

The Grand(MOTHER)

A story that deserves to live even after her

—••Written by••—

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*For Surinder Kaur... the hands and the soul,
I still reach for — and always will.*

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A VOW



“She raised me for 14 years even when she wasn’t blood.”

She gave me what the world says only a mother can give—
safety, softness, strength, and a place to belong.

She wasn’t just a woman.

She was the kind born once in lifetimes—
a form of God itself, walking the earth to rewrite the definition
of love.

She gave and never demanded.

She loved and never kept score.

She deserves to live through the generations that come after —
so the world can learn what love looks like when it is pure.

And I will make sure she does.

I owe her the credit she never got while she was alive.

Acknowledgement



This book did not come from strength. It came from a place I did not think I would ever come back from.

Papa, I don't think I ever said this the way it should have been said. I grew up watching you survive things I didn't even understand at that time. I saw your silence before I understood your pain. Today, when I look back, I don't see just a father. I see a man who lost everything and still chose to stay because I existed. Whatever I am today, whatever I will become, it will always belong to you.

Kushala Aunty, thank you for being there in ways that never asked for attention but always made a difference. Some people don't need big roles to leave a deep impact, and you are one of them.

To everyone who reads this, if this book has found you, maybe you know what it means to lose someone who felt like home. I hope these pages sit beside you in your quiet moments... It may not take the pain away, but remind you that you are not alone in it.

There is also someone this book belongs to in a way no one else will understand. If you ever come across this, you will know it was always meant to find you. For the one on the other end of my red string...

Thank you, Mr. Alex P. Sunil and Mr. Gokulam Gopalan for supporting me throughout this journey, for motivating me, and

for appreciating my art even when I was still learning how to believe in it myself.

Thank you, Babbal Bui, for letting me do this and still loving me so much.

Anjali and Naina, the way you saw this title touched my heart deeply, and as I promised, I wanted to make sure your names are lovingly included in the credits.

And always, thank you, Dadi, for still being there with me through all of this, in ways I cannot explain and never will be able to. You are the only reason I could do this. Everything I am trying to become still begins with you.

Maybe, somewhere beyond everything we understand,
I find what my soul has been searching for all along.

Author's Note



If this book has found you, I hope it meets you in that quiet place where the world thinks you're "fine," but you're still learning how to breathe without the person you lost.

I didn't write this for applause. For three years after she died, I couldn't get up. I walked, talked, functioned. I was alive, but inside, I was stuck in the same moment, the phone call, that delivered me the sentence: *She's no more.*

It took me three years to finally admit something that hurt more than the grief:

I'm never going to find the kind of love she gave me.

No matter who I meet.

No matter who claims to care.

No matter how much the world romanticizes soulmate, "the one"—for me, the closest thing to pure, unconditional love I have ever known was my grandmother.

Once I accepted that, I had two choices: "Stay on the floor forever, mourning what I'll never have again," or "Get my ass the fuck up and become what she always saw when she looked at me."

She believed in me when nobody did.

When I laughed at myself, she didn't.

She was the only one who could say with a straight face,

"Ek din tu karke dikhaegi. Main dekhungi. Sab dekhenge."

One day you will make it happen. I will see. The world will see

This book is my first, clumsy, terrified step towards that version of me she kept insisting was real.

What you've just read is not a polished "author persona."

It is a promise.

A promise to her that I will not waste the life she fought for, fed, protected, and believed in.

If I have to work till my bones ache and bleed metaphorically, I will.

A promise that I will try—really try—to become the woman she thought I could be, not the girl the world kept forcing me to be.

This book is an offering.

It is me sitting on the floor with pages spread around me, saying,

"Look, Dadi. I did something. You said I could be something. This is my first step."

At its core, this is not just a story about grief.

It is a story about a kind of love that defies logic, blood, and rules.

It is the story of two mothers who changed the definition of motherhood for me:

A father who became my mother when life ripped my own away,

And a grandmother, not tied to me by blood, who chose me as her own and loved me in a way that biology alone never could.

If you are reading this and you have ever lost someone who felt like your entire sky, I hope you feel a little less alone and see your pain held gently in these pages. I hope you remember that love like that does not end when a heartbeat does. It just changes form and waits for us in the things we create because of it.

This book is my way of saying to her:

I remember what you saw in me.

And I'm finally, finally going to try and live up to it.

Prologue



My mother passed away when I was seven.

That sentence still doesn't behave like a normal sentence in my mouth. Even after 23 years, the words continue to be foreign to my mouth. It doesn't become "a backstory." It is a line that split my life into two parts: the part where I was a child who didn't know loss, and the part where I became a child who learned it too early.

After that, people looked at me differently. They spoke in softer voices. They said things they thought were comforting. They told me I was strong, but strength was never what I wanted. I wanted my mother. I wanted the kind of certainty other children carried without knowing it existed.

And then the angel of my life took the wheel — my Grand (MOTHER).

She wasn't blood. She did not have any obligation. It wasn't a role she was forced to play.

It was a choice.

I don't remember her announcing herself as anything. I remember the ordinary things, the way she looked at me as if I wasn't a burden, the way she didn't ask me to explain my sadness.

That's the part people don't understand: when you lose a mother that young, you don't stop needing one just because the calendar moves forward. You need one in the quiet places, in the moments

you don't tell anyone about and the nights you pretend are normal.

She gave me fourteen years of that.

Fourteen years of being held back into childhood whenever I started falling out of it.

And then 2023 happened, she left too.

That's when I realized something terrifying: I had survived losing a mother once, but losing the woman who became my mother after that broke a different part of me because this time, I knew exactly what I was losing. It is the biggest loss of my life.

Everyone tells you grief comes in waves, but nobody tells you the second loss feels different. The first loss makes you a child who learns death. The second loss makes you an adult who understands what it means when the last person who made you feel safe... leaves.

After she died, life didn't collapse. It just thinned out like the air changed, like something essential vanished and the world didn't even pause to notice.

Since then, life has never been the same. The world kept moving the way it always does, busy, and I kept moving in it, but something inside me stopped feeling safe, as if the last living proof that love like that exists had been taken away.

I still reach for her in the smallest moments — when I'm scared, when I'm proud, when I'm exhausted, when I need someone to say, *eat something, sleep, come here*.

My body, my heart, my soul and my inner child still expect her to exist.

So, this book is not a tribute. This book is not me being "strong."

It is a refusal.

A refusal to let her be reduced to a date.

A refusal to let her become a "was."

A refusal to let the world forget the kind of love she gave, just because she gave it quietly.

A refusal to accept that the people who carry everyone else are the ones who leave without being celebrated.

I am writing her into permanence.

Because if the world didn't give her flowers while she was alive, then I will plant an entire garden now — page by page — until even strangers know the truth:

“Some women don't just raise children. They rescue them.”

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Chapter 1

The Boy Who Dared



Papa's story doesn't begin with Punjab. It begins with the place he ran from, the house that taught him how to survive, but forgot how to love him like a child is supposed to.

People romanticize "*home*" like it is always warm but some homes are not shelters. Some homes are cages built out of pride, pressure, and rules that feel bigger than the people living inside them.

Family is not just family. It is identity, duty and a line you're expected to walk in a straight direction for the rest of your life.

Papa didn't walk straight. He was a boy with a mind that asked too many questions and a spine that refused to bend completely. He wasn't reckless or lazy. He was the kind of intelligent that makes elders uncomfortable because it doesn't just obey. It questions.

There are families where anger is normal, where silence is used as punishment and pride sits on the dining table like an extra person. Papa grew up eating with that extra person.

By the time he was sixteen, the walls of that house had stopped feeling like walls and started feeling like a verdict. Every conversation was a trap, and every decision was already decided for him. Any dream he had was treated like an inconvenience.

The problem wasn't one fight. It never is. It's always a pattern that stretches across months, sometimes years, words that

sharpen, rules that tighten, silences that punish. The kind of atmosphere where a boy learns to listen for footsteps and to measure a man's mood by the sound of a door closing. He is raised to swallow his own anger because there is no room in the house for more than one storm.

And then something happened, something small for the outside world, absolutely "*normal*" for a strict household that didn't deserve to become a turning point... but did.

It could have been a slap.

A humiliation.

A sentence said in anger that was never taken back.

A final insult disguised as "*advice*."

A moment where he realized he could live a lifetime in that house and still never be allowed to be himself.

Whatever it was, it wasn't just one moment. It was the last stone on a pile that was already too heavy.

That night, he didn't sleep.

He lay awake with the kind of clarity that comes when you have reached the end of endurance. The quiet clarity of someone who understands that if he stays, he will slowly disappear. He didn't write a letter because when you run away from a place that doesn't feel like home, you don't announce it like a decision. You escape like a criminal.

A person doesn't leave home because they want freedom. They leave home because staying feels like suffocation.

The next morning, he left.

People imagine running away as something loud — bags packed, doors slammed, dramatic exits, but most real running away is silent. It is a boy folding his few clothes with shaking hands, choosing what to take and realizing he owns almost nothing, counting the little money he has and knowing it will not last, stepping out of the house like he's committing a crime, looking over his shoulder once, and deciding not to look again.

He didn't take memories. There wasn't any support, just a heart full of dreams.

When he boarded that train, he carried nothing but the clothes on his back and a rage that felt bigger than his body. He was escaping a fate. When the train started moving, it didn't feel like freedom because even when home hurts you, leaving it still feels like tearing something from your own body. Your heart doesn't know how to hate what raised it. Your heart only knows how to ache.

He sat there, a boy surrounded by strangers, pretending he wasn't terrified, watching the landscape change. He didn't cry. Boys like him are trained not to but he felt it — deep inside — like a silent bleeding.

Destiny drove him to Chandigarh. The first stop, but definitely not the last

Chapter 2

Six Months of Dust and Cement



Some struggles do not announce themselves. They arrive quietly, disguised as ordinary difficulty, and create a home in the body until survival becomes a routine. They look like a boy standing in a crowd, trying to survive a language he doesn't know and a future that has not agreed to him yet.

When Papa stepped into Chandigarh, he did not step into an opportunity. He stepped into a city that did not know him, and naturally did not care for him.

He was a boy from Kerala, raised under a sun that was harsh but familiar. Chandigarh felt like a different climate of life altogether. He had only a few words of Hindi, broken and incomplete, so he depended on hand movements, hesitant smiles, and the patience of strangers to ask for the simplest things. Where to go? What to do? Where to find work? Is this the right way?

Even the act of asking made him feel small because language has a cruel way of stripping a person of dignity when they cannot shape their thoughts into the words of the place they are standing in.

He walked.

He turned.

He asked.

He waited.

And the city answered him the way cities answer people who are lost, with indifference.

He walked through the city for hours, stopping people, trying again and again to make himself understood. He watched faces shift from confusion to impatience, and then to indifference.

As the day went on, the hope inside him began to thin in the slow, humiliating realization that being determined is not always enough when you are alone and unfamiliar in the wrong place.

By evening, he could no longer pretend he had a plan. He sat down on a bench because the body eventually confesses what pride refuses to admit. A boy pretending, he was simply “*resting*,” when in truth he had reached the edge of what he could do alone.

That was when fate arrived in the form of an old friend. Mr. Thomas.

The friend spotted him first — a man in the military who had been transferred to Chandigarh. The disbelief in his voice was immediate. What are you doing here? It was not a question asked casually; it was a shock, the kind that comes when you see someone where they should not be, and you understand that something must have gone terribly wrong because people don’t just end up in Chandigarh by accident when they are sixteen and alone and from another end of the country.

Papa told him the truth, not a polished version or a story softened for sympathy, but the simple and unglamorous reality that he had left home and he did not know what came next. His friend listened, and then said what any sensible person would say,

“How will you manage here? You don’t even know the language,” yet he did not leave him on that bench. He took him home, and in that one act there was a mercy that Papa would never forget, the mercy of someone choosing not to look away.

With that help, Papa found work as a helper in a cement machinery factory. It was labor of the kind that does not allow

for pride. The kind of work you don't romanticize. He cleaned, carried weight that strained his muscles, washed machines until his hands smelled of metal and grit, and carried exhaustion as a daily companion.

He did this for six months, earning only one hundred and twenty-five rupees, a number so small it barely deserves to be called "*wages*."

The amount barely covered rent and food. There was no possibility of saving or comfort of planning. There was only the necessity of enduring one day at a time and figuring out how much to spend on the only meal of the day.

Then life did what it often does to people who are already hanging by a thread.

After six months, his friend was transferred again. One sentence can create a whole new crisis. "*I have to leave*," Uncle Thomas said.

The news came with a new kind of fear. Papa had begun to survive in Chandigarh, but survival depended on the fragile presence of a familiar person. Without that, the city would become what it had been on the first day, vast and indifferent.

Papa didn't panic loudly. He panicked like a person who already knows panic doesn't help. He just stared at the problem in front of him, a city he didn't belong to, a language that still didn't belong to him and the terrifying truth that he was about to be alone again.

But before leaving, Uncle Thomas offered him one last thing — a thread to hold on to. He recommended someone in Ludhiana, someone Papa could meet and rely on, at least in the beginning.

So, Papa took another bus and without knowing it, he travelled into the city that would end up writing history for three generations.

*He arrived in **Ludhiana**, a city that, at that time, meant nothing more than just a destination.*

Chapter 3

Winter Without Shoes



Ludhiana did not welcome Papa with warmth or familiarity... It offered no softness and no comforting hand on the shoulder.

By the time the winter began to loosen its grip, he had already learned that survival in Punjab required more than a strong body. It demanded a mind that could adapt quickly and a heart that could endure quietly. The days moved with the same merciless rhythm. He woke before the sun was fully awake, washed his face with water so cold it made his teeth ache, and stepped out into a world that still felt foreign. The walk to the factory remained long and the wind still carried a cruelty he had never known in Kerala. Even when the cold softened, his feet remembered it.

He kept going because he had no alternative. Pride can be a weakness in comfortable lives, but in a life like his, it was the only thing that prevented collapse. He had already fled one house that would not let him be himself. He refused to become the kind of man who returned defeated.

Work began again, as it always did. He found another job in a factory, doing the tasks that kept the machinery of other people's lives running, cleaning, mixing products, handling materials that stained hands and clothes. At the factory, he worked the way people work when they understand that they are replaceable. There was no room for mistakes, no permission to be slow. The language around him was harsher here, faster and louder than

anything he had known. People noticed he was different. The accent gave him away. The unfamiliarity in his face marked him as an outsider. Some treated him roughly, and some spoke with the kind of cruelty that comes easily when you know the other person cannot argue back in your language. There were days the words hit him hard enough to make his eyes burn, but he kept going. Survival does not always come from comfort; sometimes it comes from refusing to stop.

Yet every evening he returned to his small room, exhausted, and still told himself the same thing, tomorrow is mine too.

Punjab's winter is not gentle. It does not feel like an ordinary cold. It feels like the wind is a force with intention, as though it is trying to reach the bone. For a boy raised in relentless heat, this kind of cold was not merely discomfort, it was a shock. He did not have shoes. He had slippers. He did not have a bed. He slept on the floor. He owned one blanket, and when the nights turned unbearable, he did what the poor have always done, he divided what little warmth he possessed into two halves, half spread beneath him on the cold floor, and half pulled over his body as he tried to rest.

He walked to work every day — **forty-five minutes**, in the wind, in slippers, through a cold that made his feet swell and his skin ache. At that stage of life, there were no choices that allowed for weakness. The body could suffer, but hunger was worse. Work was not a path to success yet, it was a basic requirement for staying alive.

His roommate had to leave for Kerala due to some family emergency. He said he would come back in a month or so. There were days when he spoke to no one, silence became the only companion that returned with him at night. There was no family, voice or warmth waiting for him, only the knowledge that tomorrow would demand the same strength again.

Vulnerability is dangerous because it reveals how easily the world can erase you when you have no one to witness your existence.

Still, something in him refused to disappear.

In the middle of that misery, one stubborn thing remained intact — determination. It did not appear as grand ambition. It appeared as discipline and persistence. A small quiet decision to keep learning.

Alongside work, he kept learning the language the way a man learns how to swim when he has already spent too long in deep water. Hindi first, because it helped him survive daily interactions. English next, because he understood it would one day open doors that labor could not. He practiced in private so nobody could laugh. He listened carefully to how men spoke, how they argued, how they joked, how they softened their tone when they were asking for something instead of demanding it. He repeated phrases under his breath as he walked, turning the road into a classroom because he had no time for anything else.

Even after all of that, it still wasn't enough to keep hunger away. The salary he earned could not carry both rent and food once his roommate was gone, and in that kind of life, practicality is never gentle, it is simply necessary. So, he did what poor people everywhere learn to do without announcing it to anyone, he began cutting down meals. One became half, half became nothing, and he kept going to work anyway, lifting and cleaning and walking through that merciless cold as if his body could be negotiated with.

It was his first winter, and starvation does not stay invisible forever. After days of working too much on too little, with the cold tightening around him and no warmth waiting at the end of the day, his strength finally gave out. His body pushed past what it could tolerate. It simply stopped right there in the middle of survival—and he fainted.

The Grand (MOTHER)

Who knew that collapse would not be the end, but the beginning?

Because sometimes the universe doesn't send help when you are brave, it sends it when you finally cannot pretend you are fine. He thought he was falling behind in life. In truth, he was falling into the moment that would change everything.

What felt like weakness that day would turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

Chapter 4

Boy Behind the Door



The hunger was sharp and violent at first, it eventually turned into a dull heavy fog. It wasn't just a missed meal. It was the exhaustion of fighting a war against the weather, the language, and the world, all on his own. He lay down on the floor, perhaps thinking he would just rest for a moment.

He didn't get up.

For two days, the world outside moved as if nothing had happened. The sun rose and set over the neighborhood. The sounds of ordinary life floated through thin walls — laughter, utensils, footsteps, a radio turning on, a child being called inside. Next door, people cooked and ate and complained about small things. Time continued doing what it always does, moving forward without waiting for anyone but inside that room, time had stopped. A sixteen-year-old boy lay collapsed in the darkness, his body shutting down in a silence so complete it began to resemble an ending.

In those two days, nobody heard him call for help. Hunger looked like a boy disappearing quietly, one breath at a time, in a room no one thought to check. If the neighbor hadn't noticed the stillness, if the silence hadn't felt unnatural, he might have become one more unnamed story in a city — a life that ended not because it was meant to, but because it was inconveniently invisible. That is what makes it unbearable: it wasn't fate that

almost took him. It was neglect, proof of how easy it is for the world to keep moving while someone is quietly slipping away.

History doesn't begin with birth. Sometimes, it begins with a broken door.

It wasn't a knock that saved him. It was a crash.

The neighbor, savior, the angel in disguise, *Dadaji*, had noticed the stillness. In a place where lives are packed close together, and walls carry everything, silence is the loudest alarm. He did not wait for permission. He put his shoulder to the wood, and the lock gave way. When light spilled into the room, it fell on a boy who looked more like a shadow than a living thing. Two days without food does not only empty the stomach, it hollows out the eyes. It rearranges the face into something that barely resembles youth.

They didn't call an ambulance; they called on their own humanity.

They helped him regain consciousness, splashed water on his face and made him drink some water. Once he looked stable enough to get up, they brought him out of the dark into their home.

But rescuing a body is one thing and rescuing a person's pride is another war entirely.

