A Contemporary Passage to India:

A Journey of Redemption, Grace, and Self-Discovery

Ashwannie Harripersaud

BlueRose ONE .com
Stories Matter
New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
India | U.K.

Copyright © Ashwannie Harripersaud 2026

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

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



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

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS
www.BlueRoseONE.com
info@bluerosepublishers.com
+91 8882 898 898
+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-81-6744-243-7

First Edition: October 2026

To Kousil Harripersaud (Mama Bear),

For the sacrifices you made, the lessons you taught, and the belief you always had in me. I hope this book makes you as proud as you have always made me.

Contents

PROLOGUE 1

The Dream Before the Journey 1

PART ONE: THE CROSSROADS 8

Chapter One: The Threat 9

Chapter Two: The Meeting 26

Chapter Three: The Wait 46

Chapter Four: The Car 58

Chapter Five: The Departure 65

PART TWO: THE ARRIVAL 72

Chapter Six: The Landing 73

Chapter Seven: The Drive 77

Chapter Eight: The Food 88

Chapter Nine: The First Day 95

PART THREE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS 102

Chapter Ten: Ryan 103

Chapter Eleven: The Historic Sites 111

Chapter Twelve: The Markets 119

Chapter Thirteen: The Food Shops 127

PART FOUR: THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY 135

Chapter Fourteen: The Swami 136

Chapter Fifteen: The Temple 144

Chapter Sixteen: Vanita 156

Chapter Seventeen: The University 164

PART FIVE: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES 176

Chapter Eighteen: The Palaces of Jaipur 177

Chapter Nineteen: The Taj Mahal 189
Chapter Twenty: The Elephants and Camels 196
Chapter Twenty-one: Delhi 204
PART SIX: THE GRAND TOUR.....213
Chapter Twenty-two: The Weekend in Gujarat.....214
Chapter Twenty-three: The Navratri Dance 221
Chapter Twenty-four: The Ayurvedic Park 229
Chapter Twenty-five: The Statue of Unity.....237
Chapter Twenty-six: The Return.....245
Chapter Twenty-seven: The Houseboat in Kashmir 250
PART SEVEN: REFLECTIONS 255
Chapter Twenty-eight: The Days Alone.....256
Chapter Twenty-nine: The Kindness of Strangers 263
Chapter Thirty: The Grace 268
PART EIGHT: THE RETURN.....273
Chapter Thirty-one: The Leaving 274
Chapter Thirty-two: The Flight 282
EPILOGUE.....287
ABOUT THE AUTHOR 291
BOOKS BY ASHWANNIE HARRIPERSAUD: 292

PROLOGUE
The Dream Before the Journey

I dreamed of India before I ever set foot on its soil.

In my dreams, the subcontinent was a kaleidoscope of colours—saffron and crimson, emerald and gold—spinning like the skirt of a dancer at a wedding. I smelled cardamom and cumin, heard the call to prayer mixing with temple bells, felt the crush of millions of bodies moving through ancient streets. I saw faces that resembled my own—the same high cheekbones, the same deep brown eyes, the same curve of the lips that had been passed down through generations like heirlooms. I heard voices that spoke in rhythms I recognised, even when I could not understand the words. I touched fabric that felt familiar against my skin, like the saris my grandmother wore, like the cotton my mother bleached on wash days in the Guyanese sun.

These dreams were not random. They were the echo of something deeper, something older than my own consciousness. They were the memory of a place I had never visited but that had never left me, a homeland I had never known but that had shaped every breath I had ever taken. They were the inheritance of my ancestors, the *kala pani's* children, who had crossed the dark waters from India to Guyana in the holds of British ships, carrying nothing but their names, their gods, and the taste of their mother's cooking lingering on their tongues.

I had grown up with India in my bones. It was there in the turmeric my mother ground fresh every morning before

the sun rose over the sugar cane fields of Berbice. It was there in the cumin we toasted until it released its smoky perfume into the kitchen air. It was there in the cardamom we crushed for our chai, the ginger we grated for our curries, the coconut we scraped for our sweets. It was there in the gods on our altars—Lakshmi with her lotus, Ganesh with his elephant head, Hanuman with his monkey army—whose stories I had heard before I could speak, whose names I had learnt before I could write, whose blessings I had sought before I could pray.

Our festivals were Indian festivals. Diwali, with its rows of clay diyas lining the verandas of our wooden houses, their tiny flames flickering against the darkness of the Guyanese night. I remember the smell of oil and wick, the soft glow that transformed our humble home into something magical, the way my mother would place each diya with such care, as if she were lighting a path for the gods themselves.

Phagwah, with its clouds of coloured powder that turned the streets of our villages into rainbows, its singing and dancing and abandon that felt like a rebellion against the strictures of colonial respectability. The red and yellow and green powders that stained our clothes and skin, the water guns and balloons, the way the entire community came together to celebrate the victory of good over evil, spring over winter, joy over sorrow.

Ram Navami, with its chanting and fasting, its re-enactments of the Ramayana that went on for hours, the whole village gathered under the mango tree, listening to the pandit's voice rise and fall like the tide. I can still hear

the rhythmic recitation, the way the words seemed to float on the evening air, carrying with them the weight of millennia.

Our weddings were much like Indian festivals. The seven sacred steps around the fire, each one a promise, each one a prayer. The turmeric ceremonies that stained our hands yellow for days, the intricate mehndi patterns that covered our palms in lace-like designs. The dowry negotiations that went on for weeks, the feasts that lasted for days, the relatives who travelled from across the country to witness the joining of two families, two destinies, two souls. I remember the smell of sandalwood and rosewater, the sound of the shehnai, the way the bride would be carried on a palanquin, her face hidden behind a veil of gold and crimson.

Our music was Indian music. The tabla's rhythmic heartbeat, the sitar's crying melody, the harmonium's wheezing breath. The bhajans my grandmother sang while she cooked, her voice rising and falling like a bird in flight. The film songs my mother played on the old record player, their lyrics in Hindi that she barely understood but felt in her heart. The chutney music my cousins danced to at parties, its syncopated beat a fusion of Indian rhythms and Caribbean energy, a sound that was neither fully Indian nor fully Guyanese but something new, something hybrid, something that belonged to us alone.

Our silences were Indian silences. The way we lowered our eyes before elders, the way we touched our parents' feet before leaving the house, the way we spoke of death in whispers as if naming it aloud might summon it. The way

we avoided direct confrontation, preferring hints and suggestions to outright declarations. The way we understood that some things were better left unsaid, that some emotions were better expressed through gesture than through words. I learnt early that love was not something you said; it was something you showed, in the food you cooked, the prayers you offered, and the sacrifices you made.

But India was also a story of loss. My ancestors had not come to Guyana willingly; they had been brought as indentured labourers, tricked or forced into signing contracts they could not read, trading one form of bondage for another. They had crossed the *kala pani*—the dark waters—in the holds of ships that carried them from their villages in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal to the sugar plantations of British Guiana. The voyage had taken months, sometimes longer, and many had not survived. Those who did, arrived broken, exhausted, grieving—their families scattered, their communities destroyed, and their futures uncertain.

They had been promised land and freedom, prosperity and dignity. Instead, they found the same poverty and oppression they had left behind, only now in a foreign land where they were surrounded by strangers and despised by their colonial masters. They worked from sunrise to sunset, their hands bleeding in the cane fields, their backs breaking in the rice paddies. They lived in barracks that were little better than prisons, their children dying of diseases that had no names, and their women enduring the unwanted advances of overseers and planters.

And yet, they survived. They endured. They adapted. They found ways to preserve their culture, their traditions, their faith; not as a museum piece, but as a living, breathing thing that sustained them through the worst of times. They built temples and mosques, they held festivals and ceremonies, and they taught their children the songs and stories of their homeland. They did all of this in secret, under the watchful eyes of their oppressors, who saw their culture as backward and savage and sought to stamp it out.

