway through the bowl, I realized Karan was still watching. "What?" I whispered.

His mouth tilted into the faintest smile. "Nothing. Just... good."

For the first time all day, a thin breath of something like relief threaded through me. I looked down quickly, not ready to hold his gaze.

That evening, Karan coaxed me out for a walk. "Just five minutes," he said.

I resisted, but when he held out his hand — not touching, just offering- I found myself standing, pulling my shawl around my shoulders, and stepping into the warm dusk with him.

We walked down to the market road. Stalls glowed with strings of bulbs, shopkeepers calling out prices. The smell of roasted peanuts and frying pakoras drifted in the air. For a moment, it felt almost like before, when I was younger, free. Almost.

We paused at a bookstall where secondhand novels leaned in crooked stacks. Karan picked one up, flipped through the pages, and handed it to me without a word. I looked down at the cover — a worn copy of *The Namesake*.

“You used to like this,” he said quietly.

My throat tightened. I ran my fingers over the faded title. “I don’t read anymore,” I murmured.

“Maybe you will again,” he said.

Something in my chest shifted — not healed, not fixed, but nudged. I clutched the book to my chest as we walked back.

The next morning, Karan drove me to the clinic again. My stomach was knotted so tight I thought I’d vomit before we even arrived. Every cell in my body screamed against going back. But when I saw Karan park and look at me, steady and unblinking, I knew refusal wasn’t an option.

“I’ll wait outside,” he said again, same as yesterday.

Inside, Dr. Malhotra greeted me with the same unruffled warmth. “Welcome back.”

I sank into the sofa, nerves sparking like exposed wires.

The therapist began gently, “Yesterday was tough. You did something audacious, saying his name out loud.”

My shoulders hunched. I muttered, “I shouldn’t have. He hates it.”

“Who?”

“Raman.” The name came easier today, though it still scraped my throat.

Dr. Malhotra's pen hovered, then rested. "Tell me what he did after you left here yesterday."

My fingers clenched. "He screamed. All night. I couldn't breathe. He told me I betrayed him. That I... that I belong to him."

My voice cracked. The room blurred. I pressed my palms over my eyes.

"And what do you believe?"

I hesitated. The silence in the room grew heavy. Then, in a small voice: "Sometimes... I think he's right."

Raman surged in at that, his voice sharp. *Of course I'm right. Who else stood by you? Who else held you when they mocked you, abandoned you?*

I jerked, whispering, "He's here now."

Dr. Malhotra didn't flinch. "What is he saying?"

My breath came ragged. "That he's the only one who stayed."

"And what do you think?" the therapist asked calmly.

My mind splintered. I wanted to agree, to surrender, to let his voice wash over me and drown everything else. But then — like a thread through the storm, I remembered Karan at the bookstall, handing me a novel without pity.

My lips trembled. "Karan stayed."

The words felt like breaking a chain. Raman roared, but it was muffled now, like sound coming from underwater.

Tears spilled hot down my cheeks. I didn't wipe them away. I let them fall, my body shuddering.

Dr. Malhotra's voice was steady. "Good. Very good. You're not alone, Meher. You never were."

By the end of the session, I was wrung out, head pounding, but there was a new emptiness in my chest where Raman's voice had raged — not gone, but cracked.

When I stepped out into the waiting room, Karan stood quickly, searching my face. I was too exhausted to speak. Instead, I reached for his sleeve, a small grasp, like a child lost in a crowd.

His eyes softened. He placed his hand over mine, solid and warm, and guided me out into the afternoon sun.

On the ride back, I whispered, so faint he almost didn't hear: "I'm tired."

He glanced at me, concerned. "Do you want to sleep?"

"No." I swallowed hard. My voice was raw but sure. "I'm tired of him."

Karan didn't reply. He didn't need to. His grip tightened on the wheel, and in the silence between us, something shifted — fragile, but real.

Chapter 17



The first thing I noticed when I opened my eyes was the light. Not the stabbing, intrusive kind that made me wince and curl deeper into the covers, but a softer, forgiving warmth spilling through the thin curtains. It painted faint stripes across the walls and trembled on the ceiling fan's blades. The fan creaked as it spun, each rotation uneven, like an old metronome keeping time. I stared at it for several long breaths, my body frozen in that fragile space between sleep and wakefulness.

And then it struck me. Silence.

No voice. No hiss. No whispered accusation winding its way into my ears. My chest tightened as if expecting the blow anyway. Any second now, I thought, he'll speak. He always speaks. But nothing came, and I clung to the quiet like a child clings to a blanket.

The faint aroma of chai drifted from the kitchenette. I turned my head and listened: the scrape of a spoon in a cup, the whistle of a kettle just lifted from the flame. Karan's voice hummed low, a tune I didn't recognize, warm and steady, filling the small flat. It sounded so ordinary, and that ordinariness broke me.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, toes brushing the cool floor tiles. For a moment, I just sat there, fingers knotted

in the bedsheet, before finally standing. My body felt like it didn't entirely belong to me, my knees uncertain, my arms slightly weak. I padded toward the doorway, pressing my palm against the wall as if to anchor myself.

Karan glanced up from the counter. His sleeves were rolled up, his hair a little unruly, his entire frame relaxed in a way it rarely was around me these days. He smiled when he saw me. Not that careful, too-bright smile he had been wearing for weeks, but something softer, realer.

"Morning," he said. His voice was light, like he was daring the day to argue with him.

"Morning," I whispered back.

He lifted the kettle and poured steaming tea into two mismatched mugs, one with a chipped rim and a fading picture of a cartoon on the side. He handed it to me, and I wrapped both hands around it, grateful for the warmth soaking into my fingers. I raised it, inhaling. The scent was cardamom and ginger, sharp but soothing. My throat tightened.

"Too sweet?" he asked.

I shook my head. "No. Just right."

We sat at the little wooden table that wobbled whenever one of us leaned too hard. The silence that fell wasn't heavy and wasn't dangerous. It was gentle, only broken by the occasional clink of spoon against glass and the faint traffic outside. I sipped and realized my hands weren't shaking as much as they had been yesterday.

By the time I finished, Karan was already slipping on his sandals. “We need vegetables,” he announced.

I raised my brows. “Since when are you the one planning groceries?”

“Since I promised you aloo parathas for dinner.”

“You can cook?”

His mouth twisted into mock offense. “Don’t underestimate me.” He held the door open, waiting.

The market was chaos in its purest form, and for the first ten minutes, I stayed half a step behind him, my pulse high in my throat. The sounds crashed over me: vendors yelling prices, the squeak of carts, the honk of scooters trying to edge through. I clenched my fists, every muscle expecting Raman to whisper in my ear, to taunt me for thinking I could handle this. But nothing came.