When Papa finally opened his eyes, they were weak, trembling, and confused. The first thing he saw was a plate of food and the first thing he did was refuse it. He pushed it away as if it were poison. In his mind, accepting free food meant accepting defeat. He would rather faint again than be reduced to a beggar.

Dadaji didn't get angry. He didn't force the spoon into his mouth. He stood over him and looked at him with a kind of understanding that only comes from having known struggle himself. He could see the boy's dignity fighting even when the body had already surrendered.

He pointed to his young daughter, who was watching from the corner with uncertain eyes. He knew he could not offer charity, so he did something wiser than charity.

He offered a trade.

"You are educated," Dadaji said, his voice cutting through the tension. *"You teach my daughter. You help her with her studies."*

Papa looked up, listening, and in return, Dadaji continued, "You eat at our table. You work all day, you study at night. I can see you are a hardworking boy, so you teach her. It is not a gift. It is a wage."

It was, in truth, a lie told to protect a boy's honor — a bargain invented to make survival feel earned. A barter system built out of kindness and Papa nodded, because now he could accept the food without feeling like he had been conquered by his own need.

The deal was struck, the kind of small, ordinary arrangement that people forget the moment it is made, never realizing it will echo through generations.

In the background, the woman of the house stood quietly — My *Dadi*. She did not speak of contracts or pride. She simply picked up the plate he had rejected, warmed it, and placed it back in front of him with a gentleness that did not ask questions.

She did not know then that she wasn't only feeding a tutor.

She was feeding the son destiny had chosen for her — the son she never had.

She did not know then that she was not only saving him. She was saving the father, who would one day need someone to save his daughter.

And she certainly did not know that a kindness that began through a broken door and a warmed plate would become part of the reason a girl, born years later, would survive this world at all.

Chapter 5

The Grammar of Belonging



It began, at first, like everything begins for someone who has learned to survive alone. Papa did not step into that house as a person who felt entitled to comfort. He stepped in like a guest who feared overstaying, a boy who believed that kindness could be taken back at any moment.

Even after Dadaji offered him a place at their table, he ate with restraint. When food was placed in front of him, he would lower his eyes and say, “*Bas, bas... I’m good. I’m good*” and he would eat only what was offered—gratefully, without asking for more.

Teaching their daughter, Babbal Bui — who was around ten years old, started in the same way. He was shy with her at first because closeness was unfamiliar territory. He sat beside her with the awkwardness of someone who had not been treated gently in a long time. He corrected her softly, praised her carefully, and watched her reactions. It looked like he was learning a new language that had nothing to do with words. Day by day, the routine formed, work outside, study inside, and a table that began to feel less like a transaction and more like a place where life returned.

Babbal Bui, too, began to change around him. In the beginning she watched him like children watch strangers, cautious and unsure where to place their trust. She tested him in small ways, the way children do, by asking questions that had nothing to do with books, by staring too long, by giggling when he

pronounced a word differently, but gradually, the lessons stopped being only lessons. She began waiting for him with her notebook already open, eager to show him what she had done. Sometimes she would run ahead to announce his arrival to her parents like it was good news, and in the smallest gestures, an extra chair pulled out, a pencil placed beside his hand. He felt something unfamiliar growing around him, a space being made for him.

The change was not sudden. It was tender. It was almost invisible. It happened the way healing often happens, so slowly you only notice it when you look back and realize you are no longer the same person.

At first, he ate because he had to. Then, after a few months passed, one day, without even meaning to, he spoke like someone who expected to be heard. He looked at a dish and asked, almost shyly, “*Can you cook saag for me sometime?*” The request was small, but it carried something enormous beneath it, the beginning of trust and preference. A boy allowing himself to want.

He didn’t notice it fully in that moment, but Dadi did not treat his request like a demand or a burden. She simply smiled as if he had offered her something precious without realizing it. She didn’t answer with big words. She answered the way women like her always did, through action. The next day, quietly, without announcement, she placed that saag in front of him, making it clear that his likes had been heard, and that in this house, he was allowed to want.

A few more months passed; the sentences changed again. They gained confidence and the simple audacity of belonging.

One day he tasted something and, half-smiling, said, “*This isn’t nice. I don’t want this.*”

Then, with the innocence of someone forgetting his old fear, he asked for more of what he liked. He did not ask it like a burden, he asked like a son who had started to believe there would be another meal tomorrow made with love.

From one meal a day, life turned into something else entirely. The evenings began filling with laughter, the kind that comes when exhaustion is still there, but it is no longer lonely. When Papa returned from work, Dadaji would be waiting because his arrival started to matter. Now, the day was incomplete until he came home. Dadaji even began making him a special milk, warm and thick, filled with ingredients he claimed were “*strength*” ingredients, things he said he had learned from the military since he was an army soldier. It was almost comical sometimes, the seriousness with which he explained it, like he was passing on a secret formula, but behind the humor was something real, a man trying to nourish a boy back into life.

Even the market trips began to change. Whenever Dadaji went out, he brought something back for Papa, something small or thoughtful, a fruit, a snack, a little necessity. These were not grand gestures. They were daily proofs.

Quiet ways of saying,

I saw you.

I remembered you.

You belong here too.

The first time Papa laughed in that house, it surprised even him. It wasn't loud, and it didn't last long, but it was real, an instinct he had almost forgotten. Hunger had trained him to be serious, to stay guarded, and to conserve everything, even emotion. Yet here, in the ordinary rhythm of evenings, books open on the floor, Bui's questions tumbling out, Dadaji's comments filling the room like background music, his face began to loosen. He started speaking more, not just answering. He began to share small pieces of himself without calculating whether it was safe and in those small exchanges, something important happened, the house stopped feeling like a shelter he had borrowed and started feeling like a place where he could return.

And the most important part was, *the love did not feel like a debt.*

It did not feel like charity or like something Papa had to repay with his soul. Slowly, it began to feel like a right, not an arrogant right, but the simple human right to be cared for. The family had found a boy who could teach their daughter and bring new warmth into their home and Papa had found something he did not know he was still searching for, people who waited for him, fed him, treated his presence as something precious instead of inconvenient.

They were happy that they had found him.

And he was happy deeply — that *he had found a family*.

Chapter 6

Shoes and Other Small Wins



It is a strange thing, the way a little love can change the shape of a life. Hardship does not disappear. The same streets remain, cold arrives, same work waits but when even one person offers you peace, when someone chooses you with gentleness instead of judgment, something inside you begins to loosen. You stop living only to endure. You begin, quietly, to grow like a flower that has been bent by wind for so long it forgets what it looks like upright until one day it is sheltered for a moment, and remembers it was always meant to bloom.

Papa began with the smallest necessities, the kind that most people do not remember because they have never had to earn them through hunger. A slightly better blanket. An extra shirt. A steel glass of his own, not luxuries, just proofs. An evidence that he was no longer one step away from disappearing. Then, when he finally could, he bought what mattered most to his body — shoes. They were not beautiful. They were not the kind of shoes people hold onto as a sentimental *“first”*. They were simple, practical, worn-looking even when new but they changed his life.

A person who has walked through a Punjab winter in slippers understands that shoes are not fashion. Shoes are survival.

The first day he wore them to work, his feet felt strangely protected, almost confused by the unfamiliar comfort. He walked the same road, but it did not punish him in the same way. He

reached the factory less angry. The swelling reduced. The cold did not climb up his bones with the same cruelty. It was a small victory, and small victories are dangerous, not because they make you arrogant, but because they awaken something you have trained yourself not to feel for a long time.

Hope.

It did not stop there. His life began to shift in small increments. He found a new job in a stationery shop, and his salary rose to ₹195. It was not wealth, but it was change, and change is its own kind of joy. Still, Papa was not content, it was not the ungratefulness, but he had discovered something powerful, if your life can move forward even a little, it can move forward again.

In the shop, he noticed a typewriter. It belonged to the owner. It was old, unused, almost decorative in the corner, like a relic from a world that moved differently. Papa kept looking at it with the same quiet intensity he had once reserved for train schedules and escape routes. During a break one day, he asked, carefully, almost as if he expected the answer to be no, whether he could use it.

The shopkeeper stared at him, startled, then amused. To him, it probably sounded like a joke, a seventeen-year-old boy pretending at ambition. *What would he do with a typewriter?* Yet the owner laughed and waved it off, saying yes, fine, use it during breaks if you want. He didn't understand what he was giving away in that moment.

Only Papa understood.

He began teaching himself to type the way he had once taught himself to survive, with stubborn repetition. He practiced in the quiet spaces between customers, in stolen minutes, in the small gaps of the day most people waste without thinking. At first, it was slow, clumsy, humiliating. Then it became smoother. His fingers began to remember. His speed increased, and his confidence followed but even when he improved, he did not stop,

because he had learned that progress is not something that arrives with one breakthrough but with discipline.

Somewhere in that season of learning, he met a man who used to visit the shop. He called him his *guru* — Mr Pathiyoor Ravi — a man he speaks of even today with the kind of respect reserved for those who alter your destiny.

He stood by him like a quiet pillar offering unwavering moral strength, steady emotional support, and the kind of motivation that gently teaches you to believe in yourself again. He encouraged him to become independent, to build a life with his own hands, and when it came to learning shorthand, he didn't just advise, he invested. He offered free tuition, generously giving his time and guidance without expecting anything in return, maybe he realized Papa's potential before Papa himself. Papa practiced until the muscles in his hand learned the patterns and the language of shorthand began to feel like a door unlocking. For months, he worked and practiced, practiced and worked, building a future out of the smallest available tools.

Then, the better job came from SP Company. A small firm. It was a typing job, but still better than what he had known or done in the past year, better enough to make him feel, perhaps for the first time, that the world was no longer only demanding things from him, it was beginning to return something.

Through all of it, one truth remained steady, the family that had rescued him did not stop being his home. He still returned to them, ate at their table and laughed in that house as if laughter belonged there. He taught Bui, sometimes scolding her gently, sometimes praising her the way a brother would. He ate Dadi's meals, food made with the kind of care that does not announce itself. He sat with Dadaji, listening to his stories, drinking that "*special strength milk*" that came with military claims and fatherly pride. What had once been a bargain became something far more permanent than any contract.

He loved them. They loved him.

And then came the job that sounded, to a boy who had once fainted alone behind a locked door, like the world finally calling him by name.

Hero Cycles. Ludhiana.

A first “*big*” job. A real turning point. The kind of moment that does not erase the past, but proves it was not for nothing, a moment that makes a person look back at the road they have walked and realize the most astonishing truth of all.

He had survived it all, the hunger, the cold feet, the fainting, the humiliation, the loneliness, and the labor.

He was no longer only surviving. He was beginning to build.

Chapter 7

The Longest Night



Life has a cruel sense of timing. It waits until you finally exhale, until you begin to believe that perhaps the worst has already happened, and then it reminds you mercilessly, that you are not in control of what comes next. Papa had just begun to feel, for the first time, that life was stabilizing. He had found work, and with work came the fragile dignity of routine. More than that, he had found a home that was not his by birth, but had become his by love. The house in HE Colony no longer felt like borrowed shelter. It felt like belonging.

One evening, Papa returned from work. He knew something was wrong before anyone said a word. The house was awake in a different way, not waiting with the usual noises of evening. Dadi and Bui were sitting with a kind of stillness that did not belong to them, their faces turned toward the door. Dadaji usually came home by afternoon. He had never been the kind of man who disappeared without reason but that day, the sun had fallen, and night had arrived, and he still had not returned.

There were no phones then, no messages, and no quick reassurance that could be sent across distance. You could not “*check*” where someone was. You could only wait, and the longer you waited, the more your mind filled the silence with the worst possibilities. Dadi kept glancing toward the entrance like looking hard enough could pull him back home. Bui sat close to her, quieter than usual, absorbing fear the way children do without knowing what to do with it.

Papa stood there for a moment, feeling the air in the room, and then he said what men say when they are trying to keep panic from spreading. He told them to wait. He told them he would go and check. He said it calmly, the way you speak when you need others to believe in calm, even if you yourself are losing it.

He went first to Dadaji's workplace. The place was closing down, men drifting out, to them nothing extraordinary had happened. Papa asked, and they answered casually at first, because nobody thinks tragedy belongs to them until it does. Yes, they said, Dadaji left at the usual time, as always. He had gone home.

But he hadn't.

Papa began asking again, calling out to people who might have seen him on the road, searching faces for recognition, gathering small fragments of information that did not help. Each minute that passed made the fear in his chest heavier, more physical, like something pressing against his ribs. Somewhere in that searching, he saw a police officer.

It is a strange thing how the body knows before the mind accepts it. The moment Papa saw the uniform, something inside him went cold. He approached anyway, because hope, even when it is dying, makes you walk forward.

The officer looked at him, measured him, and then said the words that can split a life into before and after.

There had been an accident. A roadways bus had hit someone from behind.

For a moment, Papa could not hear anything else — not even his own breathing. He felt his heart stop, not metaphorically, but in that sudden sick way fear arrests you. He did not want to go where his mind was already going. He did not want the shape of the story to complete itself.

But life does not pause because you cannot bear it.

The officer asked him to identify the body.

Papa followed, walking like his legs belonged to someone else, as if each step was pulling him closer to a truth he was begging the universe to undo. He kept thinking of the house. *Of Dadi. Of Bui.* The two women waiting behind a door, believing that any moment Dadaji would return the way he always did. He kept thinking, not only of the loss, but of the cruelty of being the one who would have to deliver it.

When he saw him, his world shattered.

It was collapse. The sudden destruction of the one steady pillar that had held his new life upright. Dadaji, the man who had broken down a door, who had offered a trade wrapped in love instead of charity, waited for him in the evenings and poured strength into warm milk — was gone. Gone in a way that did not allow for goodbye.

Papa stood there staring at the proof and the first thought that rose through the shock was not even about himself.

It was about them.

About Dadi and Bui sitting at home, still waiting, hoping. About the unbearable weight of walking back into that house and turning their waiting into mourning.

He had survived many kinds of hardship.

But nothing prepares you for the moment you must carry death home in your hands.

Chapter 8

The Debt of Life



Papa came back home, but his eyes had already said what his words could not. Dadi looked at him and asked, *“What happened?”*

Bui’s voice trembled as she asked, *“Where is Papa?”*

That is when Papa spoke out the truth with a voice so low and a shiver in his body.

Dadi fell on the floor, still refusing to believe what she heard. Bui clung to him, as though holding on to him tightly enough might undo the words he had just spoken, but death is cruel, it does not pause to ask whether you are ready for it. It does not care whether you want it or not.

They brought Dadaji home the next noon after the post-mortem. The house that once held warmth in ordinary routines filled with a different kind of noise now, the sound of footsteps that didn’t belong there, the sound of grief arriving in groups, people were crying until their voices broke, and still continuing.

Dadi and Bui shattered in different ways. Dadi’s grief was not only grief, it was disbelief, her mind kept searching the room for a place where her husband could still be hiding, still be alive. Bui’s grief was the kind that frightens you the most — the grief of a child who does not understand the rules of death, only the terror of absence.

Relatives arrived. Some came out of love. Some came because death is a public event in families like this. They brought words that were supposed to help, sympathy packed into sentences, people repeat because silence makes them uncomfortable. There were hands on shoulders, murmured prayers and a rush of rituals. Papa stood inside it all with a strange stillness, watching how life can change in seconds. One afternoon, a man leaves work and is expected home. By night, a body returns instead. The transformation was so abrupt it felt unreal, like the world had flipped a page without asking permission.

The funeral happened the way funerals do, a gathering that turns a person into a memory while the living are still begging for one more minute. Papa remembers the atmosphere as heavy, suffocating. The cries were loud enough to make his chest ache. The air felt crowded with sorrow and somewhere within that chaos was a thought he couldn't escape:

This family rescued me from hunger, and now life has starved them of their own pillar.

But the worst part did not come during the funeral. The worst part came after, when the rituals were done and people began returning to their normal lives.

Dadaji had been only forty. Dadi was only thirty-two. Bui was only ten. They were not only grieving; they were vulnerable in a way that invites cruelty. The grief was still fresh in the walls, and yet the world around them had already begun calculating what two women alone could be turned into. Dadi was no longer just the benevolent mother feeding everyone, she was a widow. Bui was no longer just a tween; she was a fatherless daughter in a society that preys on weakness. That is when the world revealed its ugliest rule, when a house loses its man, the kindness of others becomes uncertain and sometimes predatory, shockingly someone inside the family only.

There was a man in the family itself, someone who should have arrived with protection, not poison. He approached Dadi with an

offer that was not an offer at all. It was a proposal to “*keep*” her, to “*take care*” of her and the child in a way that stripped them of dignity and made their suffering an opportunity. The kind of thing men say when they believe a widow is not a human being anymore.

When Papa found out, something in him turned cold.

It wasn't only anger. It was disgust so deep it felt like nausea. He looked at Dadi and Bui and saw, with unbearable clarity, what the world was capable of doing to women who are left without a shield. He understood then that death doesn't only steal a person. It also exposes everyone who depended on them. For years, the laughter had been loud enough to drown out the reality that the title son was born out of love not blood. But titles are easy when the sun is shining. The true weight of a title is only felt when the storm hits. Papa had no standing. He was the tutor. The neighbor. He could have stood in the back, mourned respectfully, and let the distant relatives take over.

He could have said, “*I am sad, but this is not my burden.*”

But that is when the “*Debt*” came due.

He remembered the door, his hunger, and the meal that saved his life. He remembered that when he was nothing but a starving stranger, Dadaji had given him not only food but love and dignity.

Now, Dadaji was gone and his dignity was left in the hands of his wife and daughter.

In that moment, something inside him shifted.

Until then, he had needed them. He had needed their table, warmth, the safety of being waited for. He had believed he was the one receiving, the one being saved.

But now standing there, watching fake sympathies fade into private intentions, watching the world circle two grieving

women like they were easy prey, he finally understood what love actually does.

Love creates debt.

Not the kind you repay with money. The kind you repay with presence.

With loyalty. With protection.

He was not only the boy they saved. He was the man who would now have to stand between them and the cruelty of the world. He realized the truth that would define the rest of his life. That night, whether he spoke it aloud or only promised it inside his own chest, he stepped into his role.

As family.

Because some people give you life twice and when they do, you don't walk away when life tries to take theirs.

You stay.

He didn't know how to be a son yet, but he knew how to stay.

Chapter 9

A Son Was Born



A son was born that year, but not the way the world understands birth. This son was born out of something rarer, love that chooses you without obligation and devotion that does not ask what it will gain in return. He was born out of humanity and care that is so quiet it is often mistaken for ordinary, until it saves you and you realize there was nothing ordinary about it at all.

There is no measure for love like a beaker or scale that tells you how much you have received and how you are supposed to return it. Love cannot be repaid in equal parts. It does not work like debt in the way money does. It only does one thing when it is real, it expands and grows into new shapes. It spreads into corners of a life that used to be dark and makes room where there was none.

That is what happened.

Papa was no longer the shy, careful boy who entered their home with his eyes lowered and his sentences cut into yes and no. He no longer moved like a guest who might be asked to leave. He began to stand like someone who belonged, someone whose place at the table was not borrowed but earned through presence and loyalty. What had started as an exchange, food for teaching, had become a bond too deep to be explained by words like *“help”* or *“charity.”*

The change showed itself in small acts at first. He stopped refusing second servings as though wanting more was a sin. He started speaking freely, laughing freely, filling the house with the sound of a boy who was no longer bracing for abandonment. He moved from teaching Bui to correcting her, scolding her when she misbehaved, reminding her to finish her work—like a brother would. It was not like an authority, but more like that is what family does, it cares enough to correct you. It invests in who you become.