In this way, India became not just a memory but a form of resistance. To speak Hindi was to defy the English masters who wanted you to forget your mother tongue. To wear a sari was to reject the Victorian modesty imposed by colonial missionaries. To pray to your gods was to deny the Christian God who had supposedly brought you civilization. To celebrate your festivals was to assert that you had not been broken, that you had not been erased, and that you remained who you were no matter what they did to you.

As time passed, and new generations came and went, the idea of India became more romanticised and distant, yet curiously more tethered to the subcontinent. For my grandparents, India was a living memory—they had heard their parents speak of it, had seen photographs, and had received letters from relatives who had remained behind. For my parents, India was a legend, a mythic homeland they had never seen but whose rhythms governed their daily lives. For me and my generation, India became

something else entirely: a dream, an ache, a question mark hanging over our identity.

Who were we, really? Were we Guyanese? Were we Indian? Were we something in between, something new that had no name? We were a people caught between worlds, neither fully at home in the country of our birth nor fully connected to the country of our ancestors. We spoke a language that was a hybrid of English, Hindi, and African dialects. We ate food that was a fusion of Indian spices and Caribbean ingredients. We worshipped gods whose names we could barely pronounce, in temples that looked nothing like the ones in India. We were the children of the *kala pani*, and we had never quite found our footing on either shore.

My mother's singular desire was to visit India. She spoke of it the way believers speak of Mecca or Varanasi—as a pilgrimage, a homecoming, a debt she owed to her ancestors. She saved money for decades, collected photographs and magazine clippings, and memorised the names of cities she longed to see: Amritsar with its Golden Temple, Varanasi with its ghats, and Rishikesh with its ashrams. She imagined herself walking where her great-grandparents walked, breathing the same air, seeing the same rivers, and touching the same soil. For her, India was not just a country; it was a wound and a healing, a loss and a recovery, a separation and a return.

I inherited that desire, albeit in somewhat different ways. For my mother, India was the land of her grandparents, a place of memory and myth. For me, it became something more: a personal quest, a spiritual excavation, a journey to

understand not just where I came from, but who I might become. I wanted to test the stories against reality. I wanted to see if the India of my imagination—the India of Satyajit Ray's films and Salman Rushdie's novels, the India of my grandmother's songs and my mother's dreams—actually existed. I wanted to walk those streets, eat those foods, hear those languages, and discover whether the thread connecting me to the subcontinent was strong enough to hold.

But before I could go to India, I had to survive Guyana.

PART ONE: THE CROSSROADS

Georgetown, Guyana

June 2022

Chapter One: The Threat

The dream came to me again that night, the same dream I had been having for weeks, months, perhaps years. It was always the same—vivid, visceral, leaving me breathless and yearning when I woke. I was walking through a marketplace, surrounded by colours, sounds, and smells that were at once familiar and strange. The air was thick with incense and spices—sandalwood, cardamom, cumin, cloves—mingling together in a perfume that seemed to awaken something deep within me. The ground was damp with morning dew, cool against my bare feet, and the sky was a pale blue that seemed to shimmer with heat, like the surface of a lake on a summer afternoon.

Vendors called out to me in languages I could not understand but whose rhythms I recognised, their voices rising and falling like the waves of an ocean I had never crossed. I heard the singsong cadence of Hindi, the guttural consonants of Punjabi, and the melodic flow of Bengali. They were the languages of my ancestors, the tongues they had spoken before they were forced to abandon them for the English of their colonial masters. I could not understand the words, but I understood the music—the longing, the joy, and the sorrow that lay beneath each syllable.

I stopped at a stall selling bangles—thin circles of glass and metal in every colour imaginable: ruby red and emerald-green, sapphire blue and amber gold, pearl white and jet black. They hung from wooden pegs like rainbow-coloured rain, catching the morning light and throwing prisms of

colour across the ground. The vendor, an old woman with silver hair and deep-set eyes, held out her hand and placed a single bangle in my palm. Her skin was like parchment, thin and translucent, with veins that ran like rivers beneath the surface. Her fingernails were stained yellow with turmeric, and she wore a simple white sari that had seen better days.

The bangle was a deep shade of crimson, the colour of blood and weddings and sacrifice. It felt heavy in my palm, heavier than glass should feel, as if it carried the weight of generations.

"This is for you," she said, her voice soft but clear, like the ringing of a temple bell. "You have come a long way, and you have much farther to go. Wear this, and remember: you are not alone. Your ancestors walk with you. Their strength is your strength. Their courage is your courage. Their hope is your hope."

I looked down at the bangle in my palm, and when I looked up, the marketplace was gone. I was standing in a field of sugarcane, the tall stalks towering over me, their leaves rustling in the wind like whispered secrets. The sky had darkened, and rain was beginning to fall—fat, heavy drops that soaked through my clothes and plastered my hair to my scalp. I heard voices in the distance, shouting in a language I recognised but could not understand. They were angry voices, urgent voices, voices that promised violence and pain. I started to run, but my legs would not move, my feet anchored to the ground like roots, as though I was a part of the earth itself and could not be separated from it.

And then I woke up.

The dream lingered, as it always did, leaving behind a feeling of longing and urgency, a sense that I was running out of time. It was like an echo that refused to fade, a song that played on repeat in the back of my mind. I lay in bed for a few moments, staring at the ceiling of my small apartment in Georgetown, listening to the sounds of the city waking up outside my window.

Georgetown was a city of sounds. The roosters crowing, their calls competing with each other like rival singers in a contest. The dogs barking, their voices ragged and insistent, claiming their territories in the early morning light. The distant rumble of the minibuses that would soon be ferrying people to work, their engines sputtering and backfiring, their horns blaring in a cacophony that was both chaotic and strangely melodic. The clatter of pots and pans from the house next door, where someone was already preparing the morning meal.

And the smells—oh, the smells. The smell of fried dough and channa wafted in through the open window, and I knew that somewhere nearby, someone was making saheena for breakfast. The aroma of fresh roti, warm and buttery, mixed with the bitter scent of black coffee and the sweetness of condensed milk. The earthiness of the morning rain that had fallen during the night, the wet concrete, and the damp grass that seemed to breathe life into the city.

I had been in Georgetown for almost a year, and I still felt like a stranger. I had come here from Berbice, where I had

grown up, hoping to find something better—a job, a future, a life. Berbice was a land of rice fields and sugarcane plantations, of wide-open spaces and slow-moving rivers. It was where my family had lived for generations, where my ancestors had toiled and struggled and built a life out of nothing. But it was also a place of limited opportunities, of small-town gossip and closed minds, of dreams that withered before they could take root.

I had thought that moving to the capital would open doors, would give me opportunities that the rural village of my birth could never offer. I had imagined myself in a sleek office, wearing crisp business clothes, climbing the ladder of success. I had imagined a life of independence and achievement, a life that would make my mother proud and prove to my father that I was not just a dreamer but a doer.

But the city had not been kind to me. The work had been sporadic and underpaid—temporary positions that offered no security, no benefits, and no future. I had worked as a cashier at a supermarket, as a receptionist at a dental clinic, and as a waitress at a Chinese restaurant. Each job had paid just enough to keep me afloat, but never enough to save, never enough to plan, and never enough to build a life.

The people had been cold and distant. In Berbice, everyone knew everyone. The community was tight-knit, supportive, a safety net that caught you when you fell. But in Georgetown, I was anonymous, a face in a crowd that no one noticed and no one cared about. Neighbours who

did not know my name. Colleagues who did not ask about my family. Landlords who raised the rent without warning, knowing that I had nowhere else to go.