Karan launched himself into bargaining with the tomato vendor, voice loud and theatrical.

“Eighty rupees? Arrey bhai, are these tomatoes or rubies?”

The vendor rolled his eyes. “Seventy-five. Final.”

Karan gasped like he had been stabbed. “You wound me. Forty-five.”

The man groaned. I found myself smiling — a real smile — at Karan’s ridiculous performance. By the time we left with a bag of potatoes, coriander, and cauliflower, I was still smiling, the sound of his mock indignation echoing in my ears.

We stopped for sugarcane juice at a stall on the corner. The machine squealed, the stalks crushed mercilessly, juice pouring frothy into steel glasses. Karan handed me one first. I pressed it to my lips. The liquid was cold, sweet, grassy, flooding my mouth in a way that felt startlingly alive.

“This,” I said softly, almost to myself, “this tastes like childhood.”

Karan only grinned.

On the way back, a bookstore caught my eye. I hadn’t been inside one in years — not since words had become the enemy, taunting me for what I couldn’t write. But the door stood open, cool air spilling out, carrying with it the smell of paper. I paused.

“Go in,” Karan said, reading my hesitation. “I’ll wait.”

“No... I—”

“Come on. Two minutes.”

My feet carried me inside before my brain caught up. The shelves rose around me, heavy with stories. I trailed my fingers along a row, feeling the worn spines like braille. I stopped at a slim paperback — a novel I had once loved. I picked it up, thumb brushing the cover, the memories rushing in so fast my throat closed.

“You want it?” Karan asked gently, appearing at my side.

I swallowed. “I don’t know.”

But I didn’t put it back. He took it from my hand and brought it to the counter.

Back at the flat, the afternoon pressed down heavy and slow. I sat at the desk with a notepad. My pen hovered over the page, but the words wouldn't come. Sweat collected on my upper lip. *You can't write*, hissed a voice, faint but still there. *You'll embarrass yourself. You'll fail.*

My chest tightened. The pen slipped.

And then: "Chai?" Karan called from the kitchenette.

I blinked, the spiral breaking. "Yes," I croaked.

He set the cup beside me without a word, the steam curling into the air. I inhaled, sipped, and pressed the pen down again. This time, I finished an entire paragraph. The words weren't perfect. But they existed.

By evening, the kitchen smelled of frying onions. Karan cursed when the first paratha tore apart. I laughed, surprising myself. The sound startled me, like I had woken a part of myself I'd forgotten.

"Don't laugh," he scolded, though his eyes sparkled.

We sat at the wobbly table, plates piled high. The parathas were greasy, warm, imperfect, and the best thing I'd tasted in months. I ate more than I thought I could.

"See?" he said, smug. "You doubted me."

"Still do," I replied, but my voice was lighter, teasing.

Afterward, we lingered. The flickering overhead light threw uneven shadows. Karan leaned back, telling some college story about a cricket match gone wrong. He mimed his old

captain's angry gestures, his face animated, his laugh booming.

I watched him, my smile fading into something gentler. My chest ached in a new way — not from fear, but from the terrifying possibility that I wanted this, wanted him. And then I realized: I hadn't heard Raman in nearly an hour. The silence was startling, precious, fragile.

When I finally lay down that night, I waited for the voice. The hiss. The sneer. But none came. I clutched the pillow, eyes wide in the dark, whispering into the stillness.

"Thank you."

Across the room, Karan shifted in his chair. A long pause, and then his voice, low and steady:

"Always."

I closed my eyes, and for the first time in years, sleep came without fear.

Chapter 18



The morning began with light, the same soft glow that had carried me through the day before. For a brief, intoxicating moment, I thought it might be another day of peace. I stretched, my body still heavy with sleep, and listened to the fan's uneven click, the faint noises of Karan in the kitchenette.

And then it came.

"Pretending again, are you?"

The voice wasn't a whisper this time. It was sharp, insistent, vibrating against my skull. My eyes snapped open. Raman was there — not in flesh, but in the space at the edge of the bed, a shadow with the same familiar face I knew too well. His eyes burned with something I had never seen before: not amusement, not mockery, but desperation.

"You think you can erase me?" he said. His tone was half laugh, half growl. "One good night's sleep and you think you're cured? Don't be stupid, Meher. I'm the only one who's never left you."

My chest tightened. I tried to sit up, but my limbs felt heavy, my breath uneven. I pressed my palms to my eyes as if I could rub him out.

"Go away," I whispered.

But he only leaned closer, his outline blurring and sharpening like static on an old TV screen. "Go away? After everything? After seven years of me being the only constant in your rotten little life?"

The mug clinked in the kitchen. Karan was humming again, oblivious. I forced myself to stand, my legs trembling under my weight. I walked stiffly into the kitchenette, clutching the edge of the counter.

Karan glanced up. "Morning. Do you want bread or paratha?"

I opened my mouth, but the words wouldn't form. Behind him, just over his shoulder, Raman stood, arms folded, lips curled.

"Tell him the truth," he hissed. "Tell him you don't need him. Tell him you'd rather die than let him think he's saving you."

"Paratha," I managed.

Karan nodded, turning back to the pan. "Good. You need food."

The smell of butter filled the air, but it turned my stomach. Raman's laugh rose above the hiss of the pan, high and jagged. "See? He thinks he knows what you need. I'm the one who knows. I always have."

I fled to the bathroom, locking the door behind me, pressing my back to it as if holding him out. I slid down to the cold tile, knees pulled to my chest. The laughter followed

anyway, curling under the crack of the door, pressing into my ears until tears slipped down my cheeks.

By the time I emerged, Karan had plated the parathas. He looked up at me, brow furrowed, but said nothing. I sat, forced myself to chew, though every bite tasted like ash. Raman paced behind me, muttering, swearing, sometimes shouting so loudly I flinched.

“You’re nothing without me. Nothing.”

“Shut up,” I whispered into my plate.

Karan froze mid-bite. “What?”

My eyes darted to him. His face was open, worried, and patient. I shook my head quickly. “Nothing. I was... nothing.”

But the tremor in my voice betrayed me. His jaw tightened. He didn’t push, but his eyes never left me through the rest of breakfast.

The day stretched long, each hour a test. I tried to read the book I had picked up at the store, but every sentence blurred with Raman’s interjections.

“You’ll never finish it. You never finish anything. Remember how they laughed at you? Remember the names? Brother-fucker, cursed girl, dirty shame. They weren’t wrong, Meher. They never were.”

My throat burned. I slammed the book shut, breath heaving.