He began offering to go to the market for Dadi, bringing back what she needed before she had to ask twice. He noticed details, the empty tin, the lack of vegetables, the missing matchbox, because love makes you attentive. He carried responsibilities without announcing them, the way Dadaji once did.

Life did not suddenly become happy for them and sorrow does not vanish because support arrives. Dadaji was still gone. There were still nights where Dadi went quiet in a way that felt like she had walked into a room only she could see. There were still moments when Bui looked smaller than her age, as if childhood had been interrupted. But now, at least, they had each other as a way to survive it without being swallowed whole.

Months passed like that. A new structure formed around loss. A routine rebuilt itself with different hands and slowly, the identity changed. It wasn't only that people started saying he was their son and her brother, it was that they began believing it. It settled into the air like truth. It became the most natural thing in the world, that the boy they had saved had stayed, and in staying, had become theirs.

But the world does not allow goodness to exist without testing it.

There are people whose jealousy is not a momentary emotion, but a permanent nature. No amount of kindness reforms them. No amount of decency softens them. When they see someone living with integrity, they do not feel inspired, they feel

threatened. And when they see a family rebuilding itself without them, they do not feel relieved, they feel offended.

The man who had once approached Dadi with that shameless proposal did not disappear after being rejected. His entitlement did not dissolve. It only curdled into resentment. In those days, the terraces and verandas were open, the roofs loosely connected, the boundaries between homes thin enough for anyone to cross if they were determined. At night, people slept on rooftops to escape the heat, trusting the familiar closeness of neighborhood life.

One night, that trust was violated. Papa was sleeping when the man climbed over, quiet as a thought and attacked him with a sword. There was no warning, no time to understand. Only instinct. Papa raised his hand to protect himself, and the blade cut into his skin. The injury did not end his life, but it left a mark that remains there to this day — a scar that is not only a scar, but proof.

Proof of what selfless love can provoke in a bitter heart.

He was attacked just because he had stayed and protected two women the world wanted to see unprotected. He had become what that jealous man could never be, a son by choice, a brother by devotion and a protector without ownership.

That is when you learn one of life's hardest truths, the world is not made only of good people. There are vultures at every turn, watching for the moments your happiness begins to lift its head, waiting to tear it down. They do not need a reason beyond their own emptiness. They do not need an excuse beyond their own envy. But even that night, even with blood on his hand and fear in the air, one thing did not change. Papa did not leave because when love gives you a family, you don't abandon it the moment the world shows its teeth.

You stand between them and the cruelty.

That night, the terrace learned what kind of world it was standing on.

The Grand (MOTHER)

Blood on his hand, and still no retreat in his heart.
Because he wasn't staying out of obligation anymore.
He stayed because leaving would mean letting the world win.
And he had already decided, they would not be taken from him
too.

That scar stays till date, not as a punishment, but as a signature.
A reminder that he had been chosen and that he chose them
back.

Chapter 10

The Cabin of His Own



By then, they weren't just surviving together. They were a family in the only way that matters, through loyalty and love that showed up every day without needing a title. Papa had a mother and a sister at home. Dadi had a son as well as a daughter. Bui had a brother who scolded her when she acted out and defended her when the world felt sharp. They looked after each other with a devotion that wasn't dramatic, only constant. It was the kind of bond formed through choosing. And once you are chosen like that, once you have a home that waits for you, your spine straightens in ways you didn't realize it could.

That was when Papa's growth truly began.

He had already done the impossible. A boy who dared to leave home, who learned to survive in a city that did not speak his language, who worked until his body collapsed and still stood back up, he had done all of it without anyone standing beside him. Now, with a family behind him, imagine what it did to his spirit. He wasn't chasing "*big success*" the way the world defines it, but he was becoming something his old life had never made space for, a man who knew his worth.

Hero Cycles was proof of progress. It was a leap from cement dust and heavy lifting to skill and responsibility, from a nameless labor to someone trusted with words, files, and precision. He wasn't just working with his hands anymore; he was working with his mind. He had taught himself typing. He had learned

shorthand. He had studied day and night until he could do the work more efficiently than people who had degrees and comfort and family names behind them.

Yet the world still had a way of shrinking him.

He remained an intern. It wasn't because he lacked capability, but because he lacked paper.

When he applied for promotion, the senior HR gave him the kind of answer that sounds polite but feels like a closed door slammed gently in your face. The company policy required a graduation degree. He had knowledge, yes. Skill, yes. Experience, yes. But not the formal certificate. Therefore, they could not "*accommodate*" him in that position.

It is a particular kind of humiliation when you are good enough to be used, but not "*qualified*" enough to be respected.

So, they continued using him. Managers handed him their work; seniors leaned on him the way people lean on the capable. He became the invisible engine behind tasks others took credit for. He was treated like a convenient solution, not a valued person. Papa did what he had always done when life cornered him, he kept working. He did not argue or beg. What could he say? He had already learned that protest is expensive when you are trying to survive. Moreover, he himself believed that, because he truly did not have a degree, so he deserved it.

But the universe rarely stays basic when it sees a person's potential. It doesn't always reward you quickly, but it has a way of arranging a moment that becomes undeniable. A moment so clear that even the people who underestimated you cannot pretend anymore.

That moment came on an ordinary workday, dressed as a crisis.

Something urgent had to be done — something high-level, time-sensitive, the kind of work that lands on the tables of the president and the executive director. The Senior PA was not present that day. The time was short, and the pressure was high.

People panicked the way people panic when responsibility is suddenly real.

The vice president did what he had been doing quietly for months.

He called Papa.

Absolutely not because he respected him — at least not openly, but when you need something done properly, you reach for the person who actually knows how to do it. Papa took the file, took the urgency and did what he always did, he performed. He worked through it with the precision of someone who had studied too hard for too long to fail now. He completed the report, organized it properly and delivered it.

When the file reached the executive director, the first question was simple.

“Who did this?”

That question changed the air.

Papa was called in. He stood there, still carrying the discipline of someone who doesn’t assume he belongs in powerful rooms but the executive director looked at him, then looked back at the report, and said what nobody in that building had said out loud before:

“This is better than what my current PA does.”

Then came the real question — the one that finally exposed the hypocrisy of the system.

“How do you know all this? And why are you sitting in an intern department?”

Papa didn’t brag. He didn’t dramatize. He told the truth the way a self-made person does, plainly. He explained that he had applied for a senior role, but the policy demanded a graduation degree. The company had refused him, which is fair. So, he had remained where they placed him, doing the work anyway.

The executive director listened.

Then he said something that proved power can either protect rules — or rewrite them.

"Yes. That policy exists."

And after a pause, after the kind of pause where a person decides what kind of leader they want to be, he added: "But that policy does not apply when *I* decide who works with me."

The next words were not just a promotion. They were restoration.

"From tomorrow," he said, "he will work with me directly."

Papa's stomach tightened, not from fear this time, but from the shock of being seen. The vice president who had dismissed him had to sit there and hear it. Everyone in that room had to swallow the reality they had been avoiding.

"Give him a cabin," the executive director continued, looking the vice president straight in the eye, as if this was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Under his own name. Officially."

Just like that, the boy the world kept trying to keep small was given a door with his nameplate on it. A personal cabin with a desk that had his name and the designation he earned, not borrowed.

Some people call that luck but Papa and everyone around him knew better.

Luck is random.

This was earned.

That night, he walked home like the road itself had changed because for the first time, the world had not used him quietly, it had named him openly. When he stepped through that familiar door, he wasn't bringing money or news, he was bringing proof, a man can be born twice, and the second time can be by respect.

Chapter 11

The Bride Hunt



By this time, Papa had secured what once felt impossible — a cabin, a title, a seat close enough to power that people finally had to say his name with respect. He had also bought a house after two years, the walls that belonged to him and didn't depend on anyone's mercy. A boy who once slept on the floor now had keys in his pocket. Stability, at last, had a shape.

That is precisely, exactly when an Indian family becomes loud.

Because in Indian households, peace does not stay quiet for long, especially not when there is a mother, a sister, a family that loves you like you are theirs. Success doesn't end the pressure. It simply changes the topic.

Papa turned thirty-five, and Dadi and Bui looked at him the way Indian women look at a man who has started getting *too comfortable* in his routine.

"*Now you have to get married,*" they decided, like it was a company policy.

Papa, who had survived hunger, winter, and loneliness, suddenly became helpless in front of this one sentence. He would pretend to be busy. He would discover urgent work that did not exist. He would sit with a newspaper like it held life-saving information. Anything to avoid the next step. When the topic refused to die, he did something that still makes us laugh till date, he tried to outsource courage to Bui.

Whenever he had to go “*see a girl*,” he would ask her to come along.

“*Come with me*,” he’d say, completely serious.

Bui would stare at him. “*What am I supposed to do there?*”

“*You have to be with me*,” he insisted, as if this was normal.

“*What do you mean I have to be with you?*” she’d protest. “*I’ll be crashing your... whatever this is. You want me to sit there while you’re meeting a potential wife?*”

Papa, shy to the core, would nod like yes, that is exactly the plan.

The logic was very simple, if Bui was present, he would not have to carry the full awkwardness alone. If Bui was present, the moment would feel less like a marriage interview and more like a family visit and maybe the girl would reject him first, and he could go home in peace.

And the funniest part was — Bui actually went.

So there they would be, Papa, dressed neatly, sitting with a face that said *I hope this ends quickly*, and Bui beside him like an unpaid security guard, internally screaming, *Why am I here?*

One time, they sat in a living room that felt like a courtroom, a plastic-covered sofa, a tray of biscuits, tea cups lined up like witnesses. The girl’s family asked the usual questions in soft, polite voices, the kind that sound friendly but are actually interviews. Papa answered in the shortest possible sentences, like he was being charged per word.

“*Yes.*”

“*No.*”

“*Maybe.*”

Meanwhile, Bui sat beside him with the confidence of someone who did not sign up for this nonsense, sipping her tea and silently judging the biscuits like *that* was the real reason they

were there. When the girl's mother asked, "*What are your hobbies?*" Papa paused for so long it felt like he was searching for hobbies in his pocket. Before he could speak, Bui leaned forward innocently and said, "*His hobby is work and getting me to come everywhere with him.*" The room went quiet for half a second, and then Dadi coughed into her cup to hide her laugh, while Papa stared at the floor like he wanted to disappear through it.

It was funny, yes, but beneath the comedy, something tender was happening. Papa was no longer a stranger who didn't know how to exist in family spaces. He was part of a house that could tease him and still love him. He belonged enough to be mocked and enough to be cared for even when he was ridiculous.

At some point, the family decided the search needed to be "*official.*" That meant what it always meant in those days: a newspaper advertisement. The day they sat down to write it, the house turned into a committee meeting. Dadi sat like the chairperson, calm, while Bui acted like the secretary, pen in hand, ready to write. Papa hovered nearby with the anxiety of a man watching his fate get printed for strangers.

"*Write: kind nature,*" Dadi said.

"*Write: good family,*" Bui added, enjoying herself a little too much.

Papa cleared his throat, trying to sound casual, pretending like he hadn't been silently panicking for weeks. "*Also... write 'no dowry,'*" he said.

Dadi looked up. "*Haan?*"

"*No dowry,*" he repeated, firmer this time, and then — like he was issuing a moral announcement to the nation, he added, "*No caste also.*"

Bui paused, stared at him, and smiled slowly. "*Wah,*" she said. "*Look at you. A gentleman.*" Dadi shook her head like she was irritated, but the corner of her mouth betrayed her pride and Papa sat back, satisfied like he had just fixed society with one

newspaper line, still proud of this even today — that he insisted on a very specific line.

No dowry. No caste.

He says it like an achievement, like he wants the world to clap.

“*See?*” he tells us, chest slightly out. “*Even in that generation, I was against these things.*”

And we laugh, because yes, it is admirable and also because he says it like he invented equality. That line mattered to him because it proved something about the kind of man he had become. He had seen what greed does to families and what entitlement does to women. He had been saved by love that asked for nothing in return and now, even in marriage, he wanted nothing built on transaction. No business deal disguised as a wedding.

Even after that, when the proposals came, he kept refusing, but here is the truth nobody understood at the time, Papa wasn’t “*rejecting girls*” because he was arrogant. He was rejecting them like a shy man rejects inevitability. He wasn’t judging them, he was delaying himself. Every “*no*” was another month of safety where life stayed familiar and he didn’t have to step into a new unknown.

Yet Dadi and Bui teased him mercilessly.

“*What do you think of yourself?*” they’d say, half-laughing, half-offended. “*What makes you think you can reject girls?*”

Papa would try to look serious. “*I’m not rejecting,*” he’d insist, as if that sentence would save him. “*I’m just... thinking.*”

“*Thinking what?*” Bui would fire back. “*Thinking you’re some hero?*”

Dadi, who could read him better than anyone, would watch all of this with the calm of a woman who had raised him into a man. She knew his shyness was not disrespect. It was fear. He had fought too long to build a stable life. Marriage meant change. It

meant new expectations, new responsibilities, and the terrifying possibility of losing peace again.

Eventually, Dadi stopped laughing and took the matter into her own hands the way mothers do when their sons become too clever with delay, because a mother — especially one who becomes your mother by destiny and devotion does not raise you into survival only.

That is how the bride hunt truly began as a family's gentle conspiracy to give a good man the one thing he still didn't believe he deserved.

Chapter 12

The Entry of the Queen—Neelam



The newspaper advertisement did what all such advertisements do in Indian families, it turned private life into public business overnight. Suddenly, names arrived from everywhere, relatives, neighbors, distant contacts, “*someone’s someone*” who knew “*a very good family.*” It began to look like marriage was a marketplace and Papa was a product people could evaluate by price tags like job, house, and reputation.

Bui treated it like entertainment. Dadi treated it like duty. Papa treated it like a disaster waiting to happen.

And then one family called.

It wasn’t a loud introduction or a dramatic proposal. They had read the ad, they were interested, and they wanted to come see the boy. The first people to arrive from that side were Kiran Maasi and Kusum Mause ji. They came the traditional way, polite, observant, and quietly thorough. They looked at Papa. They looked at the house. They noticed his job, his stability, the way the neighbors spoke about him. He didn’t have to be a Richie rich, in those days, that wasn’t even the point. He was the Executive Assistant to the CEO of a company. He had his own home. He had a name people respected. Most importantly, he had a nature that felt nice.

They left feeling satisfied.

Before leaving, they said, “*Why don’t you visit Ambala?*”

So, Papa went. He went to see the girl and that is how my mother entered the story like destiny often does, without any announcement, or any dramatic background music... yet somehow, the air changes the moment she appears.

Papa saw her, and something in him understood before his mind could form a sentence.

She was beautiful in a way that didn't feel ordinary. She wasn't just pretty — she was *present*. She had warm, honey-toned skin that seemed to carry light softly. Her eyes were deep and curving, the kind that looked like they had known sorrow and still refused to lose softness. Her lips, shaped like a cupid's bow made even silence look graceful. But more than her features, it was her dignity. The way she sat, listened, and held herself like she had been born with class, not taught it. You could look at her and know, this woman is not here to be chosen like an item.

She is a queen.

The conversation between them was not long. There were no “*dates*,” no private coffee meetings or long romantic walks. Those things didn't happen in that time, not in that kind of setting. It was a meeting built from modesty and tradition, yet something true still passed between them — quiet, but undeniable. Then my mother said something that stayed with Papa.

“*My parents died when we were very young*,” she told him. “*It's just me and my sister*.” She explained her life plainly, how her sister was younger, now married, how she lived with her sister and brother-in-law. They were originally from Jalandhar, but they were in Ambala because Mause ji and Maasi were there. She said it like a fact, not a tragedy, like someone who had already survived what life could do and still had the courage to stand in front of a new future.

He didn't offer poetic comfort but something about her story met something in his own story, like two wounded parts recognizing each other without needing to speak. What

happened next is what made Papa different even then. He could have said yes and moved forward like men often do, deciding alone and expecting everyone else to follow. Instead, he did something that revealed his real nature, he respected the woman he called his mother.

He told everyone, *“My mother is in Ludhiana. She will come and meet you. If she says yes, then it is yes from my side too.”*

When he returned, he didn’t pretend he needed time.

He simply said, *“She’s the one.”*

What Mumma loved about him later wasn’t only that he chose her, it was *how* he chose her. With family not used as pressure, but as blessing. Dadi went, met my mother, and loved her instantly. She didn’t just approve her. She *embraced* her.

And just like that, the wedding was finalized but before marriage, Dadi said something Papa didn’t want to hear.

“Go home once,” she told him. *“Before you marry, go and tell your parents and ask them for blessings. You should invite them.”*

Papa didn’t want to. It wasn’t stubbornness, it was old injury. Twenty years is a long time to live without a family asking if you’re *alive*. Still, because he respected Dadi more than he respected his own pain, he agreed.

So, he prepared like a son going home. He bought gifts for everyone.

He held them in his hands like proof that he was returning with love and hope and not with anger. He took the train to Kerala again after twenty years. He kept rehearsing conversations the whole time. He kept imagining their reaction when they would see him after these many years. He was excited, nervous, hopeful in a way that felt almost dangerous but reality reminded him of what he had tried to forget.

They did not welcome him the way he expected.

Nobody asked, *How were you all these years? Where did you live? How did you survive?* Nobody asked what hunger had taught him, what loneliness had carved into him, what kind of man he had become.

Instead, they said, *"You are not going to marry a Punjabi girl."*

Like love and commitment were negotiable and also, his life was still theirs to decide.

"If you want to marry," they told him, *"You will marry someone we find."*

And when he refused, the threat came clean and final,

"If you marry her, we will not come to the wedding."

So, Papa returned to Ludhiana the way he had returned as a boy—*empty-handed*, but this time it wasn't money he lacked.

It was hope of ever getting things right with them.

He came back and told Dadi quietly, *"See? Some things never change."*

Dadi knew exactly what he felt, so she decided to do everything she could so he wouldn't feel the void. The wedding happened, with blessings, rituals, and a bride entering a home that was built not by blood, but by devotion.

From the age of sixteen, when Papa left his house until the day he married, the woman who raised him for the next twenty years was the one who gave him a family and finally brought his bride home.

His real parents did not show up at the wedding. He never speaks about it much. He carries it like men carry wounds, pretending it doesn't ache but we all know the truth. No matter how strong you become, it hurts when the people who should have stood beside you choose absence instead. Also, it was not only his family, his friends, his own community people condemned him for marrying a North Indian girl

Still — he got married.

He chose love. He chose the family that chose him and the queen stepped into the story exactly the way she was meant to, as someone who would become part of the legacy.

Chapter 13

The Home



After the wedding, the house changed in a way that cannot be measured but only be felt. The walls held a different kind of sound, presence and softness. For years, Papa had lived as a bachelor inside a home that still loved him fiercely. Dadi and Bui were his family, his shelter but let's be honest, a life partner does something to you that no other person on earth can. A spouse doesn't just share your days. They alter the temperature of your life.