The loneliness had settled into my bones like a permanent ache, a dull, persistent pain that never quite went away. It was there when I woke up in the morning, a weight on my chest that made it hard to breathe. It was there when I walked through the crowded streets, surrounded by people who did not see me. It was there when I lay in bed at night, staring at the ceiling, wondering if this was all that life could offer.

I had thought that moving to the capital would open doors. Instead, I had found myself trapped in a new kind of prison, one with iron bars of poverty and despair, with walls of indifference and neglect. I had traded one kind of confinement for another, and I had never felt more trapped in my life.

The year in Georgetown had been difficult, draining in ways I could not fully articulate. Each day was a battle—to find work, to pay the bills, to keep my head above water. I had watched my savings dwindle, had seen my dreams crumble, and had felt the hope drain out of me like water from a cracked vessel.

After a few months in Georgetown, the temptation to sell the car my father had gifted me was surprisingly strong—the city's narrow streets and chaotic traffic made it feel more like a burden than a blessing, and the extra cash would have been a welcome cushion. But the thought evaporated as quickly as it came, replaced by a deeper

understanding that this car was far more than a machine; it was a tangible piece of his love and faith in my independence. I made a quiet promise then to cherish it, refusing to let it become a daily commuter in the city's grind. Instead, I decided I would only drive it for journeys that mattered, saving it for the long, familiar road to Berbice, where every mile would feel like a homecoming.

I had become someone I did not recognise: a woman who was tired all the time, who had given up on the future, and who had stopped believing that things could ever get better.

And now I was being hunted.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and I reached for it without looking. The screen displayed a message from a number I didn't recognise. My heart began to pound as I opened it, and my blood ran cold as I read the words.

"You think you can hide from us? We know where you live. We know where you work. We know everything about you. Pay what you owe, or face the consequences."

I had been receiving messages like this for weeks. They had started as vague threats, hints that I had crossed the wrong people, that I had failed to repay debts I had never actually incurred. At first, I had dismissed them as spam, as the work of some internet scammer looking for an easy mark. But they had grown more specific, more personal, and more threatening.

They knew my address. They knew my schedule. They knew the names of my friends and colleagues. They knew

the colour of the pants suit I had worn to work last Tuesday, the name of the café where I bought my morning coffee, and the route I took home each evening. They knew everything about me, and they were not afraid to show it.

I had gone to the police, but they had been dismissive and indifferent. The officer at the station had barely looked up from his paperwork when I had explained my situation. He had told me to ignore the messages, to change my number, and to be more careful. He had not offered to protect me, had not offered to investigate, and had not offered anything but hollow platitudes.

"These gangs, they're everywhere," he had said, shrugging. "We can't be everywhere at once. Just be careful. Lock your doors. Don't go out alone at night. And if you have money, pay them. It's easier that way."

His words had made me feel sick. *Pay them. It was easier that way.* The police were telling me to give in to extortion, to surrender to criminals, and to accept that there was no justice and no protection. They were telling me to be a victim.

I had tried to change my number. I had tried to move to a different apartment. I had tried to vary my routines, to be more cautious, and to keep a lower profile. But nothing had worked. They always found me. They always knew. It was as if they had eyes everywhere, as if the walls themselves were listening, as if the very air was filled with spies and informants.

The threats were not idle. I had seen what happened to people who crossed the gangs in Guyana. Their pictures were in the newspapers, if you knew where to look. Their stories were whispered in the markets and the rum shops, cautionary tales that parents told their children to keep them in line. They were beaten, tortured, and killed. Their families were targeted—mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, even children. Their homes were burned, their businesses destroyed, their lives dismantled piece by piece.

And the authorities did nothing, because the authorities were either complicit or simply unable to intervene. Guyana was a small country, and the gangs had roots that ran deep, connections that reached into the highest levels of government. You could not escape them. You could only hope that they decided to leave you alone.

I had been running for months, and I was exhausted. Every day was a battle against fear, a struggle to maintain my sanity, a desperate attempt to hold onto something that felt like a normal life. I had stopped sleeping through the night, waking at every sound, my heart pounding, my hands shaking. I had stopped eating properly, my appetite gone, my body wasting away. I had stopped trusting anyone because I never knew who might be working for them, who might be reporting my movements, or who might be waiting for the right moment to strike.

I had no money to flee the country, no one to turn to for help, and no safe place to hide. I had thought about going back to Berbice, to my family, to the familiar comfort of the village where I had grown up. But I knew that would

not help. They would find me there too. They had already threatened my family, had already made it clear that they would hurt them if I did not cooperate.

I had called my mother, my voice trembling, trying to warn her. "Ma, you need to be careful. There are people after me, and they might try to hurt you. You need to lock your doors. You need to stay away from the village. You need to—"

"Child," she had interrupted, her voice filled with fear and confusion. "What are you talking about? What people? What have you done?"

"Nothing, Ma. I haven't done anything. They just want money. They think I have money."

"Do you have money?"

"No, Ma. I don't have anything."

"Then why are they after you?"

"Because they think I do. They think everyone has money. They think they can just take it. They won't believe me when I tell them I don't."

My mother had been terrified, and the guilt of that terror had been a constant weight on my heart. I had brought this danger to her door. I had put her at risk. I had failed to protect the woman who had given me everything, who had sacrificed so much for me, and who had always believed that I would make something of myself.

The weight of that guilt was crushing.

I got out of bed and walked to the small window that looked out onto the street below. The glass was old and warped, distorting the view like a funhouse mirror. But I could see enough. The city was waking up, and life was beginning to stir.

I saw a woman selling roti from a cart, her hands moving quickly as she kneaded the dough. She wore a faded cotton dress, its colours washed out by years of sun and repeated washing. Her face was lined with age and hardship, but her eyes were sharp and focused. She worked with practiced efficiency, flipping the rotis on the griddle, stacking them in a pile, and wrapping them in aluminium foil for her customers.

I saw a group of men gathered outside a rum shop, their voices raised in argument over some point of politics or sports. They wore jeans and t-shirts, sandals, and caps, their bodies slouched in the easy posture of men who had nowhere to be and nothing to do. One of them gestured wildly with his hands, and the others laughed, their voices carrying up to my window.

I saw a stray dog nosing through a pile of garbage, searching for scraps. He was thin and mangy, his ribs showing through his patchy coat. He found something—a bone, perhaps, or a piece of discarded meat—and trotted away with it, his tail held high in a gesture of triumph.

It was a scene that might have been comforting, familiar, if I had not been so afraid. I had grown up with scenes like this, had lived my whole life surrounded by the same sounds, smells, and sights. But now they seemed distant,

unreal, like a photograph of a life that belonged to someone else.

My phone buzzed again. Another message. This time, it was a video. I opened it with trembling fingers, and what I saw made me gasp.

It was my parents' house, filmed from the street. The camera had zoomed in on the front door, where a symbol had been painted in red—the same symbol I had seen on other houses that had been targeted by gangs. It was a crude drawing, a jagged shape that looked like a claw or a blade, but it was unmistakable. It was a warning. It was a promise.

The video ended with a single line of text: "*One week from today. Next Thursday. 8 PM. You know what to do.*"

I dropped the phone on the bed and put my hands over my face. I could feel tears pressing against my eyes, hot and sharp, but I refused to let them fall. Crying would not help. Crying would not save me or my family. I needed to think clearly. I needed to find a way out.

But there was no way out. I had been trapped for months, and I had run out of options. The only way to stop the threats was to pay what they wanted, but I did not have the money. I had never had the money. The debts they claimed I owed were not real, but were simply a pretext for extortion. They had chosen me because I was vulnerable, because I had no connections, because I had no one to protect me. They had seen me as prey, and they had been right.