I tried to write instead, sitting at the desk with my pen poised. The words formed in fragments, then unraveled

under his jeering. He whispered close to my ear, as though his lips brushed my skin.

“Pathetic. Do you think Raj wanted you? Do you think Karan doesn’t see through you? You’re disgusting.”

The pen clattered from my hand. I shoved the chair back so hard it tipped over. Karan was at the door in seconds, eyes wide, hands half raised.

“Meher.”

I shook my head violently, pressing my palms over my ears. “He won’t stop,” I gasped. “He won’t stop, he won’t—”

Karan crouched in front of me, but didn’t touch. “Look at me. Just me.”

My eyes flicked to him, the brown steady and grounded against the storm. I sobbed once, harsh and loud.

“Therapy,” he said quietly, firmly. “We’re going now. No more waiting.”

My body shook with resistance. The thought of sitting in that chair, of dragging Raman into the open, filled me with dread. But he didn’t move until I nodded, barely, my chin trembling.

The car ride was suffocating. The world outside the window moved too quickly, colors blurring. Raman sat beside me, close enough that I could feel the phantom heat of him, muttering nonstop.

“They’ll lock you up. You’ll rot in a white room. Karan will get tired. He’ll leave. They always leave.”

My fingers dug into the seatbelt. Karan glanced at my knuckles, then reached over, covering my fist with his hand. I jerked slightly but didn't pull away. His palm was warm, anchoring me.

At the clinic, the waiting room felt too bright, too clean. The walls were lined with cheerful posters that only made my stomach twist tighter. Raman prowled at my side, eyes darting, lips curled back like an animal cornered.

When the door opened, Dr. Ananya stood there, serene as ever, her scarf draped elegantly over one shoulder. "Meher," she said with quiet warmth. "Come in."

I rose on unsteady legs. Karan started to follow, but Ananya held up a hand. "Just her this time. You can wait here."

Karan's jaw flexed, but he nodded. He gave me one look — steady, unwavering, and I carried it with me into the room.

The therapist's office smelled faintly of sandalwood. The curtains were half drawn, muting the daylight. I lowered myself into the chair, my body coiled tight as a spring.

And Raman was there too. Not standing, not lurking, but sitting opposite me, in the chair beside Ananya's. His presence was clearer than ever, his face twisted with fury.

"You brought her into this," he hissed. "You think she can save you? She doesn't know you like I do."

"Tell me what's happening right now," Ananya said, voice calm.

My throat worked. "He's here."

“Who is he?”

My lips trembled. Saying it aloud felt like stepping off a ledge. But the words came. “Raman.”

Raman’s eyes widened, his whole body jerking. “Don’t you dare,” he snarled.

“He’s not leaving,” I whispered.

“Not yet,” Ananya agreed. “But he’s afraid. Can you see it?”

I blinked at the figure. His fists were clenched, his voice ragged, not smooth as before. His edges flickered, his face blurring at the corners.

“She’s lying,” Raman spat. “She’s lying to you.” He pointed at Ananya, then at me. “You need me. Say it. Say you need me.”

My breath hitched. I gripped the chair arms, torn between the woman’s steady gaze and Raman’s burning eyes.

“Say it!” he roared.

The air crackled with his fury.

And I finally shouted back: “I don’t!”

The words ripped out of me like something broken free after years of chains. They tore my throat raw, yet in the instant they left my lips, I felt a crack in the air, as though a pane of glass had been struck. Raman recoiled, his figure jerking backward as though struck. His eyes flared wide, wild.

“You ungrateful—” His voice boomed, echoing louder than it ever had in my head. “Everything I gave you, every night

I stayed when no one else did, and this is how you repay me?"

I trembled in the chair, but my eyes held him for the first time. Ananya's voice anchored me from the side, calm and even: "Keep speaking, Meher. You're taking your power back. Tell him what you've never been able to do."

My fists clenched. The words burned at the back of my tongue, terrified to be released, but I pushed them out. "You ruined me. You made me feel like I was nothing. You kept me in the dark, so I couldn't live. You're not my savior. You're my prison."

Raman's body flickered again, the edges of his face breaking into static. His rage spiked, his voice a bellow that made my ears ring. "No! Without me, you're weak! Without me, you'll collapse! You'll beg for me again, you know you will!"

I shook my head furiously, tears streaming. "No more. I don't want you anymore. You're not real!"

He staggered, his mouth opening in silent protest. For the first time since he appeared years ago, Raman looked afraid. His figure split at the edges like a watercolor left in the rain, pieces of him dripping into nothingness.

"No..." His voice was hoarse now, smaller, the thunder bleeding into a rasp. "Don't let them take me. Don't... leave me."

My chest ached, but I lifted my chin. My voice cracked, yet it carried: "I never needed you. I needed them. I needed me."

And with those words, something shattered.

The sound was not real, yet it reverberated through my body — a splintering crash like glass imploding. Raman's form convulsed, his face stretching in anguish, and then he dissolved. Not with a scream, not with a roar, but with a hollow collapse, like dust scattered into the air.

The silence that followed was deafening.

I gasped, clutching my chest, my heart hammering against my ribs. The chair beneath me seemed the only thing keeping me tethered. The room tilted, my vision blurred, and I fell forward into sobs; deep, heaving sobs that wracked my entire body.

Ananya was beside me in seconds, crouching low, her hand resting lightly on my trembling shoulder. "You did it," she whispered. "You let him go."

But the ache was unbearable. The space where Raman's voice had lived for so long felt cavernous, too empty, too quiet. I clutched my head, rocking slightly, crying harder. "I can't— I don't know how to be without him."

"Yes, you do," Ananya said softly, firmly. "This silence feels strange now, but it is not emptiness. It is space for you. For your life, for your voice."

I lifted my tear-streaked face toward her. "You don't understand," I choked out. "I loved him. He wasn't just a voice, not at first. Years ago, Raman was real."

Ananya didn't interrupt. She only nodded, eyes steady, inviting.

“He was my boyfriend,” I whispered. “We were sixteen. He was everything back then — kind, loud, a little reckless. One day, his family was driving to Shimla. Their car met with an accident.”

My words trembled, each one tasting like ash. “His parents died on the spot. He and his younger brother were taken to the hospital. And the car that hit them... was my father’s.”

Ananya’s breath caught, just barely.

“The case went to court,” I went on, voice breaking. “They decided to have us adopt the boys. So suddenly, Raman wasn’t my boyfriend anymore — he was my stepbrother.” I swallowed hard. “He never woke up. He fought for a month in the ICU... and then he died.”

Silence stretched between us, thick and heavy.

“I never went to see him,” I said, my voice cracking open. “I couldn’t. I didn’t know how to face him or my father. And when he died, no one was there. Not even Karan. He didn’t know, he still doesn’t.”