Papa loved the simplest thing most, coming home and finding her at the door waiting like joy. A smile that didn't ask what he had achieved that day, only told him he was safe now. He loved the way she cooked for him, not grand dishes to impress anyone, but the ones he liked, the ones that felt like they understood him. After a lifetime of eating whatever was available, he was suddenly being fed what his heart wanted and then came the moment that sealed everything. Dadi, who had carried him through so much, sat my mother down one day with calmness only real mothers have, the kind who love enough to let go. She said something that sounded light, but carried the weight of an entire life.

"I got him married, Neelam," she told her. "Now I hand him over to you. My responsibility comes to rest here."

Dadi knew how society works. She knew the cruelty of labels, the way people treat women in a new home, how they look for

hierarchy and they sharpen the word *mother-in-law* until it becomes a weapon. So, she tried to soften it before the world could harden it. She said, gently, almost like a request:

"I'm not your real mother-in-law."

My mother didn't hesitate. She answered with a certainty so clean it must have stunned the whole room.

"I don't care," she said. "I don't know what a 'real' mother-in-law looks like. The woman who got me married, who brought me home, that is my mother-in-law."

That is my mother — and that is you."

That line lived in Dadi's heart forever. She repeated it for years, with the same soft pride every time. Her eyes filled, she smiled through tears, and in that moment, she knew she had brought the right girl home. She is not only a wife for her son but a daughter for herself. What followed was not just "*adjustment*." It was devotion. Their bond became one of those rare things neighborhoods still remember.

Even today, people who knew them say it with awe, that your grandmother and your mother were not ordinary women. That they were the kind of souls the world sees once in lifetimes, and then spends years trying to find again. Despite everything, the circumstances, the losses, the history that could have made them guarded, they chose love. They chose each other. Babbal Bui loved her, and so did Mumma. The house became full again. They ate together, went to the market together, shared routines that looked simple from outside but were, in truth, healing. Life became beautiful for all of them, then. It wasn't perfect, but it was held by all of them together.

My mother was an *epitome of grace*. Even now, when people speak about her, I realize how much respect can outlive a lifetime. She died decades ago, and still, her name travels through rooms like a presence. They speak of her kindness first, how she treated everyone as if dignity was their right and then

they speak of her strength, because kindness without strength is fragile, but my mother's kindness was powerful. If she needed something done, it was done not because she forced anyone, not because she ordered the world around, but because people loved her. They respected her. She had given so much to others that they wanted to show up for her without being asked.

No wonder she lived fewer years. But whatever years she lived, she lived like a queen.

There is one incident people still tell that raises my standard for love every time I hear it. Papa was not very wealthy, but by then he could provide stability. A company car at the door, a life where errands and travel didn't feel like a struggle anymore. Guests came often. My Maasi would visit, and the house would feel like a festival, tea, chatter, family energy spilling into every corner.

One day, Mumma and Maasi went shopping. They returned with bags, the ordinary happiness of new things. Later, my Maasi joked casually, just a passing sentence, nothing dramatic that she had really liked a dress but hadn't bought it. It's too expensive, she said, laughing it off.

Papa's head snapped up.

"Why didn't you buy it?" he asked, like the answer was unacceptable.

Mumma smiled, half-amused. *"It was too expensive, not worth it,"* she waved off.

Papa didn't debate. He didn't lecture or make it a big speech about money. He did what love does when it is decisive, he stood up, held her hand, took her back to the shop, and he bought the dress. To outsiders, it might look small but it wasn't about fabric. It was about the message stitched underneath the act:

If you want it, you will have it. If it brings you joy, I will make space for it. Even if I only have that much in my pocket, I will do it for you.

The Grand (MOTHER)

That is what makes it unforgettable. It wasn't luxury or showing off. It was just devotion in motion. Their love is something people still talk about with that soft smile older people get when they remember real romance.

I feel proud every time someone says, "Your father loved your mother so much," — and it wasn't one-sided either. Mumma loved him just as fiercely, equally and completely. The kind of love that didn't perform — only existed. And the love I still look for in this world, the standard that still lives inside me was built inside that house, when it finally smiled again.

Chapter 14

The Offer and The Ordeal



Those moments were not grand events, but they are the ones that still live-in family memory. For one year after the marriage, the world finally softened around them, not in the way fairy tales show, no castles, no miracles but in the way real lives become beautiful through routine, shared meals, familiar laughter, a house that felt full. They had their own version of a fairy tale, built from everything they had survived. Mumma now had a home that welcomed her like it had been waiting. It wasn't perfect but it was safe and sometimes safety is the rarest luxury of all.

Then came the offer. A better job in a foreign country — Dubai. It was more money than they had ever seen. The kind of opportunity people spend entire lives chasing. The kind of offer that could have changed their status, lifestyle, their future on paper, but paper doesn't understand what hunger teaches a person. It doesn't understand what it means to find a family after losing one.

To accept the job, they would have had to leave Ludhiana. Leave Dadi. Papa, who once left home at sixteen and survived without anyone, refused. He refused without bargaining and with no hesitation that could be mistaken for doubt.

The world might call that foolish but I call it proof because there is a kind of loyalty that only exists in people who have been saved by love. The world may label them strangers, but Papa

knew better. Those were the people who fed him back into life. Those were the people who made him human again. So, when the chance came to trade them for more money, he did something rare:

He chose contentment over ambition.

Love over distance. The lady who saved him over any amount of money the world could provide.

When he asked Mumma what she thought, her answer matched his in a way that still amazes me. She didn't argue about money. She didn't romanticize sacrifice. She simply spoke like someone who understood where happiness actually lives.

"We can earn less," she said. "But this — this contentment, this peace — we won't find it there."

Two people, both selfless in the same direction, choosing a life that felt rich in the only way that mattered. Life, for a while, seemed to reward them for it. They bought their first motorbike. It wasn't just a vehicle. It was a symbol. Papa was proud in a way only someone who has walked too long can be proud. In that society, in that circle, he was one of the few with a motorbike. A small thing for the world, a huge thing for him. It was a proof that the boy who arrived with nothing had built something that moved forward.

After a year, my mother became pregnant. Hope entered the house again, like a candle lit in a room that has known darkness. And then, just as quietly, it was taken away.

She had a *miscarriage*. The miscarriage itself was grief but what followed was cruelty.

A complication because of a severe infection. Then came the sentence delivered in the careful tone doctors use when they are trying to be professional about something that will destroy a life.

They said that she would never be able to conceive again. Papa stood there and felt the words land like a knife. He understood what this would mean for Mumma. In a world that measures

women by motherhood, this was not only medical news — it was a future of whispers, pressure, pity, and self-blame. Still, he did not crumble in front of her. He held onto the only priority that mattered in that moment.

Save her.

Dadi understood something Papa also understood, a woman's grief after losing a child — *even an unborn one* — is not a pain that can be explained to people who haven't carried it. My grandmother told him, gently but firmly, that they could not say this to Mumma now, especially not while she was bleeding and still mourning, the loss in her own body. So, they didn't.

Papa did something that still broadens my chest when I think about it. Something that feels almost impossible in the world we live in. He kept the truth to himself for years. The doctors had said my mother might never conceive but Mumma was never told that sentence. She never carried that label. Instead, she carried something else — an assumption she made out of love. She believed the problem was in Papa, not her. She believed he might be the one who needed treatment. So, she took him to clinics, hospitals, check-ups. She held his hand and asked him to cooperate and he did.

He sat in waiting rooms while people whispered. It gives me chills. All this for what, just to protect his wife. He listened while tests were suggested. He allowed his masculinity to be questioned in a society that ties a man's ego to fertility like it is an identity card. He stood there as the "*patient*" while knowing, deep inside, that the wound was not in him.

And still — he never turned around and threw the truth at her.

He never said, *It's not me. It's you.*

Because he knew what would happen if he did. He knew how her blame would shift inward, she would carry it like a punishment and she would grieve not only the child she lost, but the future she would fear she had lost forever. So he chose to carry it

instead. He chose, for years, to let the world assume something about him rather than let his wife break under something about herself.

That is not just love. That is devotion. That is the kind of protection that doesn't get witnessed very often in this world.

The kind of silence a man keeps because he is shielding and when I think about it, I don't just see a husband. I see a man who understood that sometimes the greatest act of love is not what you say. It's what you refuse to place on the person you love.

Chapter 15

The “May” Miracle Baby — 2105



In a world where masculinity is treated like a fragile trophy, most men protect their ego before they protect their love. Papa broke that rule twice. First, when he wrote no dowry, no caste in a generation that still treated women like transactions.

And then again — when he let society point at him, test him, whisper about him, just so the woman he loved wouldn’t have to carry the cruelty of a sentence written by doctors. They didn’t even know the word *feminism* then, but Papa practiced its purest form anyway, not in speeches, but in sacrifice.

Life moved forward the way it always does without pausing for what it has taken. Papa tried to fill the house with laughter again. He made Mumma smile, teased her gently, brought her small joys the way he had learned to do with love, consistently, without performance but somewhere inside that smile, he knew she carried a grief no one could see. A child had been lost. A future had been questioned and even if Papa never said it aloud, Dadi knew he carried his own grief too because men grieve, even when they are taught to hide it in responsibility.

Years passed. The world settled into routine again. The house learned how to breathe without fear.

In 1994, my grandmother went to Hemkund Sahib.

I don’t know what she felt there. I don’t know what she prayed, she whispered to God in a place where the air itself feels holy but

when she returned, she carried something in her eyes that looked like certainty. It was not the kind of belief that comes from logic but something deeper. The kind that comes from faith.

She looked at Mumma and said, “*Neelam... I have a feeling you will get pregnant.*”

Just that. She said it like a mother who had seen life bend before and believed it could bend again. A month and a half later, it happened.

My mother became *pregnant*. After everything they had been told, all the warnings, the medical certainty that had tried to close the door forever. A new life arrived anyway — stubbornly.

Exactly nine months later, on **21 May 1995**, five years into their marriage, *I was born*.

Their miracle baby.

Mine is not a story of “planned.” It is a story of “impossible.” I was the child the world had said would not come. I was the answer that arrived after everyone had stopped asking out loud, that is why Papa named me ***Sheena*** — a name that means *God’s gift* because to them, that is what I was, a proof that life does not always keep its threats.

The miracle of my birth wasn’t only that I was born. It was how I was celebrated.

In so many Indian homes, the celebration is uneven. When a boy is born, the world gathers. People dance. Sweets are distributed. Blessings pour in like the house has achieved something. When a girl is born, the joy is often quieter, filtered through politeness, sometimes even through disappointment. The difference is so normalized that people don’t even realize how cruel it is.

My grandmother was the opposite of that cruelty. She broke it like it was nothing. She distributed boxes of sweets. She gave silver chains to the close ones and then she did something so

defiant and full of love that it still stuns me when I imagine it, she called the same celebration group, the one usually invited for a newborn boy, to come and dance and sing for *a girl child*.

For me.

She made them bless me the way society reserves blessings for sons. She refused to let my birth arrive into silence. She refused to let the world treat me like “less” on my first day on earth and she didn’t do it half-heartedly.

She did it with pride, the kind of pride that says, *Watch me. This girl is worth celebration.*

She even gave them a gold chain, she removed her own, the one she had worn around her neck and when I think about it, it makes my chest ache in the most beautiful way because just look at that lady, she had no blood relation with me. She didn’t have to do any of this but she did because love doesn’t always follow blood. Sometimes it follows the kind of woman who was born to break generational curses.

I was a miracle baby, yes but she was the bigger miracle because who celebrates a girl like that in a world that taught women to shrink? Only a woman who had decided long ago that in her house, love would not be measured by gender.

Only my Dadi.

Till the last moment my Dadi lived, she kept saying it with the quiet pride of a woman who knew exactly what she had prayed for:

“I got her from Hemkund Sahib.”

Every time she said it, it wasn’t superstition. It was her way of telling me that I was never ordinary to this family.

I was HER answered prayer.

Chapter 16

The Golden Light of Everyone



Life changed for all of them after I arrived. It was loud like the entire house had been waiting for one small heartbeat to give it a reason to glow again. I became their favorite kind of chaos. The only source of happiness in that home was me. The only source of smiles on their faces was me and very honestly, the only source of exhaustion was also me.

When a child is born after five years especially after being told you might never be parents, people don't "raise" the child normally. They go mad in the most loving way possible. Everything that should be done once got done three times. One person would do it, another would counter with "*No, this is better,*" and a third would arrive with an upgrade nobody had asked for.

Clothes became a competition, everyone had their own favourites. Milk became a ritual, non-negotiable. Food became a mission, again everyone had different suggestions.

There was no compromise when it came to me, not on quality, comfort, not on anything. Mumma was especially particular about food. She made sure I had *makhan* and *ghee* like it was a sacred duty. Fruits were not a "*sometimes*" thing in my house, they were a must. She fed me with the seriousness of someone who had fought to keep me in the world and refused to treat my body casually.

I grew up wrapped in a kind of love that made me feel like the whole world was built to protect me. If anyone thinks this makes me sound like an angel, let me correct the record quickly.

I was not.

I was a naughty child. Actually, very naughty and I will confess something that will make everyone who knows me today laugh. I was also a little violent. Yes. I hit my cousins. I have probably beaten everybody in my childhood at least once. I'm not proud of it now, but I'm being honest because the truth is always more lovable than perfection.

By this time, Bui had gotten married, and she already had children. Ranjit fufaji and Papa became the BFFs of those times. My cousins — Shivangi, Arshpreet, and Simran, would come over during vacations, and the house would turn into a festival. My Maasi and Mause ji visited too, and slowly, the family became this moving circle of gatherings, kids running, adults talking.

Shivangi was the eldest, and Papa still laughs when he remembers how easily she used to get offended. She would get mad at Bui, sulk dramatically, and complain with full sincerity, *"Did you bring us here just to get hit by her?"*

She loved Papa too much to stay angry for long. She called him *Bade Papa* and Papa, Mumma too loved her deeply in return, because before I was born, they had held on to Shivangi as if she were their own daughter. In many ways, she filled a space they didn't know how to name back then until I arrived.

Those days didn't have screens the way today does. No scrolling. Childhood was in the dirt, in gardens, in flowers, in knees that stayed bruised because play was real. We would run until our lungs burned and then run again. Parents would sit and play tambola, voices rising with playful arguments and laughter, while we children became a stampede, hiding, chasing, fighting, forgiving, repeating.

Rahul — Maasi's son, would be around, Rajat bhai, Shivani didi and me, always at the center of some kind of mischief.

One incident still makes me laugh every time I remember it.

Rasna had just become a *thing* then, new, magical in the way only childhood drinks can be. I was obsessed. I must have been four or five. Rahul and Shivani didi were older than me, and because they were older, they also believed they deserved more of everything.

One evening, Papa called Mumma and said, *"I'm stuck in traffic. I'll be late. A guest might come. Please attend him."* Mumma, being Mumma, prepared everything like a queen running a palace. She made Rasna and gave the three of us two glasses each — generous, suspiciously generous. Then she looked at us with the seriousness of a woman who knows exactly how children behave around guests drinks.

"You are full now," she warned. *"Two glasses. Enough. Don't look at the guest's glass."*

Now, if you tell children *don't look*, you have basically announced *target spotted*.

Ten minutes later, the uncle came. He sat down, Mumma served him snacks and a fresh glass of Rasna and that's when we turned into little movie villains. The three of us lined up behind a curtain and peeped like conspirators, one head above the other, eyes shining with betrayal.

Rahul whispered, *"I want one more."*

Shivani didi tried not to laugh.

And I... I was practically drooling. I wasn't even hiding it. My soul was in that glass.

The uncle didn't know Rahul and Shivani didi well, but he knew *me*. So, he called me sweetly, *"Sheenu, come here."*

Rahul kept nudging me like a coach sending a player into battle. *Go. Go. Go.*

I walked over and sat beside the uncle, pretending to be a good child. I said Namaste. He spoke to me gently like adults do when they're trying to be nice to kids, and I nodded like I understood, but my eyes were locked on his *Rasna* glass like it was destiny.

Finally, he asked, "*You want some?*" It felt like a child being offered heaven. I didn't even hesitate. I didn't even pretend to be polite. My whole face said, *Is that even a question?*

And I drank it. I drank all of it.

Mumma was standing there watching. She didn't shout. She didn't even move. She just looked at me, the kind of look only mothers have, the look that says punishment has already been decided and now it is simply waiting.

Her eyes said, "*The moment this man steps out of the house, you are finished.*"

I recognized that look immediately.

In my head, I was like, *Okay. I'm dead.*

Suddenly, I became the most hospitable child on earth, silently praying he would never leave — *uncle, please stay... I am alive as long as you are here.*

Behind the wall, Rahul and Shivani didi were watching, and they were smiling like little villains, enjoying my doomed countdown, waiting for the door to close. They literally sat down like angels and not the villains who provoked me in the first place.

But even that fear couldn't erase the truth of those days—life was beautiful.

The house was alive. The air was warm. We were messy and loud and full of love. Even when I was a tiny menace, the family still looked at me like I was a miracle they had been gifted.

Chapter 17

The Refrigerator Bear



Everything, for a while, felt perfect. I was spoiled in the innocent way miracle children often are spoiled, fed carefully, dressed neatly, treated like the house's most precious treasure. Like all treasures, I was also a troublemaker.

Even at school, I was different in the way only a child can be different without meaning to. While other children ran toward swings and games, I ran towards the animals. There was a little section near our school garden where they kept pet animals — rabbits, parrots, ducks, cats, puppies and small creatures that made the campus feel like a tiny sanctuary. Any free time between classes and breaks, I would disappear there. I loved sitting near the rabbits, letting them sniff my hands, watching their ears twitch like they had their own private language.

I ruined my clothes daily.

My family also had a nickname for me — *Bhalu*. A little bear. I was chubby then, round in the cheeks, soft in the arms, always somehow covered in milk or dust or mischief. In our house, it was affection dressed up as teasing. Families do that, they turn your body, your habits, your chaos into love-language because I was not found on swings, I was found in gardens, amongst animals, appreciating flowers, laying on the grass and dirtying my clothes and to them, I wasn't just cute... I was *their* cute, their little miracle bear.

My principal knew my parents by name because I kept arriving home looking like I had wrestled the earth. *"Sheena was late again,"* the principal would say. *"Sheena's uniform is dirty again."* My parents would hear it with the tired pride of people who had a bright child they couldn't fully control. I was too busy being fascinated by life.

I also developed another habit, one that should not be normal, but apparently was very normal for me.

I was a *refrigerator* baby.

In my house, if I wasn't found anywhere, the joke became:

"Open the fridge. She might be eating mangoes and strawberries."

One day, it stopped being a joke.

That day, Mumma, Papa, and Dadi had to go somewhere, something important enough that they couldn't take me along. So, my mother did what mothers do when they trust someone, she left me in the care of a woman who would later become an important part of our lives.

Kushala Aunty.

It was the first time I was being left there. My mother dropped me off, settled me on the bed gently, and said, *"Just take care of her. We'll be back in one or two hours."* Simple and calm.

But what was ordinary for my mother was terrifying for Kushala Aunty.

By that time, Papa carried a certain aura in our community. He was the president of the *Ayyappa Temple*. He was South Indian, disciplined, and respected — one of those men people listened to without being asked twice because his presence made you want to behave properly. Kushala Aunty knew that and more than that, she knew what I was in that household, the child born after years of prayers.