I paced the small room, my bare feet cold against the worn linoleum floor. The apartment was tiny—just one room with a small kitchenette and a bathroom that barely had room to turn around. The walls were thin, the paint was peeling, and the ceiling fan creaked with every rotation. It was not much, but it had been mine. It had been my sanctuary, my refuge, the one place where I could pretend that everything was okay.

But even that was gone now. Even that had been taken from me.

I stopped in front of the small shrine I had set up in the corner of the room. It was a simple arrangement—a small statue of Lakshmi, a picture of Hanuman, and a few diyas and incense sticks. My mother had given me the statue when I left Berbice, pressing it into my hands with tears in her eyes.

"Take this," she had said. "Lakshmi will protect you. She will bring you prosperity and happiness. Just keep her safe, and she will keep you safe."

I had kept her safe. I had lit diyas for her every morning, had burned incense in her honour, and had prayed to her every night. But she had not been able to protect me. She had not been able to save me from the men who were hunting me, from the fear that had become my constant companion, or from the despair that was slowly suffocating me.

I fell to my knees in front of the shrine, my hands clasped together, my eyes closed. "Lakshmi," I whispered, my voice breaking. "Hanuman. Please. I need your help. I don't

know what to do. I don't know where to go. Please, please, help me. I can't do this alone."

I stayed there for a long time, kneeling on the cold floor, my forehead pressed against the worn wood of the shelf. The incense had burned down to a stub, its smoke curling upward like a prayer. The diyas flickered, casting dancing shadows on the wall. I felt the tears pressing against my eyes again, and this time I let them fall.

When I finally stood up, my legs were stiff and my knees were sore. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and walked back to the window. The sun was higher now, the street busier, the sounds of the city louder. Life was going on, as it always did, indifferent to my pain, oblivious to my fear.

I thought about my ancestors, who had crossed the *kala pani*, who had survived the horrors of the plantations, who had built a life for themselves and their descendants out of nothing. They had faced worse than this, had endured worse than this. They had been enslaved, oppressed, and marginalised. They had watched their children die, their homes burn, and their communities dissolve. And yet they had survived. They had fought. They had endured.

I had their blood in my veins. I had their strength in my bones. I could not give up now. I could not let the gangs win. I had to find a way out, even if it meant leaving everything behind—my home, my job, and my country. Even if it meant starting over in a place where I knew no one and had nothing.

I picked up my phone and scrolled through my contacts. There were so few names there, so few people I could call. The years in Georgetown had been lonely, and I had made few friends. The ones I had made had drifted away, disappearing into their own lives, their own struggles, their own fears.

But there was one name. One name I had not called in years, but one name I still remembered.

Ramnarine.

He was my mother's nephew, who had emigrated to the United States years ago. We had not spoken in a long time—the distance between us had grown, the ties of family weakened by time and geography. But I remembered him as a kind, generous man, who had always treated me like a younger sister. He had sent money to my mother when my father had been sick. He had called on my birthday, even when he was busy with his own life. He was the only person I could think of who might be able to help me.

I dialled his number, my hands shaking, and waited for him to pick up. The phone rang once, twice, thrice. I was about to hang up when I heard his voice, tired but familiar.

"Hello?"

"Ramnarine, it's me. Devi. Your cousin. I need your help."

There was a pause on the other end, and I could hear him sigh. "What kind of help?"

"I need to get out of Guyana. I need to leave the country. There are people after me, and I don't have anyone else to turn to."

He was silent for a long moment. I could hear him breathing, could almost hear him thinking, weighing my words, deciding whether to trust me. "What kind of people?" he finally asked.

"Gangs. They've been threatening me for months. They sent me a video of my parents' house, of the symbol they painted on her door. They said they would come Thursday night if I don't pay. I don't have the money, Ramnarine. I never did. They made up the debt as a pretext."

"I see." Another pause. "I don't have much money myself, but I can try to help you get a visa. Where would you want to go?"

"India," I said, the word coming out before I had even thought about it. "I want to go to India. My mother always wanted to go, and I want to go for her. I want to see where our ancestors came from."

"That's a long way. And it's not cheap."

"I know. But I have to try. I can't stay here. I'll die here. They'll kill me."

He sighed again, and I could hear the heaviness of his worry in his voice. "All right. I'll see what I can do. Give me a few days. And, in the meantime, be careful. Stay low. Don't let them find you."

"Thank you," I said, tears finally spilling down my cheeks. "Thank you, Ramnarine. I'll never forget this."

"I know you wouldn't. Stay safe, cousin. And pray. Pray to Hanuman. Pray to Lakshmi. They'll protect you."

He hung up, and I sat on the edge of my bed, holding the phone in my hands. The dream of India felt impossibly distant, impossibly far away. But it was all I had. It was the only hope I had left.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. I did not leave the apartment—I could not risk being seen or being followed. I sat by the window, watching the street below, waiting for the moment when they would come for me. Ramnarine had told me to give him a few days, but I knew I did not have that long. The threat was for Thursday night, as the video had said. I had until then to find a way out.

I thought about my mother, about the fear in her voice when I had called her. I thought about my father, about his gentle face, his quiet strength. I thought about my ancestors, about the *kala pani*, about the journey they had made and the sacrifices they had endured. They had crossed an ocean to build a new life. They had faced death and come out the other side. They had survived.

So could I.

I packed a small bag with essentials: a change of clothes, my passport, and a few documents. I had already gathered everything I might need for a visa application. I had already prepared for the possibility of leaving, even if I had not wanted to admit it. I had known, somewhere deep

down, that escape was the only option. I had just been too scared to face it.

As the sun began to set, I lit a diya in front of Lakshmi's statue and said a prayer. I asked her to protect me, to guide me, to give me the strength to do what I needed to do. I asked Hanuman to give me courage, to help me face whatever came next. I asked my ancestors to walk with me, to hold my hand, to remind me that I was never truly alone.

Then I closed my eyes and waited for morning.

Chapter Two: The Meeting

The night stretched before me like an endless abyss, each hour heavier than the last. I lay rigid in my narrow bed, the thin cotton sheet offering no comfort against the chill that had settled deep in my bones. The ceiling above me was a canvas of shadows cast by the dim streetlight filtering through my window—familiar shapes that had once brought me comfort now twisted into menacing forms. The water stain in the corner looked like a watching face; the crack running from the light fixture seemed to pulse with malevolent intent.

Every sound was a potential threat. The refrigerator's hum became a whispered conspiracy. A car backfiring in the distance made my heart seize, my hand instinctively reaching for the phone I'd placed on my nightstand. The dog that barked somewhere in the neighbourhood was no longer just a dog—it was an alarm, a warning that something was approaching. When a drunk man shouted obscenities three streets over, I was already out of bed, my feet silent on the cold floor, pressing myself against the wall beside my window.

They found me. They're here.

I counted my breaths until the shouting faded, until the silence returned. But sleep would not come. Sleep was a luxury I could no longer afford. Sleep was when they would come for me, which I knew with the certainty of a hunted animal. In the darkness, I replayed every threat, every shadowy figure that had appeared at the edges of

my life. The gang members who had cornered me in the market, their voices low and dangerous. The videos they had shown me on that cracked phone screen—videos of what happened to people who didn't comply, who didn't pay, who didn't disappear.

You're a smart girl, Devi. Smart girls know when to leave. Smart girls don't make trouble.

I had tried to leave. I had tried to disappear. But Georgetown was a small city, and the gangs had eyes everywhere—at the bus stops, the markets, the shops where I bought my rice and dal. They watched my building. They knew my schedule. They knew everything.

My fingers trembled as I reached for the small wooden box beneath my bed, which I had hidden from everyone, even from my mother. Inside was my passport, my birth certificate, and a small photograph of my mother. She was standing in front of our house in Berbice, smiling with a joy that seemed to light up the entire frame. It was my most treasured possession; the only picture I had of her. I wondered what she would think of me now, running from danger, running toward a dream that had been hers long before it was mine. I wondered if she was praying to her Gods to watch over me, guide me, and whisper encouragement from wherever they were.