Tears slid unchecked down my cheeks. “He’s always gone when I need him most,” I whispered. “Every time I fall apart, he disappears. And somehow, Raman’s the one who stayed. Even if it was only in my head.”

Ananya’s expression softened, her voice steady. “So when your world fell apart, your mind kept him alive, to protect you from being alone.”

I nodded, shaking. “And now I don’t know how to exist without him.”

She took a deep breath. "You'll learn. It will hurt, but it won't kill you. Because this time, Meher, *you* get to stay."

Her words echoed through the hollow inside me, the silence folding around them like new skin. For the first time, I could breathe, shakily, unevenly, but on my own.

And that's when the door burst open. The sound tore through the quiet, and Karan appeared — wide-eyed, breathless, as if he'd run through a storm to reach me.

"Meher," he breathed. His hands hovered, afraid to touch without permission.

I turned blindly, my tears soaking my face, and for the first time reached for him. His arms wrapped around me instantly, pulling me against his chest. I sobbed into him, clutching his shirt as though it were the last rope holding me from falling.

"She's safe," Ananya told him quietly. "It happened. He's gone."

Karan's jaw flexed, emotion tightening his face, but he didn't speak. He only held me, rocking me gently, his cheek pressed to the top of my head. His warmth was solid, anchoring me to the present.

Minutes, maybe hours, passed before my sobs softened into hiccups. My body sagged in exhaustion. Karan eased me back just enough to look at my face, brushing a tear from my cheek with his thumb.

"You're here," he whispered. "You're still here."

My lips trembled. "It hurts."

“I know,” he said. His own eyes were wet. “But you don’t have to hurt alone anymore.”

The silence deepened again, but this time it wasn’t terrifying. It was heavy, yes, but bearable. The faint hum of the clinic’s air conditioner, the muted noises from the hallway, the steady beat of Karan’s heart under my ear — they all filled the space Raman had occupied. For the first time in years, the silence wasn’t cruel. It was alive.

Ananya sat back in her chair, her eyes soft. “This is the beginning, Meher. It will not be easy. But you did the hardest part today.”

I closed my eyes, pressing my forehead to Karan’s chest. The words barely formed, whispered against him, but they were true. “I’m free.”

The three of us sat there, the air thick with both grief and relief, until the weight of exhaustion finally pulled me under.

When I woke up later in my flat, Karan was still there, sitting at my bedside, his hand loosely holding mine. The storm in my head was gone. Only silence remained — strange, vast, terrifying, but mine.

Chapter 19



The silence was the first thing I noticed when I woke the next morning.

Not the kind of silence that once suffocated me—heavy with Raman’s looming presence, but a different kind. A softer hush, punctuated by the hum of the ceiling fan, the muffled chatter of birds outside the window, and the faint scrape of a chair. My eyelids fluttered open, slow, and I found Karan sitting near my bed, one leg stretched out, a notebook balanced on his knee.

He wasn’t looking at me. His head was bent, his hand moving steadily as he wrote, his lips twitching now and then in thought. It wasn’t until I shifted under the blanket that he looked up.

“You’re awake,” he said softly, as though raising his voice might break something fragile in the air.

I nodded, my throat thick. I wasn’t sure what I expected to hear—Raman’s mocking laugh, his barbed words—but there was nothing. Only my heartbeat, thudding unevenly in my ears.

Karan closed the notebook and slid it onto the side table. “How do you feel?”

I swallowed hard. “Strange.”

“Strange good or strange bad?”

“Both,” I admitted, my voice cracking.

He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “That makes sense. You’ve carried him for years. Waking up without him... It’s bound to feel unnatural.”

My eyes stung, tears threatening again. I pressed the heel of my palm against them, embarrassed. “I thought—without him, I’d be empty. But it’s not empty. It’s just... quiet.”

“That quiet is yours,” Karan said gently. “You get to decide what fills it now.”

For a long moment, neither of us spoke. I stared at the curtain swaying with the morning breeze, feeling both hollow and oddly lighter, as though my chest had been unlatched. I didn’t know what to do with the space inside me.

When Karan finally stood, stretching his back, he said, “Come. Breakfast.”

The dining room smelled faintly of turmeric and fried onions when I followed him down. Karan had already laid two plates on the table, each piled with poha, steam curling upward. He set a glass of water in front of me before sitting across from me.

I picked up my spoon slowly, almost suspicious of the food. My appetite had been missing for days—weeks, if I were honest, but the warm yellow of the rice, the crunch of peanuts scattered over top, coaxed me into taking a tentative bite.

The taste surprised me. It was simple, lemony, and familiar. I swallowed, and for the first time in too long, my body didn't revolt.

"Good?" Karan asked, watching me closely.

I nodded, cheeks heating at how hungrily I ended up eating the next spoonful. "It's been... a while since I actually wanted to eat."

He smiled—not the smug grin he often used to tease me, but something softer. "That's step one, then."

Later that morning, Ananya met with me again. She didn't push too hard, sensing how raw I still was, but asked me to describe what silence felt like.

I tried. I spoke about the fan, the birds, and the spoon clinking against the plate. I described how every sound seemed sharper, no longer drowned out by Raman's constant needling.

"And how does that make you feel?" she prompted.

"Exposed," I confessed. "Like, I don't know what to do with myself. He used to... fill everything. The gaps, the empty minutes. Even when he was cruel, at least I wasn't alone."

Ananya tilted her head. "And now?"

"Now I'm scared of being... just me. What if I'm not enough?"

"Then we'll build you, piece by piece," she said calmly. "Your routines, your work, your joys—they'll return. It will

feel foreign, but it won't stay that way. Silence doesn't have to be loneliness."

Her words lingered long after the session ended.

That evening, Karan coaxed me outside for a walk. The sun was low, spilling orange and rose across the rooftops, the air thick with the smell of frying pakoras from a nearby stall.

At first, I felt jittery, my palms sweating as we walked down the lane. Every passing motorcycle made me flinch, every group of teenagers laughing felt like knives against my skin. I kept expecting Raman to appear, to hiss something venomous in my ear.

But he didn't.

Instead, there was only the hawker calling out, the clatter of pans, the shriek of a child chasing a ball.

Karan bought us each a pakora wrapped in newspaper, handing me one without a word. The crunch of it between my teeth startled me, the heat stinging my tongue. I laughed suddenly, unexpectedly, and clapped my hand over my mouth.

"What?" Karan asked, eyebrows raised.

I shook my head, swallowing. "I just—I forgot how hot these are. Burned my tongue."

He chuckled. "City initiation ritual. It happens to everyone."