So, when she went to get milk and returned, expecting to find me where I had been placed, and the bed was empty, her blood turned cold. At first, she searched normally under the bed, behind the curtain, near the door. She called my name softly, then louder. There was no answer.

Then she panicked.

She searched the entire house. She checked rooms, corners, cupboards. She ran to the verandah. She called the neighbors. She stepped outside and searched the street.

Nothing.

Now the fear became a full-body thing. It wasn't just the fear of losing a child but fear of what would happen when the parents returned because if you lose someone's child, you don't need imagination to understand the horror. In this case, I wasn't only "*someone's child*." I was the child a family had begged the universe for.

When Mumma, Papa, and Dadi returned, the house atmosphere shattered immediately. Kushala Auntie looked like she had already been punished by her own terror. Everyone spoke at once. Everyone searched again. My Mumma and Dadi's face changed into something Papa still remembers — the sharpness of panic. It reached a point where they couldn't breathe properly. In that moment, it wasn't anger. It was pure fear. Then, in the chaos, someone said, "*Get water from the fridge*."

They opened it and there I was.

Inside the refrigerator.

Absolutely calm, totally unaware and unbothered.

Eating strawberries.

For a second, the adults screamed because shock and relief sometimes come out as the same sound. It was the kind of relief that makes your legs weak. The kind that makes you want to cry and laugh at the same time. And then my reaction — my

completely innocent, criminal response made them laugh through the panic, because apparently, in my little mind, the logic was simple: It was hot outside, so I found the coolest place but that wasn't true, I wanted to eat fruits in the refrigerator.

That was me.

I survived childhood because the house loved me too much to let me disappear.

After that, life went on again, the way it does after a scare, you tell the story a hundred times, each time laughing harder, each time forgetting how close it felt to tragedy.

Mumma was strict about one thing though — my studies.

She wanted me to be intelligent, not just adored and I was bright. I scored well. Teachers liked me even when I was mischievous, because good marks forgive a lot in school. At home, Mumma kept me disciplined, while Dadi kept me loved. My Dadi was the one who bought things for me, who carried my small wants like they were important and even then, I had that strange closeness with her — a bond that felt older than logic.

I called her *Nimmal*.

Wherever she went, I wanted to go too.

"I want to go with Nimmal," I would declare, as if that was the only plan that mattered.

Around that time, there was a room above Dadi's room, space she rented out after Dadaji's death so the house could have a little extra money. When those tenants left, Mumma had an idea the way she always did, practical, and filled with her particular kindness. She asked Kushala Aunty to come live with us.

Kushala Aunty hesitated. *"I won't be able to pay that much,"* she said.

Mumma waved it away as if money was never the point. "That's fine," she replied. Then she found a way to make it dignified for everyone, because Mumma never liked charity done in a way to

make people feel small. Mumma liked people feeling equal, respected, included.

"Since I'm North Indian and my husband is South Indian," she said, "you can help by cooking some South Indian food for him sometimes, help me learn that and you are like my sister.

That's enough," she added, and just like that, the woman who once panicked thinking she lost me became another pillar in our home.

That was my mother's gift, she had a way of bringing people into her life without making them feel small. She didn't collect people like trophies. She created a family where the world only offered acquaintances and in a house that had already learned how love can be chosen, that kind of kindness didn't feel strange.

It felt like fate.

Chapter 18

The Cancer



Cancer.

The word arrived like a storm that didn't make noise at first. Mumma was diagnosed with breast cancer.

It changed the atmosphere of our house in a single moment. I didn't understand the meaning. I only understood the faces, the sudden stillness, the way voices became careful, and laughter started sounding like something people were forcing out of loyalty rather than feeling naturally. They knew what I couldn't yet name, that life had just placed a shadow over the only happiness they had learned to trust.

In that generation, cancer was not discussed the way it is now. Treatment wasn't easily accessible. It wasn't something every hospital could handle, something you could simply schedule and survive like a difficult season. It was rare, expensive, and terrifying. The hospitals that could treat it felt distant — financially. The cost of it was not only money. It was time and exhaustion too.

Papa loved Mumma enough to become a machine. He worked day and night, because he wanted one thing, to keep his woman alive. Around that time, he had opened a property dealing business. He started earning more, hustling more, pushing himself harder, like determination could stand between her and the disease.

My Dadi and Kushala Aunty became her circle — two women standing beside her like family that refuses to flinch. They cared for Mumma, like a mother and a sister. They sat with her through the long days. They handled the small humiliations illness brings. They kept the home running so she didn't have to pretend she was fine, but no matter how much love surrounds you, this kind of disease leaves very little space for happiness. The treatment changes the body. It makes you tired in places sleep can't fix. It strips away the illusions. The rashes, the boils, the pain is unbearable. Later, the shedding of hair. It makes you look at yourself differently and then came the moment that broke something even deeper.

The doctors said they would have to remove her breasts.

There are things a woman can accept intellectually and still grieve spiritually. This was one of them. People can talk about "survival" all they want, but a woman does not hear that sentence and stay untouched. She did not become weak but something in her heart fell quiet after that, like a door closing gently from the inside. Papa did not love her less. If anything, his devotion became even more visible but illness plays cruel games. It tells you lies even when you are surrounded by truth.

One night, my mother sat with him and said the sentence no woman should ever have to say,

"You can leave me if you want."

It wasn't drama. It was fear speaking out loud — that she would become a burden, or she would be seen as "less," the fear that love is conditional on a body staying untouched by life.

Papa answered her the way only real love answers:

"I do not love you for your body."

That is when my Mumma cried, not before, not after, exactly when Papa said that sentence.

She was a strong woman. In all those years of treatment, she had carried herself with a kind of grace that almost looked like courage. But that night, for the first time, she let the fear fall out of her. She cried because maybe, she needed to hear it. She cried because somewhere inside, she had been holding the terror that she might not be enough anymore and Papa held her the way you hold someone when the world has tried to convince them they are unlovable.

People say illness tests relationships. What they don't say is that illness tests the person inside the relationship too, the part of you that still wants to be wanted. Then the doctors said the cancer had been treated. Those words should have meant relief and should have returned the house to sunlight. They should have been the moment the family exhaled but life does not always respect the endings we are promised.

A few weeks later, on a morning that began like any other, Mumma did what she always did. She woke up first and took a shower. She went into the kitchen. She made tea for herself and Papa, and milk for me. That was her routine, her quiet way of holding the house together. The day started like it still belonged to normal life.

Then she said, almost casually, as if it was nothing serious, I'm uncomfortable.

Papa told her to sit down. They thought it was a small weakness, something ordinary. He rushed to the refrigerator and brought lemon and Limca, the way people do when they're trying to fix discomfort quickly, hoping it's just a temporary problem and not a sign but then panic arrived. She wanted to vomit. She became dizzy and then the Limca came out of her mouth and suddenly everything changed, voices rising, movements hurried, fear running through the house without permission. Papa picked her up and carried her toward the hospital the way you carry your whole world when it is slipping.

Nobody knew.

Nobody knew that this was the last time she would leave the house alive, the kitchen she had just walked through would stay haunted by her absence, the morning routine she had perfected — the tea, the milk, the quiet order of love would become the kind of memory people can't revisit without breaking. Papa ran with her into the hospital believing he was saving her again.

The most cruel truth is this, sometimes you do everything right, and life still takes what you love.

Chapter 19

The Last Question She Asked



7th September, 2002. I was seven years old. The day *I learned loss.*

My mother had been admitted to the hospital, and nobody understood what had gone wrong. The doctors spoke in careful tones, turning reports over like they could find an answer hidden in the paper. Everyone kept saying the same thing, like maybe repeating it could undo reality — *the cancer was treated*. So, what was this? Why was she here like this? Why did it feel like the ground had cracked open beneath our feet anyway?

Her body changed in a moment. Half of it stopped responding, it looked like life had suddenly withdrawn its permission. Later, the doctors discovered what had happened, some particles were left behind, something that had traveled, something that had reached her brain and stolen her left side but the explanation did not matter. What mattered was the way she lay there and the way Papa's face looked like a man watching his entire universe collapse while still being expected to stand.

She had been admitted on the 4th of September. She could not speak. She drifted in and out of consciousness — more out than in. After three days, time stopped for everyone who loved her.

The world outside continued, but inside our family, clocks lost meaning. There was only waiting. An unbearable helplessness of watching someone you love become unreachable.

Papa did not think about money anymore. If a doctor said a number, he was ready to throw it down like water. He would have sold anything, given anything, become anything, if it meant bringing his wife back but the worst kind of suffering is the kind money cannot touch. When the problem is not your effort but fate, the mind begins to unravel into desperation.

Desperation makes even an educated man do things he would once have laughed at.

Papa did everything anyone told him might help. If someone said give charity here, he did it. If someone said feed someone, he did it. If someone offered a ritual, a remedy, a superstition wrapped in hope — he didn't debate it.

He obeyed it.

He held onto the possibility that life might be negotiated with if he just tried hard enough. If someone told him to throw silver, sugar, anything of her weight into water, he did. It wasn't like he truly believed in it, but when you are helpless, you stop needing belief. You start needing *any* door, even if it is made of air. Your heart is ready to take any chance that keeps the person you love alive.

Papa stood there like a man who had run out of language. He listened to prayers the way people listen to medicine. He was not performing faith. He was begging the universe fiercely to not take the one person who made his house feel like home.

And then came **7th September**.

The day my mother opened her eyes for the *last time*.

I can't write that sentence without my body reacting. Even now, it brings *chills* through me, like grief has a memory of its own. She opened her eyes, and everyone leaned toward her like the whole world depended on what she would say. People expect final words to be profound. They expected regrets, declarations, romance.

But mothers are made of something else entirely.

The first thing she asked was not about herself, her pain or the fact that she was standing on the edge of leaving.

She asked about me.

“Did Sheenu come back from school?”

“Did she eat something?”

That is when Papa and Dadi broke in a way they never fully recovered from.

Because what kind of love is this?

What kind of soul still mothers from the edge of death?

What kind of woman, after everything her body had endured, still carried her child as her first responsibility?

What are mothers made of?

Something holier than anything understandable.

Chapter 20

The Funeral, The Only Memory



It is a strange thing to grow up without memories of your own mother. The older I get, the more I realize that the version of my mother I carry inside me has been borrowed. I know her through other people's sentences. The way my family says her name. The stories told in kitchens, in living rooms, on anniversaries when memories return. I know what kind of woman she was because the world still speaks of her with reverence but I do not remember her touch. I do not remember the exact weight of her hand on my head and the softness of being held by her, because I was too small.

The *irony* is unbearable:

The only clear memory I have of Mumma is her funeral. It plays in my head like someone recorded it in 4K and stored it permanently behind my eyes. I cannot forget the afternoon light when the body was brought in. I can see her lying there with cotton in her nostrils, dressed like a bride. The rituals began around her, the world had decided to continue being formal even when a child's universe had ended.

Then they looked at me.

A seven-year-old child standing in the middle of a room full of mourning adults.

Their eyes held the same question: *What do we do with her?*

Someone said it first, the way people say things that have been passed down like rules, daughters are not supposed to go. *Sheenu* shouldn't be there. Keep her away, they thought it was a mercy and a child could be spared the truth by being removed from it.

Papa stood there like a man who forgot how to breathe. What else could we expect from a man who lost the most precious thing in his life overnight? He was a widower with a seven-year-old girl holding his hand, looking up at him for answers he didn't have.

He held my hand. He held it the way you hold something you cannot afford to lose. The grip was so tight it felt like it was the last thing left in his world that made sense and he said something that still echoes inside me because it was not only a sentence, it was who he was.

"This is the reality of life," he said. "Everything else in this world is an illusion—a lie. She needs to see the reality with her own eyes."

In that moment, two things were happening inside him at once. One was his rebellion against cruel traditions, the same man who wrote *no dowry, no caste*, the same man who refused to let society decide what women can and cannot endure but the second thing was deeper than rebellion. It was a father trying to give his daughter the one thing grief steals first, truth.

So, he took my hand, and we walked. We walked into the crowd, into the ritual. The priest was chanting. The air was heavy and people around us began saying the words that every child in India hears at some point,

"Ram naam satya hai."

As a child, I did not know what it meant. I thought everyone was singing. So, I started singing too, along with everyone. I remember my small voice joining in, innocent, almost cheerful because children assume adults know what they are doing. I sang like it was a song for Mumma to wake up to. Like the

moment the chanting ended, she would open her eyes and smile at all of us.

But it wasn't a song. It was a *goodbye*.

When I look back now, I don't want to sound heartless, but I know the truth, at seven years of my age, I didn't understand the full extent of what I had lost. I didn't have enough years with her to carry a library of memories that I could grieve later. I didn't have enough of her love stored inside my body for grief to pull it back and torture me with it. I had the funeral and I had *Papa's hand*.

Now, when I look back, when I truly understand what that day meant, my heart doesn't only break for the little girl who sang at a cremation because she thought the world was singing.

My heart breaks for Papa because that day, the loss belonged to him more than it belonged to anyone else in the world.

He didn't just lose his wife. He lost the only woman who made the home smile.

Still, he held my hand and walked me into the truth.

That day, childhood ended for me — not with a birthday, school, or growing up slowly the way children are supposed to. It ended in the middle of a farewell I didn't understand, while my voice joined a chant, I thought was a song. It ended while Papa's hand held mine so tightly it felt like he was trying to anchor both of us to the earth.

The smoke rose, the words continued, and somewhere inside that little girl, something quietly stopped believing that life would always bring people back.

"Childhood doesn't always end with age. Sometimes it ends with a funeral."

Chapter 21

The Funeral After the Funeral



People only talk about the funeral that happens at the cremation ground. They talk about the body being taken away, they think the pain ends when the rituals end but no one talks about the second funeral. The one that happens quietly after everyone goes home.

The funeral of the person left behind.

Papa's world didn't just crumble after Mumma died. It was destroyed. There are collapses you can rebuild from. This wasn't that. This was the kind of loss that doesn't leave rubble, it leaves emptiness. He didn't understand what had happened to him. He didn't know where to put his love now, the love he had spent years giving and receiving so fully it became his definition of home.

For one full year — *365 days* — he did not step out of the house.

Not once.

It wasn't a dramatic statement or rebellion. It wasn't even a choice. It was grief swallowing a man whole. The kind of grief that doesn't ask permission, follow logic, care that the sun is rising or bills exist or people are waiting. A man who had once run away at sixteen, had survived winters and hunger and humiliation, had built himself from nothing, was now defeated by something he couldn't fight.

Love.

When you have truly loved once and when you have had that love returned selflessly, your mind doesn't understand how to exist without it. It feels unnatural. The world becomes unrecognizable, like someone has changed the language of life overnight, and you are trapped in a country where you can't speak. While he was drowning in that agony, there was also a little seven-year-old girl in the same house who had lost her mother.

Me.

That is the part people don't talk about either. People think children forget. They don't. They just learn how to carry heavy things in small bodies. I remember the sounds around grief more than the words. I remember realizing that "*tomorrow*" wasn't promised, not even for mothers.

They talk about children losing parents as if it is one tragedy but the truth is, grief multiplies inside a home. Papa wasn't only a widower, he had to become a mother too, and that is not a transformation society prepares a man for. Fathers are expected to be strong. To "*handle it.*" They are expected to provide but nobody teaches a man how to hold his own broken heart while also holding a child's childhood in place.

So, my Dadi had to step in.

She saw what Papa couldn't see in that year, she saw a little girl standing in corners, not knowing what expression was appropriate anymore. I didn't know whether to smile, cry, laugh or feel guilty, whether to look around for someone who would never appear again. A child can survive sadness, but a child cannot survive being emotionally abandoned by the only parent left. Then she entered my life, completely. She was always there, yes, but now she was about to love me the way I can never find in this world ever from anybody.

By blood, she was nothing to us. Logic says she should have offered her condolences, brought a plate of food, and gone back to her side of the wall.

But she didn't go back.

She looked at Papa, who was drowning in heartbreak, and she looked at me, standing on the edge of becoming an orphan in spirit.

She stepped across the threshold. Again.

She didn't try to replace the mother I had lost. You cannot replace the dead. Instead, she did something braver. She decided to become the mother I needed to survive.

Papa's only interaction with life at that time was food—necessary food, forced into his mouth by Dadi like medicine. She wanted him to eat and live. That was it. He wasn't speaking to the world. He wasn't meeting people. He wasn't leaving the walls that now felt like a tomb he couldn't breathe inside and it is not normal for a human being to remain inside four walls for an entire year.

Loneliness doesn't care what is normal.

It only cares what is unbearable.

In that unbearable year, something happened that still makes my chest tighten when I admit it, the circumstances made Papa and me distant. It wasn't that we didn't love each other or because he didn't care but, because I was too small to console him. I had just learned what death was, and now I was expected to stand in the shadow of a man's grief that even adults couldn't understand.

I couldn't reach him. And he couldn't come back to me.

So, my Dadi had to choose how to divide herself and that is a cruel choice for any woman, because in that house, there were two people who needed her completely. A son who had lost the love of his life and a child who would become an orphan in every way that matters if someone did not mother her into safety.

The Grand (MOTHER)

Dadi had always been there for him. She had rebuilt him once, but now she looked at me and knew the truth that only mothers know.

A child cannot wait for grief to finish.

A child needs someone NOW.

So, the second funeral continued quietly in that house, with silence and locked doors. A man disappearing into sorrow. A child learning to grow around absence and a grandmother standing in the middle of it all, trying to keep two lives from collapsing completely, knowing she could not save both in the same way, at the same time.

After a funeral, the dead are gone and the living are the ones who have to keep surviving what is left.

Chapter 22

Two People to Save



I started sleeping with Dadi. It happened the way most childhood changes happen after loss. That bed became my shelter. Her room became the center of my world and in a house that had forgotten how to feel normal, Dadi became the only thing that still behaved like love.

She did everything.

She woke me up in the mornings. She bathed me. She dressed me. She oiled my hair and made neat parts. She fixed my backpack, checked my notebooks, packed my lunch, and sent me to school with a face that tried to look steady even when her insides were tired. She became my mother in the most practical way possible — through routine, food and small, repetitive acts that keep a child from falling into the cracks.

At the same time, she was trying to keep Papa alive, because that year, he was not himself. He started snapping. He started getting irritated over things that didn't matter at all. The laugh that used to exist in him, the warmth that made a house feel inhabited — was gone. The house forgot what a happy conversation sounded like. Even the walls seemed cautious, as if they were listening for the next outburst, the silence, another sign that pain had not loosened its grip. People came for condolences, and their words were almost always the same, delivered like they were being “*realistic*” instead of cruel.

“It won’t be easy now.”

“How will he raise a girl alone?”

“A father cannot do this by himself.”

They added, especially, that there was no sibling, no second pair of small hands to make the loneliness feel less sharp. Papa barely heard them or maybe he heard everything and couldn't respond to any of it. He was lost in a world no one else could enter. Sometimes, when you've been strong your whole life, there comes a moment when you stop being yourself. You become unrecognizable. It disconnects you from your own logic. It turns ordinary reactions into reckless ones. You aren't choosing your behavior; your body is simply responding the only way it knows how when the person you loved becomes a memory overnight.

Even today, when Papa talks about that year, his voice changes. He says it was the moment he truly understood what it means to have someone in your life who you can share your emotional vulnerability with. It's not about someone to talk to just about work or to laugh with at dinner. It's about someone to hold the parts of you that break.