Promise me, Devi. Promise me you'll go. Promise me you'll see it for both of us.

I had promised. I had promised her in the final moments before leaving Berbice. I had promised her that I would not let the dream die. And now, with every threat, every

shadow, every sleepless night, I clung to that promise like a lifeline.

When the first pale light of dawn finally crept through the cracks in my curtains, I felt a wave of relief so profound that I nearly wept. I had survived another night. The sun was rising, and with it came the relative safety of daylight. The gangs were creatures of darkness—they preferred the cover of night for their work. In daylight, they were cautious, visible, and less bold.

I rose from my bed, my body aching with exhaustion, and shuffled to the tiny bathroom. The mirror revealed a stranger—dark circles beneath eyes that had lost their spark, hollow cheeks, and a mouth set in a permanent line of fear. I hardly recognised myself. The girl who had graduated at the top of her class, the girl who had dreamed of becoming a teacher, who had wanted to inspire young minds—that girl seemed like a distant memory, a story about someone else.

I turned on the faucet and let the cold water run over my wrists, feeling the shock of it travel through my veins. Then I splashed my face, washed away the sweat and tears of the night, and took a deep breath.

Today is the day. Today, everything changes.

I had made the call to Ramnarine the previous evening, my voice barely steady as I asked him to confirm the meeting with Mr. Narinedatt at the High Commission. Ramnarine had introduced me to a fellow member of the small Indo-Guyanese community that gathered at the temple on Sundays. He had watched my mother's dream of India

grow over the years and had listened to her stories for decades. He had promised to look after me, to help me, to fulfil her dream.

The address and time were now scrawled on a piece of paper I had memorised and then burned in the sink. I couldn't afford to be careless. I couldn't leave any trace that might lead them to me.

I dressed in my best sari—a deep blue with gold embroidery that my mother had given me for my graduation. I had only worn it once, on that proud day when I had walked across the stage to receive my diploma. My mother had sat in the front row, her face wet with tears, her applause the loudest in the room. The sari had been too expensive for us, a gift she had saved for months to buy, but she had insisted. "You deserve the best, Devi. You are going to do great things."

Now, I touched the delicate fabric, feeling her love settle heavy and warm in my chest, her sacrifice, her hope. I was wearing her dream wrapped around me. I was carrying her with me into this meeting.

I gathered my documents—passport, birth certificate, the letters she had received from relatives in India, and the faded photograph of her in front of our home in Berbice. I placed them carefully in a cloth bag, one that I could hold close to my body, that I would never let out of my sight. In the other pocket, I slipped my phone, my meagre savings, and a small tinderbox my mother had given me—a charm, she had said, to keep me safe.

I paused at the door of my apartment, my hand on the handle, my heart pounding. I looked around at the small space that had been my home, my sanctuary, my prison. The cracked walls, the leaky faucet, the threadbare curtains—they were all I had left of the life I had known. I didn't know if I would ever return.

Don't look back. Don't look back.

I left the apartment without looking back.

The morning air hit my face like a blessing—warm and humid, carrying the familiar scents of the city. Georgetown was waking up around me, its cacophony of life rising to greet the sun. The minibuses were already careening down the streets, their drivers honking with an urgency that was equal parts performance and necessity. Passengers hung from open doors, their voices rising above the roar of engines as they negotiated fares and destinations.

"Georgetown! Georgetown!”

"Stabroek Market! Last bus! Get in, get in!"

I walked quickly, my head down, my bag clutched tight against my chest. I kept to the edges of the sidewalks, staying close to the buildings, watching the faces of everyone I passed. The street vendors were setting up their stalls, their tables laden with fruits and vegetables, with cassava and plantains, with bottles of coloured drinks that gleamed like jewels in the morning light. The smell of freshly cooked roti and curry wafted from the small eateries, making my stomach growl despite my anxiety.

I had not eaten. I could not eat. My body was a vessel of fear, and there was no room for hunger.

A woman called out to me from her stall—"Young lady! Come, come, look at these beautiful mangoes! Sweet as sugar!"—but I shook my head and kept walking. I could not stop. I could not let anyone see me, remember me, or speak to me. Every interaction was a risk, every moment of visibility a danger.

The streets grew more crowded as I approached the centre of the city. Office workers in their smart clothes hurried past, their faces set in expressions of routine determination. Students in their uniforms walked in groups, laughing and chatting, their youthful energy a stark contrast to my own weariness. Shopkeepers were opening their shutters, the screech of metal echoing through the narrow streets. A man on a bicycle rang his bell repeatedly, weaving through the pedestrians with practiced ease.

I kept my eyes open for any sign of danger—any familiar face, any shadow that seemed too still, any gaze that lingered too long. The gangs had their spies everywhere. They had their informants, their lookouts, their watchers. I had learnt to recognise them: the men who lounged too casually at street corners, their eyes scanning the crowd with predatory patience. The young boys who delivered packages with too much furtiveness, their hands moving too quickly, their gazes too darting. The women who sat at market stalls but never seemed to sell anything, their attention always on the passers-by.

I spotted one of them near the cathedral—a man in a red shirt, leaning against a wall, his phone held at a suspicious angle. I changed my route immediately, ducking down a side alley, my heart racing. I walked faster, my sandals slapping against the pavement, my breath coming in short gasps.

They're everywhere. They're everywhere.

But the alley led me to another street, and that street led me to another, and soon I was back on the main road, the High Commission building visible in the distance. Its modest two-storey structure stood like a beacon against the sky, its faded white walls a symbol of safety, of rescue, of hope.

I slowed my pace, trying to compose myself. I couldn't arrive looking like a frightened animal, dishevelled and desperate. I smoothed my sari, tucked a strand of hair behind my ear, and took several deep breaths. The flag bearing the colours of Guyana fluttered in the morning breeze—red, gold, green, white, and black. A reminder of the country I was leaving, the country that had been both home and prison.

You can do this. You have to do this.

The interior of the High Commission was a stark contrast to the chaos of the street. It was cool and quiet, the air-conditioned temperature making me shiver after the heat outside. The waiting room was small but functional, with plastic chairs arranged in neat rows along the walls. A few ceiling fans spun lazily overhead, their rhythmic hum

adding to the sense of calm that seemed to pervade the space.

But the calm was deceptive. The people in the waiting room were like me—anxious, hopeful, desperate in their own ways. They clutched their documents, their papers, their folders of evidence and applications. They watched the door with the same intensity I did, their eyes dancing toward every movement, every sound.

A young couple sat in the corner, the woman's head resting on the man's shoulder, their hands intertwined. They were probably applying for a visa to visit relatives in India, or perhaps to start a new life there. An elderly man sat across from them, his face weathered and tired, his suit too heavy for the weather. He held a photograph in his hands, studying it with an expression of profound longing. A family with two young children occupied the centre of the room, the parents trying to keep the children quiet while the youngest fussed and whined.

They all looked at me with curiosity, their eyes scanning my sari, my bag, my face. I was younger than most of them, and my desperation was written too clearly in my features. I looked away, not wanting to invite questions, not wanting to explain myself.

I took a seat in the corner, as far from the others as possible. I placed my bag on my lap, my hands gripping it tightly, feeling the weight of my documents, the weight of my hopes and fears. I tried to breathe slowly, to calm the frantic beating of my heart. But every minute that passed felt like an hour, and every sound made me jump.

The door opened, and a man in a smart uniform walked in. He carried a clipboard and a serious expression, and he called out a name I didn't recognise. The elderly man with the photograph stood up, his movements slow and deliberate, and followed the uniformed man down a corridor. I watched him go, wondering what his story was, what his dreams were, and what he hoped to find on the other side of that door.