The sound of our laughter, mingling in the fading light, was shockingly normal. For the first time, normal felt possible.

Back in the flat, as I washed my face and set my notebook on the desk, I realized I hadn't heard Raman's voice all day. Not a whisper. Not a flicker.

It frightened me at first. I caught myself staring into the mirror, half expecting him to materialize in the reflection. But the silence held.

When I finally lay in bed, my body heavy with exhaustion but not dread, I whispered into the darkness: "I'm still here."

No answer came. And that was enough.

The next morning, I woke to the smell of cardamom.

I padded into the small kitchen and found Karan humming tunelessly, rolling out parathas on the counter. The dough stuck slightly to his fingers, and he muttered under his breath, as though the flatbread were a stubborn opponent.

"You're doing it wrong," I said, my voice still rough with sleep.

Karan glanced up, mock-offended. "Excuse me, madam, this is my grandmother's recipe."

I arched my brow. "Your grandmother must've been generous if she counted that lopsided thing as a circle."

He held up the dough triumphantly. "Abstract art. Very avant-garde."

Despite myself, I laughed—a light, surprised sound. It startled me almost as much as it startled him. For a moment, our eyes caught and held, something unspoken threading

between us before he turned back to the rolling pin with exaggerated seriousness.

I took over the pan, flipping the first paratha until it puffed, golden and fragrant. As we sat at the table, tearing pieces and dipping them into the pickle, I realized I was hungry again. Properly hungry.

It wasn't just food filling my stomach—it was the easy rhythm of sharing a meal with someone who didn't demand, didn't haunt, didn't twist me into knots.

Later that day, I found myself standing outside a bookstore.

The glass windows gleamed, displaying glossy covers of novels, memoirs, and even cookbooks. Once, I would have hurried past, head bowed, afraid that someone inside might recognize me. Today, though, I paused.

My palms sweated as I stepped in, the bell over the door chiming. The smell hit me first—paper, ink, dust, and something sweet, maybe from the café counter tucked into the corner. Rows upon rows of books stretched ahead, their spines promising entire worlds.

I reached for one at random, a slim paperback. My fingers trembled, but I traced the embossed letters of the title as though it were an amulet.

A voice behind me said, "That one's good. The ending's a bit heavy, though."

It was the shop owner, a bespectacled man, arranging a stack. I blinked at him, waiting for a snide remark, for

laughter that never came. He only smiled and went back to his task.

I clutched the book to my chest, heart racing. Nothing bad had happened. Nobody whispered. Nobody laughed. I was just another woman in a bookstore.

When I left, bag rustling against my hip, I felt almost dizzy with relief.

That evening, I sat at the desk in my room. The notebook lay open before me, blank lines daring me to try.

My pen hovered, my mind stuttering. Normally, Raman would have interrupted by now — taunting me, mocking me, filling the silence with poison. But there was nothing.

The quiet unnerved me.

I closed my eyes, breathing deeply, then wrote a single sentence. Then another. Soon the words began to string together, not smooth, not perfect, but mine.

When I finally stopped, a page and a half of cramped handwriting filled the notebook. My hand was cramped too, but my chest felt... lighter.

Karan poked his head in just then, holding two mugs of chai. "Progress report?"

I flushed, instinctively covering the notebook. "Private."

He grinned. "That's a good sign." He set the chai down anyway and leaned against the doorframe, watching me with a pride he didn't try to hide.

On Sunday, he suggested a bus ride to the city center. I hesitated, nerves coiling tight, but agreed.

The bus was crowded, bodies pressed together, the air thick with sweat and cologne. I clung to the rail, fighting the urge to shrink back. Raman's voice didn't come. Instead, the hum of the engine, the conductor's calls, and the jostling of passengers filled my ears.

Karan stood close, shielding me from the worst of the crowd without making it obvious. "See? Nothing to it," he murmured.

I managed a shaky smile. "Easy for you to say."

By the time we reached our stop, my legs ached, but I hadn't fainted or bolted. It felt like a victory.

We spent the afternoon weaving through stalls—bright saris flapping like banners, vendors shouting over one another, the sharp tang of spices filling the air. At one point, a woman selling bangles grabbed my wrist, sliding a circle of green glass over my hand.

"Perfect," the woman declared.

I almost protested, but when I caught my reflection in a polished tray, the bangle glittering on my wrist, I couldn't bring myself to take it off.

Karan paid the woman without asking, shrugging when I frowned. "Consider it a souvenir."

I rolled my eyes but didn't remove the bangle.

That night, back in my room, I lay awake staring at the ceiling. The noises of the day replayed in my head—the vendor’s singsong call, the shopkeeper’s casual kindness, Karan’s steady voice at my side.

I realized something startling: I had gone an entire day without remembering Raman until now.

The silence didn’t feel empty anymore. It felt full of books, of bus rides, of bangles and parathas and chai.

My chest tightened, but it wasn’t fear. It was a possibility.

I turned on my side, watching the shadow of the bangle glint against the wall. For the first time in years, I let myself drift to sleep without bracing for a voice in the dark.

The next few days blurred into small routines—work calls, groceries, laundry. Karan and I unpacked vegetables together, argued over chili levels, and laughed at each other’s clumsy attempts at cooking. One afternoon, as we sat side by side on the floor, eating dal and papad, I caught myself laughing—loud, unguarded, and realized how foreign and familiar it felt all at once.

At therapy that week, Ananya listened as I spoke more openly than ever before.

“It’s strange,” I told her, twisting a tissue in my lap. “Raman was everything for so long. He followed me everywhere. And now... I can barely hold onto his face.”

“That is healing,” she replied gently. “Not erasure, but distance. The memories don’t disappear—you change your

relationship to them. You've built something new to stand on."

I sat with that for a while. Something new. Something—or someone—that had been there all along. I left the session lighter than I'd entered, my steps unhurried as I walked back into the late afternoon sunlight.

That evening, the power went out again across the neighborhood, plunging the streets into heavy darkness broken only by the occasional generator's hum. The flat grew hot quickly, fans stilled.

"Come," Karan said. "Let's go up to the terrace."

I followed him up the narrow stairwell, my dupatta brushing against my arm, my hair loose and catching the humid air. The terrace smelled of wet cement from the morning's drizzle. The tiles were still damp beneath our sandals. We sat side by side on the low wall, the city stretching beneath us in a scatter of flickering lights and faint shadows.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The silence was not the old silence—tight, suffocating. It was a living thing now, full of breath and possibility.

Karan was the one to break it. His voice was quiet, low. "Do you remember that night at the station when you first came back? You were so angry. So tired. I thought... I thought you'd never let anyone in again."

I kept my eyes on the horizon. "I didn't think I would."