“I had nobody,” he says, even today. *“How do I explain to someone? There was no one.”*

Then the world — always the practical one, began knocking. The property dealing business he had built started collapsing. People stole money and disappeared. The advances for the deals were taken away by the people working there. The deals vanished after the payments were made and those payments never reached our house. The trust Papa had in those people turned into a huge loss. The worse was when the debt collectors began arriving at the door, bringing reality with them in a language grief could not ignore, that is when Papa opened his eyes, like someone waking up to fire. He realized the money was gone; the stability was gone. The life he had worked for had returned to zero. In the middle of that wreckage, he felt something darker than sadness, the desire to end it.

He wanted to die.

But then, he looked at me and something inside him stopped.

“What is her mistake?” he thought. *What is this child’s wrongdoing in this world?* He had lost his wife, yes but he could not let his daughter lose her father too. He could not leave me alone in a world that had already taken one parent.

So, he decided to live. It wasn’t that life suddenly felt worth living, but because I was. That was the moment he pledged to regain his life because whether your heart is broken or not, you still have to eat food. You still have to answer doors and have to face debts. Life goes on — cruelly and at some point, you either stand up or you drown. He regained grip on his life by accepting that I have to live for her. The problem now was a whole year of absence from the real world, he had to begin from zero again.

We had nothing again and that is when instead of required support people started suggesting the sentence nobody wants to hear when they are still grieving:

“You should get married again.”

At first, he ignored it. He couldn’t even imagine it. It wasn’t only loyalty, it was the inability to picture another life when the current one still felt like it was bleeding but people kept saying it and they did it the way society always does, pretending it is advice while actually being pressure.

“It’s not for you, Raman,” they said. “It’s for your daughter.”

“She needs a mother.”

“It’s not easy for a man to raise a girl.”

Slowly, that line began to shape the decision, definitely not a desire, but a responsibility. Papa looked at me and told himself what every parent tells themselves when they choose a hard path:

It’s for her.

There was no conversation between me and Papa about it. *How could there be?* This kind of decision doesn't sit between a forty-year-old man and an eight-year-old girl like a normal discussion. A child doesn't get to vote on the shape of her future. Adults decide and you simply live inside whatever decision is made around you.

That is how the next chapter of our lives began. Absolutely not with healing but with survival wearing the mask of practicality, because the world does not pause for broken families, and a grandmother can only hold so much weight alone.

Chapter 23

The Woman Who Changed the Meaning of Motherhood for Me



In those months, Papa was barely present. He worked relentlessly. Some nights he came home near midnight. Some days he left before the sun felt awake. Our lives stopped overlapping like a normal family's life overlaps.

I left for school at six in the morning, in the bus, so early it still felt like night. Dadi was the one who woke me, dressed me, fixed my bag, and sent me off. At night, when Papa returned, I was already asleep. There were weeks where we barely saw each other properly, just the edges of each other's existence, passing like shadows in a house that had once known laughter.

As a child, I didn't understand what he was carrying. I didn't understand debt. I didn't understand loneliness. I only understood distance, and that distance kept growing, day by day, until it began to feel normal.

Then one day, the woman walked in. It happened without any celebration, sweets or the kind of joy weddings are supposed to carry.

It happened the way survival decisions happen urgently, with adults speaking in practical sentences while children absorb the consequences without understanding the language of it. A proposal came. People said the woman was a widow. She had a child too, a son. Papa, still bleeding from grief and drowning

under debt, was painfully clear with everyone about what this was going to be.

"This is a transaction," he said.

It's not love or a romantic beginning — just a clean arrangement in a world that had stopped being kind.

"She takes care of my daughter," he told them. *"She has a son, and I will make sure I take care of him."*

That was his mindset — responsibility, not replacement. He had loved one woman in his entire life, and she was gone. He wasn't looking to give that space to anyone else. He was trying to keep the house from collapsing. He was trying to make sure a little girl didn't grow up motherless in a world that punishes girls for being unprotected. The cruel part is this, when you are grieving, but you are still a good human being, you don't immediately suspect the world. You don't imagine evil as the default. You assume that people are mostly decent, because your heart is already exhausted from pain and cannot afford more fear.

And to a nine-year-old child, the presence of another adult in the house feels like sunlight, especially when the house has become nothing but walls. I was old enough to remember things, to store details that would still live in me at thirty but I was still small enough to believe the word *mother* could be safely trusted.

For a brief moment, I felt something close to hope.

Because I thought: *maybe now the house will feel alive again. Maybe now someone will be there when I return from school. Maybe now I won't have to be alone with silence.*

I had no idea that this woman was about to change the meaning of motherhood for me in the worst way.

For years afterward, I hated the word *mother* because of her.

It was not only because she failed to love me the way my real mother did, that would have been understandable. No one can replace a soul like that but because she didn't even try to be kind.

She wasn't who she claimed to be, basically she was a con woman, and we didn't know it. Later, we would understand she had done this before, entered families like an answer, then revealed herself like a disaster.

For the first few months, she wore a face that passed as normal. But after six months, it was as if she got tired of pretending. The soft mask tore off, and what remained was cold.

I remember returning from school and sitting outside into the sun for hours because she wouldn't open the door. Four, five hours, time stretching slowly, while I waited like I didn't belong to my own house. Sometimes Dadi wasn't home either, because she had to go for military-related appointments, paperwork, pensions, things widows are supposed to do just to keep life running. Those were the hours when I learned what loneliness feels like inside a place that is supposed to protect you. I remember hunger, not the dramatic kind where someone collapses, but the steady kind where your stomach becomes a quiet ache and you start to feel ashamed for needing food at all.

I remember seeing good dishes being *served* to her son.

And nothing *offered* to me.

The worst part is what it did to Papa, without him even knowing.

He was working himself to the bone, trying to rebuild from zero. He was doing it for school fees, for groceries, for keeping the roof secure and the only reason he could work that hard was because he believed I was safe at home. He believed there was someone there to care for me. That belief was the only thing keeping him moving. He did not know what was happening inside those four walls and she made sure he wouldn't know. She did something that cruel people often do, she tried to isolate us. She didn't want Dadi's presence or Kushala Aunty's influence. She didn't want any witness or support system, no voice in the house that could protect me or Papa. Slowly, she began poisoning the air, planting sentences like knives.

"She's not even your blood," she would say, speaking about Dadi with contempt.

"They're using you."

When you're nine, you don't have the strength to separate truth from manipulation. You only know that an adult is saying something with certainty, and certainty feels like power. So, it confuses you. It makes you doubt the one person who had been holding you up.

But the truth comes out, no matter how strongly it is manipulated

One day, I asked her for food while she was feeding her son. The rejection wasn't just verbal. It became punishment. It became pain and what I remember most isn't even the physical moment, it's the way my body learned that asking for basic care could be dangerous.

Then she leaned into my terror and sealed it. She placed my hand on the hot pan which left a mark I hold till date but the mark left on the soul of a child was much worse than the hand.

"If you tell your father," she threatened, *"You will see the worst side of me."*

It sounds ridiculous when you're grown.

But how do you explain that to a nine-year-old?

A child believes the adults who scare them, it makes you feel that silence is survival. It threatens you to the core and you believe it like a fact that speaking will get you more hurt.

So, I stayed quiet.

Papa continued believing I was safe.

I continued living through what became the most brutal two years of my childhood.

The worst part, the part that still makes my throat tighten—is this:

Nobody knew.

I repeat — *nobody knew*.

Not Papa, because he was busy in working and rebuilding, trusting the wrong person with the one thing he loved most.

Not Dadi or the world outside and that is how cruelty survives, by being hidden in plain sight, behind closed doors, inside “family,” inside the assumptions people make about what a home must be.

I, nine years old, learned a lesson no child should learn:

“Sometimes the most dangerous place in the world is the place you are told is safe.”

Chapter 24

The Glass That Saved Me



That year, the brutality didn't feel like a sudden tragedy anymore, it started feeling like the new normal, that's the most dangerous part of cruelty, the way it trains you to accept it. I accepted it. I adjusted. I became a child who learned how to live inside fear without calling it fear. I didn't tell anyone.

I didn't have friends then. I was quiet in a way that wasn't personality, it was survival. My academics started slipping because my mind was tired from carrying things it didn't have words for. I would sit in class and speak to no one, staring at pages as if they belonged to someone else. The only happiness I could still find was outside, where grass didn't judge, flowers didn't ask questions, animals didn't require explanations. I would go to the garden and sit with them, letting their simple presence remind me that softness still existed somewhere in the world.

Then one evening — an evening that should have been ordinary, the world left no choice but to reveal itself. It was unusual for Papa to come home early. He usually returned after seven but that day, his sugar dropped. Diabetes has a cruel way of turning normal moments into emergencies. He stumbled in, dizzy, disoriented, his face was pale with that particular weakness that looks like the body is failing at something basic.

He asked her — *that woman* — for something sugary to drink and then he saw me. I was sitting there with a cup of milk, ***Bournvita*** mixed into it, sweet, childhood comfort in a glass.

Papa's eyes went to it immediately. His sugar was low, and he assumed the simplest, most innocent thing, *my daughter will share*. He took my glass, as he drank, I watched him change. He stopped mid-swallow, his face tightening like the taste had slapped him awake. He stared at the milk as if it had suddenly grown teeth.

"This doesn't taste right," he said. *"Something is wrong with it."*

She tried to dismiss it quickly — *No, no, nothing, nothing*.

Kuch nahi hai. She reached for the glass like she wanted it out of his hands, out of his sight immediately.

But Papa didn't let it go.

"No," he said again, firmer now. *"There is something wrong."* You try it, Papa moved the glass towards her. She didn't drink it.

He still didn't expect the worst, he walked to the sink himself and poured the milk out thinking the milk was curdled.

What fell into the sink with it changed everything.

A tiny pill not fully dissolved. It sat there like proof. A betrayal made physical, a truth so ugly the house couldn't pretend anymore. For a second, nobody moved because the mind doesn't accept that reality easily. The mind refuses to believe that a *nine-year-old child* — still in primary school, still small enough to be lifted easily, *could be fed slow poison inside her own home*.

But the pills didn't care what anyone could accept.

They just existed.

Dadi and Kushala Aunty had already been pushed away from us because they were made to feel like outsiders in their own home. In families, when you want peace to *"continue,"* people tell you to adjust. She didn't want their presence or their interference at all. They had no idea what was happening inside those four walls. Nobody did.

In that moment, the ground under Papa's feet shattered.

Suddenly, he wasn't only a grieving husband or a drowning businessman or a tired single father, he was a man who realized his child had been in danger right under his roof while he was out working, trusting the wrong person with the one thing he was living for. That was the moment everything began to unravel.

But by then, he was beyond calm.

People had to stop him from doing something irreversible, because rage like that — a father's rage, the rage of realizing your child was being harmed doesn't come with polite edges. It comes with a single thought,

"I will destroy whoever tried to destroy my child."

Now Papa started searching, asking questions, digging into what she had claimed about her life. He began to find the cracks in her story, and then the cracks became a pattern. The revelations like court papers, old details and names that didn't match, the stories they told didn't align at all...

The truth emerged with the kind of cruelty that makes you nauseous:

She wasn't just "bad."

She was a con woman.

This was not her first trap. She had done it before.

Papa found himself connected to legal proceedings where he met someone who had already been her victim, someone who looked at him with exhausted recognition and said, *This is what they do. This is their business.* Their divorce case was still running, the man said. How could she have married again if she was not even legally free? The word *marriage* began to sound like a scam that had been used to enter our home and destroy it from the inside.

In the middle of all this, Papa had to protect himself too because once people like that are exposed, they weaponize whatever they can. They twist laws meant for safety into tools for harm. Papa

began preparing legally, because he had learned too late that kindness without caution can become a doorway for predators.

It was a different world unfolding around me — courts, hearings, legal language, investigations. Children don't understand "*process*." They understand only one thing clearly:

Am I safe?

And Papa after seeing those pills knew the answer.

No.

So, he made the only decision he believed could keep me alive. He decided to send me to a hostel.

Dadi begged him not to. She knew that's the last thing I would want.

"Don't send her," she pleaded. "We'll figure something out."

But Papa couldn't gamble anymore, not after the sink, those pills, after realizing how close "*normal life*" had come to becoming an obituary. He kept repeating the same truth like it was all he had left to stand on:

"How? She's not safe."

As a grown-up girl today, I understand the logic of his decision. As a child, I only understood abandonment.

Because that's the language I had learned since my mother died— *everyone leaves*.

Maybe not always by choice but to a child, the reason doesn't matter. The result feels the same.

So, something in me turned cold.

I started hating everyone. I started hating life. I started hating the idea of family itself and I did what children do when they don't have power over reality, I tried to control something smaller. I remember taking scissors to photo albums. I cut everything that showed us as a happy family — because we

weren't, definitely not the way those pictures pretended. I even cut pictures of Mumma. Now I know it was reckless and stupid and she absolutely did not deserve it but anger makes children irrational. I was angry at her for leaving me, as if it had been her choice, like she had looked at me and chosen death. A child doesn't understand cancer. A child understands only absence, by then, absence had started feeling like my permanent home.

So, when the hostel decision came, it didn't feel like safety. It felt like proof that no matter what I did, how small I stayed, how quietly I tried to survive...

People would still leave.

I was shifted to the hostel. It wasn't because anyone wanted to punish me or I was not loved but because love — desperate, terrified love — sometimes makes decisions that feel like abandonment when you're too young to understand the difference.

Chapter 25

The Rebel Period



By then, I had stopped watching mothers feed their children. I had watched it too much for two years, watched it like a starving person watches food. At parent-teacher meetings, I saw mothers arrive with their kids, fixing collars, wiping mouths, kissing foreheads like love was the most normal thing in the world and I would sit there, silent, looking up at the sky in my mind and asking, *God... why am I missing this?* What did I do wrong that I don't get to be held like that?

So, when Papa left me at the hostel, I didn't understand the word *safety, protection*. I only understood the language my life had taught me again and again — leaving. I didn't know I was being saved. I thought I was being thrown away.

The only person who did not want this was my grandmother.

Hostel did not feel like grief.

Grief was softer than what came next. Grief still has tears in it. Hostel had something else, something dry, almost numb. It was like a child in fifth standard learning what "*fuck the world*" means without ever saying the words. It was not the vocabulary; it was the feeling. The decision inside your chest that says:

If everyone leaves anyway, then I'll stop needing them first.

So, I became a rebel.

The stubborn kind, rule-breaking as a language. If they told me to wear the uniform a certain way, I would do the opposite on purpose. If they said braid your hair neatly, I'd loosen it. If they said stand in line properly, I'd lean, slouch, shrug, act like I didn't care. It wasn't confidence. It was protest.

There was a rule in the hostel, you're supposed to speak to your parents once a month. The last Saturday of the month. Every child lined up for that call like it was oxygen.

And I? I would refuse.

"I don't want to." I said it like a wall.

The worst part was the sympathy. Adults always think sympathy is kindness, but sometimes it feels like someone putting their finger on your wound. They would look at me with those soft faces — *poor child, no mother*, and I hated it. I didn't want their pity. I didn't want anyone trying to love me in that careful way people love broken things.

Papa was allowed to visit. Sometimes he came carrying a bundle of gifts, eatables, toys, things he thought would reach me because he didn't know what else to do with his love. I would take the bag and walk away.

Literally no hug, I didn't smile. Sometimes not even a proper look. I used to leave him standing there like he was some visitor, not *Papa*.

Because in my mind, at that time, *his presence wasn't love — it was late*.

It wasn't fair. I now know it wasn't mature but that's the thing about abandoned children, we don't punish the people who hurt us on purpose. We punish the people who *couldn't save us in time*. I was too young to understand that Papa had been trying to survive too.

The only person I still melted for was my grandmother.

When she came, my whole body changed. I hugged her like she was my last safe place, like if I held her tightly enough, I wouldn't drown. I looked at her like she was my moon, quiet light in a dark sky and she understood.

Of course she did, because in my entire life, only she did.

She didn't call me rude, spoiled and didn't take my distance personally.

She knew it wasn't cruelty. It was damage.

Teachers loved me. I wasn't a "bad" kid but I wasn't myself. I was living in those abandonment years where you stop expecting anything good because expecting is how you get hurt again.

I didn't have many friends. People called me strange, like I was a child from another world and maybe I was because while other kids wanted chocolates and fancy toys and expensive gifts, I would stare at those things and feel nothing. Or worse — feel *angry*.

Like, *how do I explain that this is not what I'm hungry for?* I was like can you gift-wrap safety? You can't hand someone a doll and replace a mother and you definitely can't buy your way back into a child's trust once it breaks. Two years passed like that and then my grandmother finally said to Papa the sentence that mattered:

"If you keep her there, you'll lose her."

By then, the woman was gone. The disaster. She left one night the way thieves leave, quietly, carrying what she could. She took things that belonged to my mother, jewelry, money, pieces of our history and vanished and Papa, exhausted, furious and relieved, let her go because at that moment he had only one thought:

My daughter is safe. That is enough.

What he didn't realize yet, what none of us could admit out loud was that in the process of saving me from danger, we had lost each other in a different way.

It was the distance and silence of two years of a child learning to stop reaching back.

Meanwhile Papa, standing outside the hostel with gifts in his hands, didn't know that the thing I wanted wasn't inside that bag.

It was *him*.

Chapter 26

The War Inside the House



Coming back home was not a homecoming. It was another battlefield.

When I returned from hostel, I wasn't that little girl anymore who just needed arms to cry in. I was in seventh standard now, old enough to have a sharp tongue, to hold a grudge, to think I understood the world.

In my version of the world, one thing was clear: *He* was the one who left me there. So now it was my turn.

It wasn't a child returning to her father. It was a child returning to settle a *score*.

Papa reached for me in his own clumsy way, trying to ask how school was, trying to build something from the ruins, but I refused to make it easy. I didn't shout at first. I did something worse.

I kept my *distance*.

There were only short answers, no eye contact even. I used to walk past him like he was just part of the furniture. He would try to start a conversation, and I would give him the kind of "*hmm*" that closes doors. The only language I trusted by then was withdrawal.

You sent me away. Now watch me go even while I'm in front of you.

The funny thing is, *we are the same*.

Whatever attitude I had, I got it from him. Obviously, it is the same genes, so the same temper, stubbornness and ego. The same kind of “*I’m fine*” when we’re clearly not fine at all. Basically, his female version.

So, it became exactly what you’re imagining, an ego clash. Two people with the same fire standing in one small house.

Years went by like that.

Some days were quiet.

Some days were explosive.

Sometimes the arguments turned ugly. It reached to not just the raised voices but the words that don’t leave easily, that hit your own people like stones. I remember one day in particular, the kind you wish you could rip out of history. The fight had escalated, and I was already in that dangerous teenage place where you don’t know how to regulate anger, you only know how to aim it.

I said something *brutal*.

So brutal that even now, I don’t like repeating it. I saw the way it landed on Papa’s face. I saw the way Dadi’s expression broke for a second, like something inside her heard a sound it had never heard in our house before.

If there is one moment I could go back and change, it would be that day.

Those words.

That version of me.

I didn’t say it because I didn’t love them.

I said it because I was hurting and wanted them to hurt too.

After that, my rebellion got more strategic. I started skipping him, not just emotionally but physically. I fixed my tuition timings in a way that felt very clever to my teenage brain, when he was home, I was out; when I was back, he was at work. I did everything I could to avoid being in the same room.