The minutes stretched on. I checked my phone repeatedly—no messages, no calls. I wondered if Ramnarine had confirmed the meeting properly, if Mr. Narinedatt knew I was coming, or if there was some mistake that would send me back to the streets, back to the danger, back to the fear.

I was just beginning to spiral into panic when a receptionist appeared from behind a small counter. She was a young woman with glasses and a professional smile; her hair pulled back in a neat bun. She scanned the room with efficient eyes, then called out my name.

"Devi Maharaj? Miss Devi Maharaj?"

I stood up so quickly that I nearly dropped my bag. My legs were shaking as I walked toward her, my heart pounding so loudly I could barely hear her next words.

"Follow me, please. Mr. Narinedatt is expecting you."

She led me down a narrow corridor, her heels clicking against the linoleum floor. The walls were lined with framed photographs—pictures of important meetings, official visits, and diplomatic gatherings. I caught glimpses

of faces I half-recognised, politicians and dignitaries whose names I had heard on the news. But I couldn't focus on any of them. My mind was a whirlwind of fear and hope, of doubt and determination.

The receptionist stopped at a door at the end of the corridor. She knocked once, a soft, respectful knock, then opened the door and gestured for me to enter.

"Mr. Narinedatt will see you now."

The office was more modest than I had expected, but it had a quiet elegance that spoke of its occupant's taste and character. The large wooden desk was polished to a high shine, its surface carefully organised—a neat stack of files, a pen holder, and a small lamp with a brass base. The leather chair behind it looked comfortable and well-worn, as if it had been the seat of many important conversations.

The shelves that lined the walls were filled with books and files, their spines a rainbow of colours and titles. I recognised some of the Indian authors—Tagore, Narayan, Rushdie—and felt a small pang of connection. The books represented a culture I knew only through my mother's stories, a heritage I had inherited but never fully experienced.

A portrait of the Prime Minister of India hung on the wall behind the desk, his dignified face looking down on the room with an expression of serene authority. On the corner of the desk, next to a framed photograph of a family that I assumed was Mr. Narinedatt's, stood a small Indian flag, its saffron, white, and green stripes a vivid

reminder of the country that had captured my mother's heart.

Mr. Narinedatt stood as I entered. He was a man in his fifties, I guessed, with a kind face and warm eyes that seemed to see into the heart of the person before him. His silver hair was neatly combed back, and he wore a well-tailored suit that spoke of quiet elegance rather than ostentation. His smile was genuine, without the practiced warmth of a politician or the cold assessment of a bureaucrat.

"Miss Devi," he said, his voice calm and reassuring. He extended his hand as I approached, his grip firm and steady. "I'm Mr. Narinedatt. Ramnarine told me about your situation. I'm so sorry you're going through this."

The kindness in his voice almost undid me. I had prepared myself for scepticism, for suspicion, for the cold bureaucratic detachment I had encountered from the police and the other officials I had tried to approach. Instead, I found warmth and empathy, and I felt the familiar burn of tears behind my eyes.

"Thank you for seeing me, sir," I managed, my voice trembling despite my efforts to steady it. "I don't know what else to do. I've tried everything. The police won't help. There's nowhere for me to go."

"Please, sit down." He gestured to the chair in front of his desk and waited until I was seated before resuming his own position. "Tell me everything. Don't leave anything out. I want to understand your situation fully."

I sat down, my hands clasped tightly in my lap, and began to speak. The words tumbled out of me like water from a broken dam—the threats, the gangs, the videos, the fear. I told him about the men who had cornered me in the market. I told him about the videos they had shown me. I told him about the constant terror and the feeling of being hunted like an animal.

I told him about my mother, about her dream of India, about my dream of giving her that gift. I told him about my promise to her, her eyes bright with the hope that I would carry on her legacy. I told him about my ancestors, about the *kala pani*, about the weight of my history, the burden of longing, and the desperate desire to return to a homeland I had never seen.

I told him about my mother's stories; the ones she had told me as a child. The tales of the village in Uttar Pradesh where her family had once lived, where the Ganges flowed like liquid silver and the air was thick with the scent of marigolds and incense. The stories of her grandmother, who had been the keeper of the family's traditions, who had recited the *Ramayana* from memory and had sung songs of longing for a homeland they had never seen again. The stories of the ancestors who had crossed the *kala pani*, the dark waters, not knowing if they would survive, not knowing if they would ever see their families again. The stories of their resilience, resistance, and refusal to let their culture die.

I told him about the photograph I carried with me, the one of my mother, standing in front of our house in Berbice. I

told him about the promise I had made to her, the promise that had become my guiding star.

"She told me that India was not just a country," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "She said it was a feeling. A belonging. A home that you carry inside you, even if you've never been there. She said that our ancestors had crossed the *kala pani* with nothing but their faith and their memories, and that we owed it to them to remember who we were. She said that going to India was not just about seeing a place—it was about reclaiming a part of ourselves that had been lost."

I paused, wiping my eyes with the back of my hand. "And now—now I don't even know if I'll live long enough to keep that promise."

Mr. Narinedatt listened without interrupting, nodding occasionally, his expression thoughtful. His eyes were focused on me with an intensity that was both comforting and unnerving. I felt like he was truly hearing me, truly understanding the depth of my situation.

When I finished, he leaned forward, his eyes meeting mine. There was a long pause, a moment of silence that seemed to stretch into eternity. I could hear the ticking of a clock on the wall, the distant hum of traffic outside, and the soft whisper of the air conditioning. I held my breath, waiting for his response.

Then he spoke.

"I have a proposal for you," he said. "It's unorthodox, and it might seem risky. But I think it could work."

I leaned forward, my heart pounding, hanging on his every word. "Anything, sir. I'll do anything."

Mr. Narinedatt took a slow breath, his fingers tapping thoughtfully on the polished wood of his desk. "The Indian government allows for emergency visas in certain cases. Humanitarian grounds, safety concerns, exceptional circumstances. Given your situation—the threats, the danger, the fact that your life is clearly at risk—I believe I can make a strong case for you. The documentation of the gangs' activities, the threats, the police's inaction—these are all pieces of evidence that will support your application."

My breath caught in my throat. "You can get me a visa?"

"It will take some time," he said carefully. "The paperwork is extensive. There are background checks, security clearances, and interviews. The process typically takes several days, even under the best circumstances. And I'm not sure if we can get it processed before I leave for India."

"When do you leave?"

"Next week. I'm returning to New Delhi to resume my duties at the Ministry. I can't stay in Guyana any longer—there are responsibilities in India that require my attention. But if I can get you the visa before I go—if the paperwork can be expedited—you can come with me. I'll make sure you're looked after in India, that you have a place to stay, and that you're safe."

I could barely breathe. "You would do that for me? You don't even know me."

He smiled, a gentle, fatherly smile that reminded me painfully of my own father. "I know you're scared. I know you're desperate. And I know you're someone who deserves a chance. Ramnarine spoke highly of you, and I trust his judgment. He told me about your mother, about her dream, about the promise you made to her. He told me about your intelligence, your determination, and your refusal to give up. Those are the qualities I look for in people who deserve help."

I felt tears streaming down my face, hot and unexpected. "Thank you, sir. I don't know how to thank you."

"Besides," he added, his eyes twinkling with a warmth that made my heart swell, "I have a soft spot for people who want to see India. It's a remarkable country, Miss Devi. I've travelled all over the world, but India always calls me back. It changes people. It opens their eyes, their hearts, and their minds. It gives them a sense of belonging that they never knew they were missing. Your mother understood that. And I think, in time, you will too."

"It already has," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "And I haven't even been there yet."