"But you did," he said simply. "You let me."

My chest tightened. I turned to look at him fully, and the way he gazed back—steady, unflinching, with so much tenderness—it undid something I hadn't known was still locked.

"I need to say something," I whispered. My throat constricted, but the words had been waiting too long. "Karan, I—" I hesitated, searching his eyes for courage. "I love you."

The world seemed to still. The barking dog in the alley below, the generator hum, the rustle of leaves—all receded. Only his face remained, lit faintly by the moonlight, eyes widening and then softening with unmistakable relief.

He let out a breath, almost a laugh. "Meher... do you have any idea how long I've waited to hear that?"

My eyes burned. "Really?"

"Really," he said. "I love you too. More than I thought I could love anyone. But I needed you to reach this place on your own. I couldn't rush you. I wanted you whole. And now—" His voice broke slightly. "Now you are."

I reached for his hand, my fingers trembling, and he closed his around them—warm, solid. We sat that way, the silence swelling, our hearts speaking what our words had already freed.

When he leaned in, it wasn't desperate. It was steady, certain. Our lips met in a soft kiss, sealing a promise that had lived between us for years. When we pulled apart, I rested my forehead against his shoulder, the scent of his shirt

grounding me. For the first time since childhood, I felt safe. Utterly safe.

The power was still out when we returned downstairs. Karan lit two candles, their flames trembling in the draft. He poured us each a glass of water, set them on the table. The room felt hushed, intimate, the glow painting his face in amber.

We didn't rush to fill the silence. Instead, we spoke in fragments—memories, half-jokes, secrets long held. I told him about the first time I saw him cry, years ago, when he thought no one was watching. He told me how he'd once stayed up all night rehearsing what he'd say if I ever let him in again. We laughed softly, but beneath the laughter was something unshakable.

When the power finally surged back, the fan overhead clattered into life, and the spell broke only a little. We looked at each other, and I thought: this is it. This is living. Not surviving. Not fighting shadows. But choosing joy. Choosing love.

For years, I had been haunted by a ghost, bound to pain that seemed endless. But now—now I knew with startling clarity—I was free.

And in that freedom, I had found him.

Karan.

My beginning, not my end.

Epilogue — Karan's Voice



I remember the night on the terrace more vividly than any other night of my life. The air smelled of rain, heavy and metallic, carrying the wet earth of a city that had been rinsed but never truly cleansed. Streetlights flickered below us, blurred halos through a curtain of mist. Meher sat beside me, her dupatta tugged by the breeze, her hair loose in waves that kept brushing her face. Her eyes, those dark eyes that had been carrying grief for too many years, looked almost calm. For a moment, I thought she might finally rest. And then she turned toward me, her voice thin and trembling, and said it: *I love you*.

I laughed, shaky and ridiculous, because what else do you do when your secret finally steps into the open? I told her the truth—that I had loved her for so long, longer than I knew how to measure. When she kissed me, tentative but sure, it felt like the world shifted. All those years of waiting, of swallowing down what I felt, had been for this.

And yet, when I think about where it started, I don't think of that kiss. I don't even think of the night she confessed. I think of the first day she looked at me with disgust, outside that coaching class, my thumbs tapping on a stupid phone game. She thought I was a waste of space, and maybe I was. But somehow, from that tiny crack of contempt, everything else grew.

That's love, I think. Not grand beginnings, not cinematic first sights. Just a messy moment, two lives brushing clumsily, and then one refusing to let go.

Even now, with Meher beside me, her laughter real, her eyes no longer haunted, I still carry that first look. Because it reminds me that love isn't always chosen. Sometimes it's stumbled into, sometimes it's survived. And sometimes, if you're lucky, it waits for you through all the wrong turns, until finally, at last, you hear the words you thought you'd never hear: *I love you.*

And you get to answer back.

I used to think I knew myself pretty well. Calm, balanced, practical — the kind of person who didn't get swept up in storms. That illusion ended the day I met Meher.

The first time wasn't magical or cinematic. It was sweaty, loud, the kind of day you'd rather forget. We were outside the classroom, a bunch of us punished for not bringing our books. I had my book, technically, but I'd lent it to someone else and ended up outside anyway. I wasn't upset. I leaned against the wall, half-bored, playing a game on my phone. The others were complaining, shuffling, whispering about unfair teachers. And then I saw her.

She stood apart, arms crossed, face tight with irritation. Her hair had slipped out of its tie, a strand sticking stubbornly to her cheek in the humid heat. She looked furious — not just at the teacher, but at the whole world. She glanced at me, caught sight of my phone, and I swear the disgust on her face could have melted steel.

I remember thinking, *She hates me*. And that should've been that. But for some reason, I couldn't look away.

We didn't talk that day. We just stood there, sweating through the punishment, me pretending not to notice her glare and her very obviously pretending I didn't exist. When the bell rang, she bolted back inside, and I figured that was the end of it.

But a month later, my phone buzzed at midnight. A follow request on Instagram. Her name. My heart slammed against my ribs like I'd just run a marathon. I accepted instantly, of course, though I waited an hour before sending her a message — didn't want to look desperate. I typed something casual, a throwaway meme, but every second I waited for her reply stretched into an eternity. And when she finally responded, with a short "lol" and a smiley face, I felt like I'd been handed the world.

That was the beginning.

Our chats weren't extraordinary. Silly jokes, rants about teachers, and little complaints about life. But for me, each message was oxygen. I started staying up later, phone in hand, waiting for the tiny buzz that meant she'd written back. When her profile picture changed, I noticed. When she came online, my pulse jumped. I saved screenshots of our conversations, even though I never admitted it to anyone. At night, I'd scroll back through them, reading her words again and again until I knew them by heart.

I didn't tell her how I felt. Not then. She saw me as a friend, and I didn't want to scare her away. But already, I was hooked.

Two years passed like that — me silently orbiting her, pretending to be fine with just friendship while my chest burned every time she mentioned another boy. I told myself it was enough. Better to have her in my life in some form than not at all.

But then I made a mistake. Or maybe it was inevitable.

I got a girlfriend.

Not because I'd stopped thinking about Meher — God, no. It was the opposite. I thought maybe if I forced myself into another relationship, I could drown the ache. Distract myself. Be normal. Everyone else was dating, moving forward, so why was I stuck in place?

She was nice, my girlfriend. Sweet. She laughed at my jokes, sent me good-morning texts, and held my hand when we walked. And yet, every time, my mind compares her to Meher. The sound of her voice wasn't Meher's. The way she dressed wasn't Meher's. Her eyes didn't flash with that particular sharpness Meher had when she was annoyed. I was with someone, but I was starving for someone else.