He still did his part.

He paid the bills.

He bought the groceries.

He paid my school fees, my tuition, my clothes... Every damn thing.

Whatever I pointed at, he somehow arranged it. If an outsider had looked at our life from the street, they might have said, *What's the problem? He's a responsible father.*

But inside the house, we knew.

The one thing that was missing was the only thing that actually makes a house feel like home:

Love.

Communication.

Happiness.

We were not starving. We were not homeless. We were just emotionally... *empty*.

Right in the middle of this was my grandmother.

I think, out of everyone, she suffered the most in that phase because how do you stand there and watch the two people you love the most almost tearing each other apart with silence and words? She had seen Papa as a boy who ran away from a cruel house, as a young man being reborn in her kitchen, him fall in love with Mumma like a teenager and lose her like a man and now she was watching his only child turn into his mirror.

She tried to soften it.

She would say, *"Don't talk to your father like that,"* one day and *"Don't shout at your daughter,"* the next. She was constantly trying to hold two broken edges without cutting her own hands. She remained my only thread of peace, the one person I didn't want to hurt ever.

But even she couldn't fix what had already taken root inside me, that feeling that I had been unloved all my life.

It didn't matter how many birthdays were celebrated or how many notebooks were bought. Inside I carried this one stubborn ache:

If Mumma was alive, it would be different.

I'd imagine a version of life where I came home to her cooking, to her voice, to her hand running through my hair. I'd imagine a brother or sister, someone to share the loneliness with, someone who could stand between me and Papa when we clashed.

But I had none of that.

I had a father I didn't know how to forgive.

I had a child-version of myself I didn't know how to comfort.

And I had Dadi.

Always Dadi.

In all of it, the hostel, the poison, the fights, the distance, one thing stayed the same, she was my anchor. The person whose room felt safe. I could only sleep with her. The person I could still put my head on without performing strength, who knew that behind all my anger was not arrogance, but a girl who had never truly learned what it feels like to be held and not left.

So, the return home wasn't a happy ending.

It was the start of a new chapter of war, two people who loved each other but didn't know how to show it, and a grandmother in the middle, holding the house together with nothing but her patience and her tired, stubborn love.

Chapter 27

The Woman Who Stayed in The Fire



Most people run out of a house that's on fire.
She wasn't most people.

My Dadi didn't escape. She didn't stand outside and scream,
"Look what's happening to them." She did the opposite; she walked
straight into the flames and burned her own hands trying to put
them out.

Papa and I still say this even today:

"If we are the way we are today, it's because of her."

Whatever softness is left in us is her gift because even when we
gave up on each other, she refused to give up on either of us.

When there was a cold war between us, her love became
logistics.

Two people at war?
Fine. Two meals.

One the way I liked it. One the way he liked it.

But the part that stays with me is this, no matter how late I
came home, my food was always ready. My favorites and the
phulkas — *always hot, always fresh*. I remember throwing my bag
on the bed and running straight to her, sitting cross-legged,

opening my mouth like a little kid,
"Aaaah" and she would feed me with her hands.

Yes. Even when I was in college, this didn't stop. Who gets fed garam phulkas by hand in their twenties? I did. Because in her mind, I should never feel the emptiness my mother's death left behind. She was constantly trying to fill a space she knew she could never fully replace, but it didn't stop her from trying harder than anyone else ever would.

She used to say, in her own way, that she wanted to raise a girl who was "*acchi insaan*." A good human being. Her secret wish was that one day, when people praised me, they'd say, "*Yeh uski Dadi ke sanskaar hain*." These are her grandmother's values. She wanted her love to show up inside my character, not just in my memories. She was the one who taught me you can be kind and still not let anybody shrink you.

I slept near her for years.

Her bed was my only real home. It still shakes me when I think about that warmth. The day she left, something in my body registered a deeper kind of trauma... It was like someone had turned off the last safe light in the room.

Because of what that other woman did to me when I was small, I had already developed this fear of sleeping next to people. I didn't trust being that close to anyone. The only person I ever fully relaxed beside was my Dadi. With her, my body knew, *nothing bad will happen here*.

So, when she died, that *safety* left with her.

Since then, I still struggle to sleep next to anyone. It's not drama. It's like my nervous system refuses. There's always that consciousness, that alertness. My brain remembers that one bed, that one person, and nothing else has been able to replace it and not only me, when we used to talk over the video calls, sometimes cry, she also had the same thing. She said, I sleep alone. It has been years. Then she would ask me, "*Do you remember in winters I always used to warm your feet?*"

She used to warm my feet in winters.

I'd fall asleep with freezing toes, and in the middle of the night, even half-asleep herself, she would pull my feet towards her and warm them with her hands, tucking them into the fold of her shawl or against her legs. Every time I shifted, she adjusted like her job was to make sure no part of me stayed cold.

That's the kind of love she gave, the kind that pays attention to feet at 2 a.m. There's one little memory we still laugh about. I was a night owl whenever exams came. I'd sit up late, books open, notes everywhere, convincing myself I'd only sleep after finishing "*one more chapter.*"

Half the time, I'd just pass out on my books, head down, pen still in my hand, pages underneath my cheek. She never complained. She would come into the room softly, gather the mess, close my notebooks, put my pen away, and tuck me into bed properly and then, without waking me, she would lift my head gently and feed me a glass of milk while I was still half asleep.

In the morning she'd ask,

"Yaad hai, raat ko doodh piya tha?"

Do you remember I made you drink a glass of milk last night?

And I'd say no. I never remembered.

Papa, Kushala Aunty, everyone still laughs when they talk about it.

"She drinks the whole glass and doesn't remember in the morning."

Strange. But cute.

That was us and wherever she went, she never came back empty-handed. Even if she'd just gone to a nearby market, she'd return with *some* little thing for me — my favourite chocolate, a hair clip, a packet of chips, a small notebook. It was never about the price. It was her way of saying, *I thought of you while I was away.*

When I look at all of this together — the two meals, the warm phulkas, the midnight milk, the warmed feet, the tiny gifts, the way she stood in the middle of a burning house and didn't run, I realize something:

Papa and I survived a lot of things we should not have survived which had nothing about us being strong but her being our pillar because one woman decided she would rather burn her own hands than watch her family turn to ash.

Chapter 28

The Heartbreak Disguised as A Blessing



No matter what was happening between Papa and me. For years, my safe space was only her.

Even if she got mad at me sometimes, scolded me, she could never stay away from me for more than two hours and if I sulked and skipped a meal like a spoiled child, that was it — she couldn't last five minutes. She just couldn't watch me leave the house without eating. It almost kills me today when I remember this, because now I can go an entire day without food and nobody knows. She was the only person who noticed, who cared, who could tell even when I lied and said, *"I've eaten."* She would look at me and say, *"No, you didn't."*

In all this, she realized one thing back then, looking at me and Papa, this cannot keep going like this. I was a teenager by then. We didn't fight every day anymore. It wasn't constant screaming. It was something quieter, almost worse, a bond that didn't exist. We lived together like two people who shared a surname and a house, not a life.

That's what pinched Dadi the most.

Society always says daughters don't open up to their fathers. Fathers are supposed to be providers, not people you cry to. They give money, not emotional safety. That's the line we're all fed — mothers, for feelings, fathers for fees.

But my family has never been particularly good at obeying society. We've been rule breakers from the start. A boy who ran from home at sixteen. A grandmother who adopted him as a son. A man who married outside his community. A woman who treated Dadi like her own mother. We were never meant to be "*typical*."

So, in Dadi's head, that idea, that daughters can't be close to their fathers never sat properly. She wanted something entirely different for us. She wanted people to look at our bond and feel jealous. She wanted them to say, "*I wish I had what they have*." She wanted Papa to be my safe person, not just my surname but underneath all of that, she carried a hidden thought:

She needs someone—at least one person in this world who loves her.

What if something happens to me? A child who is already motherless shouldn't be made to feel fatherless too, especially when she still has one. I need to leave love behind for her, even if I have to go. She can't remain unloved in this world just because she only has me. Raman has to win her back, she said to herself.

Because she was who she was, she didn't ask.
She plotted.

I wish she knew or if please someone could tell her, even today, **there is absolutely no one in this world who can replace her—not even Papa. He knows it. He agrees to it more than me.**

Back at that time, I was going through my first heartbreak. The kind of breakup that feels like the end of the world when you're that age. The stupid, dramatic, full-body kind. I was hurt, fragile in a way I didn't know how to admit and that's when Dadi turned into a quiet mastermind.

She decided to use it. She had a conversation with Papa.

"You're not brutal when you're vulnerable," she told me years later.
"That's the only time the heart is soft enough to listen."

There was another thing happening in the background, Papa had picked up smoking. It wasn't casual smoking. It was not a decent amount like one or two or three, it was packets. One after another. stress, debts, business, life — it all came out in the form of white smoke between his fingers.

I hated it.

The hate was not the way normal people say, *"Oh, smoking is bad."* I hated it from my bones because I remembered that woman, my stepmother. She was a smoker. I remember the cigarette that burned my hands multiple times. The smell that made my whole childhood flinch. Seeing my own father holding the same thing felt like a betrayal I didn't know how to name. He didn't understand why I reacted so strongly to the sight of it. I don't think he even knew the full story and then, one night, everything exploded. It wasn't a small argument. It wasn't one of those half-fights where you slam a door and that's it. It was years of unsaid things vomiting out at once. He shouted. I shouted. All the old accusations and the old wounds, all of it spilling out in sentences that had been sitting in our throats since I was a child.

Dadi just stood there.

She didn't step between us at all, didn't even try to silence either of us, in fact she let the storm happen because she very well knew, she knew better than either of us that sometimes the only way to move forward is to let everything break at once, to let everything out that had been built inside for years. That night, I cried myself to sleep. I remember the final feeling, that same familiar script playing in my head, nobody understands me, nobody stays, I am alone in this house even when it's full. I don't know what conversation happened between Papa and Dadi after that.

Papa still doesn't tell me. Maybe he can't. Maybe it hurts. All I know is what Dadi told me later, in pieces, in her own simple language. *"You were breaking down, yes, but He was the one breaking*

down too all along, you just had to see it, you both had to see through your anger”.

So, that night, after I had finally fallen asleep, Papa came and sat beside my bed. He looked at me for a long time. The girl who had grown up into someone he didn't recognize. The girl he had tried to save and lost anyway, in a different way. He put his hand on my hair and started caressing it.

And he cried.

The strongest man I have ever known — sat there and cried with his daughter who didn't even know he was there.

Dadi cried too because she had wanted this softness from him for so long. The walls finally cracking.

She told me later that he gently lifted my head and placed it in his lap and he just stayed there, with my face turned towards him, tears falling into hair I was too asleep to feel. The next morning, I woke up in his lap. For a moment, I was confused. How did I get here? Why was I not in my usual side of the bed? And then I saw his face still swollen from crying, still trying to look normal. We didn't have a big dramatic conversation. I was stunned trying to process then turning to look at Dadi, who was on the other side of the bed, *“What exactly is happening here?”* kind of expression.

She just smiled at me. There wasn't any long apology, just a look but both of us felt it.

We didn't know it, but that night had ended years of war.

My heartbreak had opened a door neither of us had managed to touch for a decade. He probably realized that, intentionally or unintentionally, he had messed up in places a father should not have and I realized that a seven-year-old can't understand the weight a forty-year-old carries — but a twenty-year-old can at least try.

That evening, I found him in the balcony again. It was the same scene and the same freaking routine that I hated. He was smoking — again. Maybe the tenth cigarette that day.

For the first time, I didn't walk away. I went and stood next to him without anger boiling over. My heart was still fragile from the night before, from the breakup, from the crying. I don't know where the courage came from. Maybe it wasn't courage, it was finally being tired of watching the person you love kill himself slowly. I remember we were both in the balcony not looking at each other but the sky.

"Can you please stop it?" I said. "I hate it."

I expected a cold response. A joke. A *"haan, haan, I'll try,"* the way adults say they'll quit and never do. The most hopeful version in my head was him saying, *"Okay, I'll reduce."*

He didn't do any of that. He looked at the cigarette once, then he crushed it between his fingers, threw it away, and said nothing. And that was it. No drama. No ceremony. Just... over.

People take months, years, therapy, threats, ultimatums to leave addictions. He left it in one sentence. Just a moment under the sky and one request from his daughter.

Sometimes I still think, that man has guts.

To this day, if someone offers him a cigarette—even at a party, even jokingly — he says the same line, like a reflex:

"No. My daughter doesn't like it."

Loyalty in the absence. That's what it is. It has nothing to do with health speeches. It's about love.

There's one more thing about him that ruins my standards for love completely. There were only two conditions my mother ever kept in front of him, don't drink outside the house, and don't drink and drive. Bas. That's it. Two requests.

She's been gone for more than twenty-three years.

He still follows them like she's standing at the door watching.

He doesn't drink and drive. He doesn't drink outside. It's not because the law says so, and absolutely not because someone will catch him.

Just because "*my wife said so.*"

That's the kind of man he is. People talk about love stories like they belong only to couples who hold hands in public. My parents had a love story that outlived death and I, the angry daughter who once tore photographs and ran from his presence, eventually had to admit:

He didn't just love my mother like that.

He loves me like that too.

That night, the fight and that heartbreak felt like it was going to destroy me, it did something else instead. It ended a war.

It gave me back Papa because one woman wanted this more than both of us. That's why we always say,

It's her strength and her story; we are just living in it.

Today, he is all the roles I thought I lost with my mother. He is my parent, my friend, my shopping partner, my emotional safe place, **my person.**

All because of my Grand(MOTHER).

Chapter 29

When the Four Walls Learned Love Again



The four walls of our house had seen a lot.

They had watched a love story begin and end, a child become a stranger, arguments, silences, slammed doors, and quiet meals eaten at different times in different rooms. For years, the house was just a structure where people lived side by side, not together.

Suddenly, there was love again. It slipped in, in small changes, the way Papa called out my name now and I didn't walk away. Dadi sat in the middle of the room and watched us like someone watching a long-awaited scene in her favorite movie.

We've always been taught that real, deep love is supposed to be genetic. Blood. Family tree. Surname. Parents. Children. Siblings. There are names and categories for everything but what do you call it when people who had nothing to do with each other become each other's entire life?

I still don't have a word for it. I don't think I ever will.

One of the first things that changed was the schedule.

I've never liked the idea of everyone eating separately. I don't understand families where the father eats alone, the mother in the kitchen, the children in front of the TV. So, when our bond

started healing, I told Papa, I don't like this *"eat whenever you want"* system.

Can we have our meals together please? I want us at the same table.

He listened.

From then on, he made sure that whenever it was possible, especially breakfast and dinner, we sat together, even if it was something simple, parathas and pickle, dal and roti, it felt different when we were all reaching for the same bowl.

We started playing games with Dadi after dinner. Cards, antakshari, and silly made-up games only we understood. She would laugh in that deep, full way, the kind that comes from the belly and makes her eyes almost disappear. She cooked like she was feeding her own joy. In the mornings she'd ask, *"What should I make for you?"* and no matter what I said, she somehow had it ready, hot, exactly the way I liked.

Little efforts came from both sides.

From my side, it looked like this, sitting with Papa instead of disappearing into my room. I started asking him questions, telling him about college, teachers, friends. I decreased the gap by letting him tease me without taking offense at every line. I started leaning on his shoulder on the sofa once in a while, pretending it was casual, knowing it wasn't.

From his side, it looked like this, changing his entire life.

By then, he had already opened a daycare named Bon Voyage, he did that when I went to hostel in 2005. He was still running the property dealing business after that though, which meant long hours, unpredictable days, and very little time at home. That's why we hardly saw each other when I was younger.

Now, he decided to leave it.

It wasn't a dramatic quitting speech. It was a quiet choice: *enough running, enough chasing, I want to be present now for my daughter in every way I couldn't when she needed me most...*

He wanted to make up, as much as he could, for all the years he wasn't there, or was there only as a shadow passing through.

My college ended at 4:30 p.m. By five, I was usually back at the bus stop, which was five minutes away from our house. From that point on, Papa made it a rule, an unspoken one, but a very strict one for himself—he would be there.

We started coming home together.

He would pick me up, sometimes talking about nothing, sometimes about everything and once we stepped inside the house, he didn't leave again. There was no evening work that haunted me for years, no *"I'll just go for a bit."* *He was home.*

With us. With me.

We talked for hours.

We laughed.

He helped me with studies, like a proper, strict-but-soft father, scolding me when I was distracted and then sneaking in jokes when I got too serious.

I remember lying in bed sometimes and thinking, *Is this real?* After so many years of distance, fights, and silence, it almost felt like if I blinked too hard, it would disappear.

Dadi, in the middle of all this, started to glow.

There is no other word for it, she looked like someone had taken a tired flower and poured sunlight on it. She moved differently now. Her shoulders were lighter. Her eyes were softer. She looked like a rose that had finally found the right season to bloom.

Our house, which had once felt like a battlefield, turned into something else entirely.

Punjabi food in the morning—*parathas, chhole, halwa*, made by Dadi

South Indian food at night—*idli, dosa, sambhar*, made by Kushala Aunty.

We had created a strange, beautiful family out of people who were once strangers.

Sometimes I look at so-called “*perfect*” families and feel nothing. Then I look at ours — wounded, stitched-together, healing and I think, we loved each other more honestly than many blood families I’ve seen.

College was fun for me, but a big part of that fun was knowing where I was coming back to. My friends started coming over. They loved my dad. He wasn’t the scary father type anymore. He’d joke with them, pull their leg, ask about their studies, offer them food until they were forced to say no. By then, our bond wasn’t about fear anymore. It wasn’t that “*Don’t tell Papa*” energy children often have. It was a bond where I could talk to him about almost anything. I could share things I never thought I’d tell Papa—confusions, plans, even some heartbreaks.

I won’t lie, though. There was still a small corner in me that stayed cautious. When you’ve spent years building your life around abandonment, some part of you always whispers, *Should I say this? Or will it hurt later when things change?* That doubt still exists somewhere deep but above it now stands this louder truth, he is all I have. He is everything I have.

As I grew older, I began to understand what he had sacrificed for me.

The jobs he left. The comfort he gave up. The loneliness he chose. The remarriage he refused. The way he stayed single because he couldn’t risk anyone harming me again. He deserved companionship.

Relatives, neighbors, well-wishers kept repeating the same thing to him over the years:

“Life is long.”

“You should think about yourself now.”

“Find someone. How will you spend the rest of your life alone?”

“Daughters are meant to leave one day.”

We would look at each other and laugh, not because the idea of marriage was funny, but because they had no idea what our past looked like. They didn't know what "*someone*" had already done to us and what is the meaning of the word *stepmother* in our house. That experience sits in our story like a burn mark.

Still, Dadi and I used to talk to him in private sometimes.

"You should have someone," we'd say. "You deserve company."

He would just smile, the kind of smile that has already made a decision.

He chose not to.

He chose me.

He decided he would rather live alone as a man than risk his daughter ever being unsafe in her own house again. People call it sacrifice. Maybe it is but to him, it was simple:

"My daughter first. Always."

So, the four walls that once echoed with grief and anger started to hold something else, a father and daughter who had found their way back to each other, and a grandmother who finally got to see the family she had been trying to hold together her whole life.