"That's the spirit." He stood and extended his hand again. "I'll do everything I can to help you, Miss Devi. I'll make calls, I'll pull strings, I'll move mountains if I have to. But you need to do something for me too."

"Anything. Anything at all."

"In the meantime, stay safe. Stay hidden. Don't tell anyone about this meeting—not even Ramnarine. The less people

know, the safer you'll be. Don't go to your usual places, don't talk to your usual people, don't give anyone a reason to find you. And pray. Whatever you believe in, pray. Because we're going to need all the help we can get."

I took his hand, feeling the strength and warmth of his grip. "I will. Thank you, Mr. Narinedatt. I'll never forget this."

"I know you won't," he said, and his smile was warm, genuine, and full of fatherly affection. "Now go. I'll be in touch. Use this number if you need to reach me." He handed me a small card with a phone number written in careful handwriting. "Memorise it and then destroy the card. And keep your phone close. I'll call you when I have news."

I left the High Commission in a daze. The sun was high in the sky now, its heat beating down on the streets of Georgetown with a ferocity that seemed almost personal. The city was even busier than before, the crowds denser, the noise louder, the smells more intense. Minibuses honked their horns with renewed urgency, vendors called out their wares with increased desperation, and the air was thick with the mingled scents of exhaust, sweat, and street food.

But I barely noticed any of it. I was walking on air, my feet barely touching the ground. The weight that had been pressing down on my chest for months had lifted, if only slightly. The fear that had consumed me had receded to a dull ache, replaced by a fragile, tentative hope.

After such a long time, I allowed myself to dream. I imagined myself in India—the colours, the sounds, the smells. I imagined walking through the streets of New Delhi, visiting the Red Fort, the Qutub Minar, and the Lotus Temple. I imagined standing at the banks of the Ganges, touching its waters, whispering my mother's name. I imagined finding her village, meeting the family she had told me about, and seeing the land where her ancestors had once lived.

I'm going, Ma. I'm going. I'm keeping my promise.

But even as I dreamed, I stayed alert. I kept my head down, my eyes moving, my body ready to run at the first sign of danger. The gangs were still out there, still watching, still waiting. I couldn't afford to let my guard down. Not yet. Not until I was safely on that plane, far away from everything I had known.

I took a circuitous route back to my apartment, doubling back through alleys, crossing streets at random, making sure no one was following me. I avoided my usual shortcuts, my familiar landmarks, the places where I might be expected. I was a ghost moving through the city, invisible, untraceable.

When I finally reached my building, I paused at the entrance, my heart pounding. I scanned the street, the windows of the buildings opposite, the parked cars, and the passing pedestrians. Everything seemed normal. Everything seemed safe.

I climbed the stairs to my apartment, my legs shaky from exhaustion and adrenaline. I unlocked the door, slipped

inside, and locked it behind me. Then I collapsed onto my bed, my body finally giving in to the exhaustion that had been building for months.

I didn't sleep—the fear was still too close for that—but I lay there, staring at the ceiling, letting my mind wander. I thought about my mother, about her smile, her stories, her love. I imagined my father's eyes, gleaming with the pride he never had to say aloud. I thought about Mr. Narinedatt, his kindness, his willingness to help a stranger. I thought about the journey ahead, the challenges I would face, the risks I would take.

And for once in what felt like ages, I allowed myself to believe that maybe, just maybe, everything was going to be okay.

Later that evening, as the shadows grew long and the city settled into its night-time rhythm, I sat at my small table and wrote a letter. I didn't know if I would ever send it, didn't know if it would ever be read, but I needed to write it. I needed to put my feelings into words, to make sense of everything that was happening.

Dear Ma,

I don't know if you will receive this letter, or if you're praying for me from wherever you are. I hope you are. I hope you can see me, hear me, know that I'm trying to keep my promise.

I met a man today—Mr. Narinedatt, the High Commissioner. He's kind, Ma. He's like you are—compassionate, generous, full of hope. He listened to my

story, all of it, and he didn't turn me away. He said he would help me. He said he could get me to India.

India, Ma. I can hardly believe it. The place you talked about all those years, the place you loved more than anything else in the world. I'm going to see the Ganges, touch its waters, whisper your name. I'm going to find the village, meet the family, and walk the same streets you dreamed of walking someday.

I'm scared, Ma. I'm so scared. The gangs are everywhere, and I don't know if I can escape them. But I'm trying. I'm trying so hard. I'm doing everything I can to survive, to keep my promise.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I close my eyes and I feel like you're here. I feel your hand on my forehead, your voice in my ear, your love in my heart. And I remember why I'm doing this. I remember what you taught me—that we are never truly alone, that we carry our ancestors with us, that we are part of something greater than ourselves.

I carry you with me, Ma. Everywhere I go, you're there. In my smile, my laughter, and my tears. In the way I see the world, the way I love, and the way I refuse to give up. You made me who I am, and I will never forget that.

I don't know what the future holds. I don't know if I'll make it to India, if I'll find safety, if I'll ever be free. But I know that I'm trying. I know that I'm fighting. And I know that you're with me, guiding me, supporting me.

I'll make you proud, Ma. I promise. I'll make you proud.

With all my love,
Devi

I folded the letter carefully and placed it in the wooden box with my documents. Someday, I thought, I would read it again. Someday, when the fear was gone and the danger had passed, I would look back on this moment and remember how far I had come.

But for now, I had to keep going. I had to survive. I had to hope.

Hope, I thought, as I lay down on my bed and closed my eyes. *That's what she gave me. That's what I have to hold on to.*

And for the first time in days, I slept.

Chapter Three: The Wait

The days that followed were the longest of my life. I stayed in my apartment, barely leaving, barely sleeping. I checked my phone obsessively, waiting for news from Mr. Narinedatt. I prayed constantly—to Hanuman, to Lakshmi, to Ganesh, to any god who might be listening. I lit diyas in the small shrine I had set up in the corner of my room, their tiny flames flickering against the darkness of my fear.

The threats continued. Every day, I received new messages, new videos, new warnings. They had stepped up their campaign, making it clear that they would not give up until I paid. They knew I was trying to leave. They knew I was planning to escape. And they were determined to stop me.

One night, I received a message that made my blood run cold. It was a photo of my parents' house, taken from inside the yard. The symbol was still painted on the door, but now there was something else—a message written in red paint on the wall: *We know where your daughter is. We will find her.*

I called my mother immediately. She answered on the first ring, her voice trembling with fear.

"They came to the house, Beta," she said, using the Hindi endearment she rarely called me. "They didn't hurt me, but they threatened me. They said they would burn the house down if you didn't pay. They said they would kill me. They said they would kill your father."

They had never hurt anyone, had never caused anyone any trouble. They were the gentlest souls I had ever known. And now they were in danger because of me.

"Ma, I'm so sorry," I said, tears streaming down my face. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I'm trying to fix it. I'm trying to leave."

"Leave? Where are you going?"

"India. I found someone who can help me get a visa. I'm going to India."

There was a long pause on the other end. When my mother spoke again, her voice was filled with a mixture of fear and hope. "India? You're going to India?"

"Yes, Ma. I'm going to see where our ancestors came from. I'm going to find a way to start over. And I'm going to make sure you are safe."

"Be careful, beta," she said, her voice cracking. "Be careful. And promise me you'll come back."

"I promise," I said, though I was not sure if it was a promise I could keep.

We talked for a few more minutes, and then I hung up. I sat in the darkness of my apartment, staring at the wall, my mind racing with fear, hope, and desperation. I had to get out. I had to survive. For myself, but also for my parents, who had sacrificed so much for me.

The days blurred together, each one indistinguishable from the last. I lost track of time, of the hours, of the

minutes. The only thing that mattered was the wait—the endless, agonising wait for news from Mr. Narinedatt.