It came to a head one night. Meher had a boyfriend at the time, and I was spiraling in jealousy I couldn't control. The thought of her with him, laughing with him, letting him into parts of her life I wasn't allowed — it was unbearable.

We were on a call, late, both of us restless. And I blurted it out.

“Either be my best friend, or stay with your boyfriend. I can’t take both.”

There was silence on the line. Long, suffocating silence. I wanted to bite my tongue, rewind the words, but they were out there, ugly and raw.

Finally, she sighed. “Karan, that’s not fair.”

Fair. I knew it wasn’t. I knew I was being selfish. But in that moment, I didn’t care. I wanted her to choose me, even if it was only as a friend. I couldn’t bear the idea of sharing her.

She didn’t choose me. Not then. And I hated myself for making her uncomfortable.

After that, we drifted. I buried myself in my relationship, tried to be the boyfriend I was supposed to be. But it was hollow. Every time I looked at my girlfriend, I felt like a liar. And then one day, everything shattered.

She cheated on me.

I remember the exact moment I found out. A message from a mutual friend, screenshots attached. My girlfriend is with someone else. Her arms around him, her smile pressed against his neck. I stared at the images until my vision blurred, a ringing in my ears drowning out everything else.

When I confronted her, she cried, begged, and said it was a mistake. I felt nothing. Just emptiness. I walked away, not because I was strong, but because I had nothing left to give.

And in that emptiness, one name rose to the surface. Meher.

After three years of silence, I dialed her number. My hands shook as the phone rang. I told myself she wouldn't answer, that she'd forgotten me, moved on. But then — her voice.

"Hello?"

Just one word, and the dam inside me broke.

We talked for hours that night. Hesitant at first, fumbling through old memories, then loosening as if no time had passed. She laughed, and it was the same laugh that had haunted my dreams. She teased me, and the years melted away.

I knew, then, that no matter what I tried, I could never erase her. She was carved into me, my first thought in the morning and my last at night. And maybe, just maybe, fate had been waiting for this moment — to return her to me when I was finally ready to admit the truth.

When I hung up that first night after three years, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling until dawn. My phone was still warm in my hand, the last message from her glowing like a tiny ember: *goodnight, Karan*. I hadn't seen those words in so long that they felt both alien and aching familiar. I read them again and again, afraid that if I closed my eyes, they would vanish, that the whole call would dissolve like a dream.

The next day, we spoke more. Short calls at first, half-awkward, stumbling around the gaps in our years apart. Then the longer ones. Laughter slipped back into our conversations as if it had been waiting, hidden under the silence. She told me about her writing, the city she lived in, the little things she hated — noisy neighbors, buses that

never came on time. I told her about my job, my own missteps, how I'd been trying to piece myself back together. But beneath every exchange, unspoken words thrummed: *I missed you.*

When we finally agreed to meet, my heart beat so hard I thought people on the street could hear it. She walked into the café late, as always, her hair loose, a little disheveled, and I forgot how to breathe. She looked older, sharper, more tired than the girl I remembered, but when she smiled, the years folded away.

"Still playing games on your phone during punishments?" she teased as she sat down.

I laughed, shaking my head. "Still glaring at people who don't deserve it?"

It was easy. Too easy. Like slipping back into clothes you'd thought you'd outgrown, only to find they still fit perfectly.

But it wasn't the same. I noticed things I hadn't before. The way her hands trembled slightly when she reached for her cup. How her eyes darted away whenever the conversation edged near her family. She carried shadows with her now, ones I didn't know how to chase away.

That became the rhythm of us again: closeness, laughter, and then sudden distance. She'd vanish for days, not answering calls. When she did return, she was restless, brittle, carrying some invisible weight. I tried not to push, but it gnawed at me. I wanted to be the person she leaned on, but sometimes I felt like a stranger knocking at a locked door.

The breakdowns came slowly, then all at once. Nights when she called me sobbing, words tumbling out half-coherent, apologies mixed with anger. Times when she said she couldn't take it anymore, when her voice was so small I wanted to climb through the phone and hold her until the world went quiet. I lost count of the nights I stayed awake just listening, whispering the only thing I could: "I'm here, Meher. I'm here."

And I was. Always. Even when she pushed me away. Even when she said things she didn't mean. Even when my own chest felt like it was cracking under the weight of her pain. Because no matter what, the thought of not being there for her was worse.

Then came Raj.

The first time she mentioned him, her voice had a lightness I hadn't heard in months. He was her manager at work, sharp, composed, a man who wore pressed shirts and spoke with confidence. I smiled through the phone, made the right noises, but inside my stomach twisted. I told myself it was good. She deserved someone stable, someone who could give her peace. But every time his name slipped into conversation, it was like a splinter under my skin.

I watched it unfold from the sidelines. Their long hours together, the way she talked about him more often. I told myself to let it go, that my place in her life was as a friend, nothing more. But when I heard the change in her tone — that softness reserved for him — it nearly broke me.

And yet, I stayed. Through her arguments with Raj, through the times Raman — yes, I heard her mention him once, as if he were still alive — dragged her back into old wounds, through her spirals that left her shaking and guilty. I stayed, even when it felt like watching her drift farther from me with each passing day.

There were moments, though, small ones, that kept me anchored. The way she leaned her head on my shoulder once during a cab ride, half-asleep, trusting. The night she texted me out of nowhere: *You're the only one I can talk to*. The times she laughed at my stupidest jokes, a laugh that still sounded like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

I wanted to tell her. God, how many times I almost did. The words pressed against my teeth, begging to escape. But I held them back. Because if I said them, and she wasn't ready, I could lose her all over again. And losing her again — that was unthinkable.

Then came that night on the terrace.

I hadn't known she was so close to the edge until I saw her standing there, the wind pulling at her hair, her body taut as if one wrong breath could send her over. My heart stopped. I called her name once, twice, louder each time, my throat raw with terror. She turned, her eyes hollow, and for a moment I thought I was too late.

But then she wavered, and I ran. I didn't think. I just moved, grabbing her, pulling her against me as tightly as I could. She struggled at first, weakly, mumbling something about being tired, about not wanting to fight anymore. I held her tighter,

my arms aching, my face buried in her hair. “No, Meher. Not like this. You’re not leaving me. Not like this.”

I don’t remember how long we stood there. Minutes, hours — time had no meaning. All I knew was the sound of her breathing against my chest, the wild panic in my own veins. When she finally went limp in my arms, sobbing, I lowered us both to the ground, whispering again and again, “I’m here. I’m here.”

That was the night everything changed.