It wasn't perfect but it was ours and it was *love*.

Chapter 30

2016, The Year I Didn't Know Was Last



September 2016.

If I had to circle one month on the calendar and write “*everything changed here,*” it would be that one. Back then, it didn’t look like that. There was no big goodbye moment where everyone cried in slow motion. She didn’t leave the world. She just... took a flight. I didn’t know that I was watching a last time pretending to be an ordinary day.

For years before that, our lives had been tilted towards one person — Babbal Bui.

She was in the USA with her family—Ranjit Fufaji, the kids: Shivangi, Arshpreet, Simran. One night, they were all in the car, driving somewhere in California. It was raining, the kind of rain that turns roads into glass. The car skidded badly and when they turned, it lost control. There were screams, the fear grew, everything you imagine when you think “*accident*” and hope it never happens to anyone you love.

They all got hurt but destiny, which I sometimes think is blind in all the wrong ways, chose her.

Bui had always had this insanely long, beautiful hair. It was literally proper Rapunzel-like hair. We all loved them. She loved them. It was her thing. You know how some women have one

feature that becomes part of their identity? For her, it was her hair. It was long, black and silky, like it belonged in a movie.

We didn't know that same hair would be the reason she never walked again.

When the car flipped, her hair got stuck in the steering wheel. Her body twisted with it and her spine took the hit. The injury was so bad that till today, she's on a wheelchair. She can talk, she can laugh, she can feel but she cannot walk. She cannot feed herself properly and move through the world the way she used to.

For a mother, that is its own kind of death. I still get angry that the two kindest women I have ever known had to go through this much pain. My heart breaks when I think about how two such exceptional souls were made to suffer that deeply.

When that news reached us, something inside my Dadi broke. We were all heartbroken, but a mother's heartbreak has a different sound. Her daughter was in pain in another country, and she could not even touch her. So, the visa attempts began. For years, she tried to get a US visa. We all tried every possible way but for years the applications always led to refusals.

Another year, again refusal. Then another and another kept adding. Each "no" felt like someone had physically pushed her away from her own child. She waited for all these years. She prayed. She did the one thing that has defined her whole life, she didn't give up.

Finally, in 2016, it happened.

The visa was *approved*.

The house lit up. For the first time in a long time, it felt like life was being fair to her. She packed her bags the way mothers do, half for herself, half filled with masalas, pickles, homemade things, love folded into containers. We were happy. It was important for both of them, a mother who needed to see that her

child was still here, breathing and a daughter who needed her mother to see her like this, not just in photos.

So, she left.

People say you realize how much you love someone only when they're gone. They're right but I learned something scarier, sometimes you don't realize how much you love them even when they're still alive... and you just don't know you've already seen them for the last time.

Something else sat heavy in September.

My mother's death anniversary is in the same month.

And even today I sometimes wonder, of course it had to be September. It's built in my bones now September was meant to take away something from me.

It was the second time. *The second loss.*

There's one incident from that time that still feels so unreal, I have to keep reminding myself it actually happened. If I saw it in a film, I'd say, *this is too much, this is fiction, nobody's life is this main-character coded*, but my grandmother was the main character and it was real.

The night before, around **12:30 am**, I cried like my body was trying to empty twelve years at once. I cried the way you do when no one is watching. The way that twists your face and ruins your voice. I didn't sob loudly. I don't do that. I just lay there in the dark, and the grief came in waves, and I let it.

No one knew.

After she left for the US, I had started sleeping alone. Papa didn't know I was crying. Kushala Auntie didn't know. Nobody. I didn't tell people back then, and I still don't most of the time. I've always been the kind who breaks quietly.

The next morning, Papa's phone was full of missed calls because mine was switched off. He had slept through all of them. Finally, one call connected in the morning.

It was Dadi. From California.

"Where is Sheenu?" she asked. "I need to speak to her. Something is wrong."

Papa, half asleep, brushed it off.

"No, she's fine. Bilkul theek hai."

Because that's what he saw and honestly, why would he suspect otherwise? I didn't go out of my way to show sadness.

But she wouldn't accept it.

"No," she said. "I can feel she's cried. She's crying. Put her on phone."

She was oceans away... across time zones... in another continent.

And she *knew*.

Papa came to my room and knocked in the morning. By then, I had washed my face obviously after crying for hours. I had wiped every trace of the night away. I had already started performing "normal" again, the way you do when you think nobody would understand anyway.

I opened the door, spoke like everything was okay, took the phone.

She asked me, in that soft but firm voice of hers, *"You were crying, na?"* The moment I heard her voice, I broke.

The way glass shatters. The dam broke all over again and this time I didn't try to stop it.

I kept thinking, *How?*

How the fuck do you even know without anybody telling you?

Movies show this—the *"I just felt you were in pain"* kind of connection. We see it and roll our eyes. That day, I couldn't roll my eyes anymore. I learned there is a frequency of love that doesn't need wifi, location, logic.

My own father, sleeping in the next room, didn't feel it.

My grandmother, across an ocean, *did*.

Something shifted inside me that day.

It's not like I didn't love her before. I adored her but my love for her crossed into something else entirely. It went from love to worship. *From "this is my grandmother" to "this is my miracle."*

Because how do you compete with a love that can feel your tears through continents? No matter who I end up with in life, no matter who loves me, I know one thing for sure, nobody will ever love me like that again. I am not saying this because people are bad, but because this is not a common kind of love.

It's once-in-many-lifetimes type.

So, 2016 was the year she left for the US. Then, almost as if the universe was doing some kind of cruel symmetry, 2017 came.

On 1st September 2017, I left for Canada. Of course, September again.

She flew one way.

I flew another.

We didn't cry or cling at the airport like this was the end of something. We thought we had time, there would be more summers, more winters, more *"I'll come next year,"* more *"We'll sit and talk properly then,"* more *"We'll see each other soon."*

We said goodbye like people who believe the world will wait for them.

We didn't know that both those flights — hers in 2016, mine in 2017 — were not just trips.

They were *exits*.

We thought the story had more chapters with us in the same room. We didn't know we were already standing inside the last one.

Chapter 31

That Day, Two People Died



Even when I moved to Canada later, she was my anchor. I didn't want to go. Imagine this, you finally get your father back after years of distance, after a childhood of abandonment and walls and misunderstandings... and the moment the house learns how to be happy again, you're packed in two suitcases and sent to another country.

Everyone else called it *"opportunity."*

I called it being taken away. Again.

In Punjab, Canada had already become a factory dream. Study. PR. Settlement. That word, *settle* — is thrown around like it's a synonym for success and in a middle-class house, dreams come with a ceiling. You are allowed to dream, but only within the budget of practicality.

By then, I had finally grown up enough to see Papa clearly, not as the man who sent me to hostel, but as the man who had lived an entire war of a life and still chose me over and over. His sacrifices were not stories anymore, they were facts carved into my head.

So, when everyone said, *"He spent so much to send you abroad, now you must build a life there,"* I believed them. Somewhere deep inside, I decided that the only way to be loved back was to obey, and give up what I wanted so he'd never feel I wasted his sacrifices.

There was a conversation stuck in my throat that I never had the courage to say out loud:

I don't want this life. I want to be an artist.

Only one person knew.

Her.

Dadi would say, in that sure, matter-of-fact way of hers, *"Ek din main tujhe TV pe dekhungi."* *"One day I will watch you on television."*

You'll be up there. I know. I promise and I, myself used to laugh it off.

It never happened. Not yet.

But she said it like it was a promise written somewhere I couldn't see.

In Canada, she became my time zone.

She would wake up early just to call and wake me. She would stay on the line while I got ready, like a background presence that made the room feel less empty. She'd remind me of appointments, food, what I had told her the day before.

Today you have this.

"Eat this, do not do this, you haven't been eating properly."

All my life I had only been taken away from love. She knew that. She knew that underneath everything, the degrees, the visas, the foreign country, there was one thing I craved more than anything, to be loved, consistently, by someone who would not leave.

I think she was the only person on this planet who understood my definition of love.

After 2018, something inside me collapsed. I went into a kind of depression I didn't have language for. Outside, I was the usual NRI story — studying, surviving, and smiling in photos. Inside, I was empty. I couldn't talk to anyone, not even Papa. I didn't want to put more weight on him. I didn't want him to feel guilty or helpless.

So, I put on a show for the world, and saved the truth only for her.

She was the one who knew I was breaking.

She was the one who heard the silences between my *“Main theek hoon.”*

I wanted to come back.

Papa had told me, once your studies are over, you can and I held onto that sentence like oxygen but the world never shuts up. The so-called relatives, neighbors. *“Well-wishers.”*

“You spent so much, now you can’t just waste it.”

“Tum log koi crorepati nahi ho, samjha karo.” You guys are not some billionaires.

“Respect his money, settle there, get PR. That’s the goal.”

The idea was simple, if you are in Canada, there is only one blueprint for your life and it does not include risk, art, or madness. It includes paperwork, job, PR, marriage, repeat. That’s the dream. That’s the *“right”* way.

Wanting anything else is an insult. To your parents. To the system that stamped your visa.

I respect everyone who wants that life.

I just didn’t.

But people are not ready for that conversation, so they shut it down before it even begins.

“Grow up.”

“Be practical.”

“Lakhon log hain, sab thodi kar paate hain.” There are thousands out there, you think you are special?

So, like every good child trained in guilt, I learned to suppress my dreams, to fold them into small pieces and hide them where nobody could see. Out loud, I was the girl abroad. Inside, I was still the child who wanted a stage and one pair of eyes in the front row who believed she belonged there.

That pair of eyes was hers. *My Dadi.*

She would get so mad when I called myself not beautiful. “*Tu pagal hai kya? Why do you think you can’t do this?*” She saw versions of me I couldn’t even imagine for myself.

Years passed. *Depression* settled like dust.

Then 2023 came.

She finally got her citizenship.

Until then, she couldn’t travel freely. I couldn’t come back because of COVID. We were stuck in our separate countries, promising each other, “*When all this ends, we’ll meet.*”

The day she finally got her citizenship, she called me first. I remember how happy and excited she was. She said, I have good news. I literally jumped like a child when she said “I got the citizenship. Now I am going to come to you. India first and then Canada

Shivangi’s wedding was fixed, so the plan was, first India for a month — shopping, relatives, the usual chaos — then Canada.

“*I’ll cook for you,*” she said. “*Bhindi banaungi. Paneer banaungi. Tere baalon mein tel lagaungi. Dekh, teri skin kharab ho gayi hai, tu khayal nahi rakhti na.*” *I am going to cook your favourites, I am going to oil your hair. Your skin has gone pale, you never take care of yourself.*” One full box of Pinnis I am going to make for you

My head snapped up when she said I am gonna wash your hair, they were good and healthy when they were in my hands.

I am not a *baby* anymore Dadi, I protested.

You will always remain mine, she countered.

My heart melted at that sentence then, and today it rips every piece of my heart...

She had a thousand small plans. I had one big one, *She’s coming.*

After five years of dragging myself through pain, that one sentence put life back into my body.

I started preparing like God was coming to visit me.

I decorated the house. I bought furniture, plants, groceries, new sheets, a microwave and what not. I picked things thinking, *Dadi yahan baithegi. Yahan soengi mere sath. Yahan hum baat karenge.* She is going to sit here. She will sleep here with me. Here we are going to talk.

When Dadi reached India, I was sulking like a child because everybody in India got to meet her before me.

"She's here, we got to hug her," they teased.

"You're still there, too far."

I kept telling myself, *Just one month. Bas ek mahina. Then she's mine.*

We talked that night.

Our heart out. They all were together, I was on the video call.

We were laughing, making plans.

I slept like someone who finally saw light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

Two days later, in the morning, my phone rang.

It was her nephew.

His voice didn't sound normal.

"She's no more."

For a full minute, my world stopped.

Everything...sound, sight, thought. I remember standing in the living room and then not really standing anymore. I just dropped to the floor. It felt like my soul left my body first and my body was taking time to realize.

The night before, I hadn't been able to sleep. There was a strange uneasiness, a restlessness that made no sense. I tossed,

turned, stared at the ceiling. Finally, when I did fall asleep for a few hours, it was morning and then came the call.

My Mami came to pick me up. I was in Brampton then; they lived nearby. Everyone knew what that news would do to me. They knew what she meant to me, that this was *not* a “grandmother died, feel sad for a while and move on” situation.

I remember sitting on the sofa for twenty hours straight. Not moving.

My legs went *numb*. My blood circulation got messed up. For three days, I physically couldn’t walk properly. Grief sat in my body like a weight. I fainted. People had to hold me like I was the one who had been hit by something and not her.

They called for the funeral on video.

I watched what I could. I turned the screen away when I couldn’t. The biggest regret of my life will always be this, I couldn’t see her one last time with my own eyes. I begged everyone to let me come. I truly, literally begged.

“Please, let me go.”

“Please, I have to see her.”

“Please, I want to touch her for the last time.”

But how do you reach another country in 24 hours? Bodies do not wait for flights and visas. Cremations do not pause for grandchildren.

She had promised me one month.
The universe didn’t give me even one day.

On 21 March 2023, my world *ended*.

On 27 March, I came back to India.

Because I couldn’t stay there anymore, not in that life that everyone else called “*lucky*” but where my only refuge no longer existed.

Depression is one thing. Grief on top of that is another species entirely.

When she went, she took half of me with her. There wasn't just one death that day. There were two.

What shocked me almost as much as losing her was the way people reacted.

"Jo likha hota hai, wahi hota hai."

"Will she come back if you cry?"

"Itni roti kyu hai? Sabko jaana hai."

"Everyone has to go one day."

I wanted to scream. They were not wrong in some philosophical way; they spoke that way because emotional intelligence is a luxury most people clearly never received. They looked at my grief like it was drama instead of the only thing I had left to hold onto her.

When I came back, I locked myself in the house. I did not go out. I did not *"move on."* I could not. People kept expecting explanations, logic, neat answers.

"How are you?"

"Ab kya plan hai?"

"Life goes on."

I didn't have a plan. I had a hole. How do you explain to anyone that the only love you have ever truly received in your life has just disappeared from the earth? That the one person who asked what you ate, how you slept, what you dreamed, who believed in your stupidest, wildest dreams without a snicker—she's gone. Who replaces that? Where do you order that from?

You don't. You just fucking cannot.

Two people who loved her the most stood on opposite ends of the same loss. Papa was definitely broken beyond words, yet carrying a strange kind of peace in his heart. A peace that came from knowing she returned to the land she belonged to in her

final days, that he could stand there and perform her last rites as a son by love. He still says it, and he means every word: even in seven generations, we would never be able to repay what she did for us. And maybe that one moment gave him something to hold on to... a closure life rarely offers.

And then there was me. The one who probably loved her the most in this entire universe... standing miles away, oceans away — without a goodbye, without even one final look at the face that felt like home.

People talk about how the universe knows better... but some questions don't settle, they stay.

Why didn't it give me that one moment? That one chance?

Maybe I will spend my whole life carrying that answerless silence.

So yes, a body was cremated that day.

A woman called someone's mother, someone's sister, someone's grandmother, left this world.

But another thing happened that no one could see, because it didn't happen on a pyre.

A version of me also died.

The version who knew, *no matter what happens, I always have her.*

That version is gone.

And if anyone ever tells me again,

"Will she come back if you cry?"

I will still answer the same thing in my head:

"No. She won't. But crying is the only way I keep the part of me that died with her from disappearing completely."

A Letter She Will Never Read



Dadi,

I have rewritten this letter in my head a thousand times, and still, no version of it feels big enough to hold you. Maybe that is the punishment of love like yours, it leaves no language behind that can fully explain it.

I want to start with the cruelest truth first, 2016 was the last year I saw you. You may have left the world in 2023, but my world has never been the same since then. That year keeps replaying in my mind like a scene I didn't know was the final one. You left for the USA. I left for Canada the next year. Somewhere in between, time turned into a thief. It didn't take you all at once. It took you little by little, through distance and the lie we tell ourselves when we love someone and assume life will be fair. You promised you would come to me and celebrate my birthday with me, in a month and I believed you the way a child believes the person who has never failed them before. I counted days like they were steps bringing you closer. I imagined your hands in my hair, your voice in my house, your laughter filling the empty spaces I didn't know how to fill without you.

But you didn't come. Your promise stayed unfinished and I know it wasn't a lie the way the world lies. It was life, life doing what it does best, changing plans without permission and calling it fate. Still, some part of me remains stuck there, waiting, counting, checking the calendar as if I can bargain with time and make it keep its promise.

When Mumma left, I was too small to understand what grief really meant, too young to hold the full weight of what had happened. People told me I was strong, but I wasn't strong. I was simply a child who didn't yet know how to remember properly, a child who lost her mother before she had enough years to even build a complete picture of her and then you became the only one, I had. You gave 14 years to a child you had no obligation to, that is why losing you felt like my mother died again, only this time, the pain had a face, a voice I could still hear in my head. You left, and with you, something in me left too, something that still doesn't know how to come back.

I wasn't there, Dadi. I couldn't see you for the last time. That is the regret that follows me like a shadow. I could not reach in time. I could not be there when you were cremated. I did not get to hold the last moments the way I thought I would and that "what if" is a cruel inheritance. What if I had come earlier? What if I had pushed harder? What if I had fought time the way you fought everything for me? What if you needed me and I wasn't there?

I know people will say, don't do this to yourself but they don't understand. You weren't just my grandmother. You were the person who made safety feel real. You were the kind of love that doesn't happen twice.

Even now, I live as if you are still within reach. I still have your number saved in my phone as My Universe. I can't delete it. I won't. I still send you voice notes as if you'll listen to them later as if you're just busy right now and will reply when you get a moment, like the world didn't take you away and call it "natural." Sometimes I imagine you hearing them from wherever you are, somewhere above this loud planet, somewhere softer than here. I imagine you listening from the stars, smiling the way you used to smile when you didn't want me to know you were emotional. I imagine you shaking your head at me and saying something simple that sounds like you, Eat something. Sleep. Don't cry so much.

Dadi, I need you to know something I didn't say enough when you were here, I loved you. I always did. I love you in the way a person loves the one who rescued them without asking to be thanked. I love you in the way the body loves warmth in winter. You were my only home.

If I ever become anything in this life, it will be because you were the only person who believed in me and if I ever do something brave, beautiful and worth remembering, it will be for you, not to impress the world, but to honor the fact that you carried me when I was too small to carry myself.

But I also need to confess what I hate admitting, the day you left, you took half of me with you. The part of me that knew how to be safe and be happy without fear. I could rest, because you were in the world. Now I am living with only the other half, and sometimes that half feels like it's pretending. People tell me time will teach me how to live without you, but what they don't understand is this, I don't want to learn a life where you don't exist.

Who will ever love me the way you did? No one. I repeat, no one.

Maybe that is the truth that will stay with me forever as a mark of what I was given because if your love was once-in-a-lifetime, then grief is simply the price of having been loved that deeply.

So, I am writing this, Dadi, because it is the only way I know to reach you now.

If you are watching, keep watching.

If you are listening, keep listening.

And if there is any part of you anywhere in the universe that can still feel my voice—then feel this:

I am still yours.

I will always be yours.

The Grand (MOTHER)

*And I will spend my life turning your love into something that survives
me, too.*

*I love you. I miss you. Thank you for still guarding me from somewhere
up there.*

Always.

Sheenu-Your little girl



The End