Therapy came after. Hard, brutal sessions that left her drained, furious, sometimes silent for days. I watched her fight battles inside her own head, battles I couldn’t see but could feel in the way she clenched her fists, the way she avoided mirrors. I sat in waiting rooms, made her tea when she wouldn’t eat, and reminded her to take her medicine. There were times she lashed out, told me to leave, and said she didn’t need me. I left, but I always came back.

Slowly, unbearably slowly, she began to heal. Raman’s name faded from her lips. Raj became a memory, less sharp with every week. The shadows still lingered, but they no longer controlled her. She laughed more often. She wrote again. And sometimes, when she thought I wasn’t looking, she watched me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher.

The night of the confession, I wasn’t expecting anything. We were on her terrace again, calmer this time, sipping tea under the stars. She set her cup down, turned to me, and said it so softly I almost thought I’d imagined it.

“I love you, Karan.”

I froze. My heart slammed against my ribs, my breath caught, and for a second I couldn't move. All the years of silence, all the buried words, all the nights I'd lain awake wanting to tell her — and now here she was, handing them back to me.

I laughed then, half in disbelief, half in joy so sharp it hurt. "You're serious?"

She nodded, eyes steady, no hesitation. And in that moment, everything inside me broke open.

"I've loved you since the beginning," I said. My voice cracked, but I didn't care. "Since the punishment outside class, since your first message, since every damn moment in between. I tried to fight it, I tried to bury it, but I never stopped. I never could."

She leaned into me, and I held her, not with desperation this time, but with the fierce, trembling relief of a man who had finally come home.

I never thought I would see her like this.

Not the girl I met all those years ago at CA coaching, not the fragile shadow I held back from the edge of terraces and tears, not the woman who used to fight herself every night until exhaustion finally let her sleep. No, this Meher—the one who sits across from me with her legs tucked under herself, hair messy, a mug of chai balanced in her hands—is someone else entirely. Someone lighter. Someone freer. Someone who looks, for the first time since I have known her, like she has finally come home to herself.

And if I'm honest, there are days I still don't believe it.

I remember the first time we were punished together outside that coaching class. She was furious with me because I had handed my book off to someone else and was sitting in the corridor, half-smiling, playing a silly game on my phone. She thought I was careless, reckless, maybe even stupid. She wasn't wrong. But I remember catching her glare, how it burned, how it stayed with me longer than it should have. I told myself it was nothing. That she was just another classmate. But something inside me was already gone, already given.

Now, as I watch her take a sip of chai and wrinkle her nose because it's too hot, I wonder if that was the very first moment I loved her. Maybe love isn't one grand instant, but a thread of tiny moments that keep weaving themselves into a story until one day you wake up and realize it has become your entire life.

I waited through her silences. Through her stubbornness. Through her heartbreaks and through mine. I watched her make choices that pulled her farther from me, and I made choices of my own that I regret. I tried to bury the way I felt by giving myself to someone else. That ended the way it had to end—painfully, abruptly—but in truth, I had never really been with that girl at all. Meher had been the ghost in every room I entered.

And then came those years of distance. Her messages thinning, then vanishing. Her laughter is gone from my phone. The silence stretched so long it felt like she had slipped off the edge of the world. When she came back into my life, she was not the same Meher. She was broken in

places I couldn't see, bleeding in ways no bandage could fix. And beside her was someone else—or what she believed to be someone else. Raman. The ghost that held her tighter than any living person ever could.

For a long time, I hated him. I hated the way his name tasted in my mouth, hated how she looked past me to smile at an absence, hated how her eyes softened for someone who wasn't even there. But more than anything, I hated myself for resenting him, because to her, he was real. He was comforted. He was history, love, and grief all tied in one unbearable knot. Who was I to tell her that her lifeline was nothing more than smoke?

So I stayed. I swallowed the jealousy, the confusion, the helplessness. I stayed when she pushed me away, stayed when she screamed, stayed when she refused to let the past unclench its fist around her throat. And then the night she climbed that terrace—God, even now the memory makes me shake—I thought I had lost her for good. Her hair whipping in the wind, her eyes wild with the pull of the void, her voice carrying that terrifying finality. If one breath had gone differently, one second had slipped past me, she wouldn't be here now. My Meher. My reason.

But that wasn't the end. That was the beginning.

Therapy broke her down before it built her back up. I sat in waiting rooms, helpless, while she walked into battles I couldn't fight for her. I heard her cry through thin walls, heard her voice crack as she named the things she had never dared to name. I watched her stumble out after sessions, drained and hollow, and all I could do was hold her hand,

guide her home, make her tea, and remind her that she wasn't alone. Slowly, painfully, something shifted. Slowly, Raman's voice began to quiet. Slowly, her eyes began to clear.

And then one morning—God, I'll never forget this—she woke up and didn't mention him. Not once. The whole day passed, then the next, and then another. She laughed at one of my stupid jokes, slapped my arm for being annoying, called me an idiot—and there was no shadow in the room. It was just us. Just Meher and me. And I realized, with a quiet, breathless kind of awe, that she was finally free.

Now, weeks later, the freedom has settled into her like a second skin. She's writing again, her words spilling out late into the night, and sometimes she'll call me over just to read a paragraph aloud. We sit with parathas at her desk, crumbs everywhere, chai cooling between us, and she talks about clients and deadlines with an ease that makes my chest ache. She's herself again, but stronger. Softer. Fiercer. All at once.

And me? I am still hopelessly, endlessly in love with her.

She knows. Of course, she knows. My love has never been subtle. It's in the way I watch her too long when she's not looking. It's in the way I carry her bag without asking, the way I memorize her coffee order, the way I sit outside her therapy sessions as if my presence alone could be armor. But more than all of that, it's in the way I've stayed. Love, I've learned, is not always fireworks or declarations. Sometimes it's just staying.

We've never had some grand confession, not in the way movies promise. But we don't need it. The night she leaned against my shoulder on the terrace, after all the tears had dried, she whispered, "Don't leave me." That was her confession. And my answer has always been the same. Never.

Tonight, as I write this in my head—because I'll never put it down on paper, never risk her finding it—I watch her sleep on the couch. She fell asleep mid-sentence, still holding her laptop, her hair falling across her face. I cover her with a blanket, set her laptop aside, and for a moment, I just stand there, drinking in the sight of her peace.

I think of the boy I was, punished outside a classroom, pretending not to notice the girl glaring at me. I think of the man I became, walking with her through fire and shadows. I think of the future—uncertain, unwritten, but ours to hold. And I realize, maybe for the first time, that I don't need anything more than this.

She is here. She is whole. And she is mine, not in the way of possession, but in the way two lives can tangle until you cannot see where one ends and the other begins.

I love her. I have always loved her. And for the rest of my life, that will be enough.