I had memorised his number, burned the card as he had instructed, but I found myself checking my phone constantly, refreshing my messages, hoping for a sign that the visa had been approved. Every notification made my heart leap, and every disappointment made it sink a little lower.

I had stopped going out altogether. The apartment had become my prison, my sanctuary, my tomb. I had enough food to last me a week—rice, dal, a few vegetables, and some canned goods—and I rationed it carefully, not knowing how long I would have to wait. I had stopped answering the door, stopped answering unknown calls, stopped trusting anyone who came near my building.

The neighbours had started to notice. I could hear them whispering in the hallway, their voices low and curious. They had seen the strangers lurking outside, had noticed the cars that sat idle for hours, had sensed that something was wrong. But they did not ask, and I did not offer any explanations. It was safer that way.

I spent most of my time in the corner of my room, kneeling in front of the small shrine I had set up. The statue of Lakshmi looked down at me with her serene smile, her four arms extended in blessing. The picture of Hanuman gazed at me with his fierce eyes; his mace raised in protection. I prayed to them constantly, my voice hoarse from repetition, my heart raw with desperation.

Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, please bring me fortune. Please open the doors that are closed to me. Please guide me to safety.

Hanuman, protector of the faithful, please give me strength. Please shield me from harm. Please help me find my way.

Ganesh, remover of obstacles, please clear the path before me. Please remove the barriers that stand in my way. Please let me pass.

I lit diyas every evening, their tiny flames casting dancing shadows on the walls. The smell of incense filled the room, mixing with the musty scent of the old apartment. I had always found comfort in these rituals, in the familiarity of the prayers and the offerings. But now, they felt desperate, frantic, like the last gasp of a drowning woman.

One afternoon, I received a message that made my stomach drop. It was a video, sent from an unknown number. I hesitated before opening it, my finger hovering over the screen. I knew it would be bad. I knew it would be another threat, another warning, another reminder of the danger that surrounded me.

But I opened it anyway.

The video was grainy, shot on a cheap phone in poor lighting. It showed a group of men standing outside a familiar house: my parents' house in Berbice. The symbol was still painted on the door, but now there was something else: a group of men in dark clothes, their faces

hidden by hoods, standing in the yard. One of them held a can of gasoline. Another held a lighter.

The video ended with a single line of text: *Thursday. 8 PM. You know what to do.*

I dropped the phone on the bed, my hands shaking, my heart pounding. I felt bile rise in my throat, and I barely made it to the bathroom before I was sick. I knelt on the cold floor, my body heaving, my eyes streaming with tears.

They're going to burn the house down. They're going to kill my parents. And it's all my fault.

I sat there for a long time, my forehead pressed against the cool tile, my breath coming in ragged gasps. I had never felt so helpless, so powerless, so utterly alone. I had no money, no resources, no one to turn to. The police had abandoned me. My friends had disappeared. Even Ramnarine, my distant cousin, had been unable to do more than make a phone call.

I thought about my mother, about the fear in her voice when I had called her. I thought about my father, about his quiet strength, his gentle hands. They had given me everything: their love, their sacrifice, and their hope. And now, because of me, their lives were in danger.

I had to do something. I had to find a way out. But every path I considered led to a dead end. I could not pay the gangs; I had no money. I could not fight them; I was one woman against an army. I could not hide; they knew where I was, where my parents were, where everyone I loved lived.

There was only one option left. I had to leave. I had to disappear. I had to start over somewhere far away, somewhere the gangs could not reach me. And I had to take my parents with me.

But how? How could I uproot my parents from the only home they had ever known?

I had no answers. All I had was the desperate hope that Mr. Narinedatt would come through, that the visa would be approved, and that India would offer me the refuge I so desperately needed.

That night, I did not sleep. I sat in the corner of my room, my knees pulled to my chest, my eyes fixed on the door. Every sound made me jump—the creak of the building settling, the footsteps of a neighbour in the hallway, or the distant bark of a dog. I was a hunted animal, and I knew that the hunters were closing in.

I thought about my mother's stories, the ones she had told me as a child. She had spoken of her own mother, my grandmother, who had been a strong woman, a survivor. My grandmother had lived through the hard times, the years of poverty and struggle, when the sugar cane fields had failed and the rice paddies had dried up. She had raised five children on next to nothing, keeping them fed, clothed, and educated against all odds. She had never complained, never given up, and never lost faith.

“We are survivors,” my mother had said. “We have survived worse than this. We will survive whatever comes.”

I clung to those words like a lifeline. I am a survivor. My mother is a survivor. My grandmother was a survivor. The blood of generations of survivors runs through my veins. I will not give up. I will not surrender. I will fight, and I will win.

But as the night wore on, the weight of fear pressed down on me, and I felt my resolve begin to crumble. I was so tired. So exhausted. The months of running, hiding, and fighting had taken their toll. I was a shell of the woman I had once been, hollowed out by fear and despair.

I closed my eyes and let the tears fall. I was not strong. I was not brave. I was just a scared girl trying to survive in a world that had turned against her.

The first pale light of dawn crept through the cracks in my curtains, and a wave of relief washed over me. I had survived another night. The sun was rising, and with it came the relative safety of daylight.

I rose from my spot on the floor, my body aching with exhaustion. I had not slept, moved, or eaten. I was running on fumes, adrenaline, and the sheer force of my will to survive.

I shuffled to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face. My hair was tangled, my dress wrinkled, and my skin pale and clammy.

I tried to muster some courage, some hope, some belief that everything would be alright. But the words felt hollow, meaningless. I was a woman running from a

nightmare, with no idea whether I would ever get myself out of this.

That afternoon, my phone buzzed. I grabbed it with trembling hands, my heart pounding. The screen displayed an unknown number, but I recognised it—it was Mr. Narinedatt's number.

I answered immediately, my voice shaky. "Hello?"

"Miss Devi," he said, his voice calm but urgent. "I have good news. The visa has been approved. You're coming to India."

I could not speak. I could not move. I could only stand there, the phone pressed to my ear, tears streaming down my face.

"Hello? Miss Devi? Are you there?"

"Yes," I finally managed to say, my voice choked with emotion. "I'm here. I'm here. Thank you, Mr. Narinedatt. Thank you. I don't know how to—"

"Don't thank me yet," he said gently. "There's still work to be done. You need to get to the High Commission tomorrow to collect your visa. Then you need to pack your things. You leave in three days."

"Three days," I repeated, my mind spinning. "Three days. I'll be ready"

"Good. And, Miss Devi?"

"Yes?"

"Don't tell anyone about this. Not your friends, not your neighbours, not even your family. The fewer people who know, the safer you'll be."

"I understand," I said. "I won't tell anyone."

"Good. I'll see you tomorrow."

He hung up, and I stood in the middle of my apartment, my heart pounding, my hands trembling. Three days. In three days, I would be leaving Guyana. In three days, I would be on my way to India. In three days, everything would change.

I fell to my knees before the shrine, my hands clasped together, tears falling freely. "Thank you, Lakshmi. Thank you, Hanuman. Thank you, Ganesh. Thank you for hearing my prayers. Thank you for keeping me safe. Thank you for giving me this chance."

I stayed there for a long time, my forehead resting against the worn wooden shelf. The incense had burned down to a stub, and the diyas had flickered out. Yet the gratitude in my heart was brighter than any flame.

I had been given a second chance. I would not waste it.

The next day, I went to the High Commission to collect my visa. The process was quick, efficient, almost surreal. I was handed a small sticker, a piece of paper that would change my life forever. I looked at it for a long moment, feeling its significance more than its weight in my hands, before slipping it into my bag and leaving.

I had done it. I had gotten the visa. I was going to India.

But the danger was not over. The gangs were still out there, still watching, still waiting. And I had three days to get out of the country before they found me.

I walked back to my apartment, my steps quick and purposeful. I had to pack. I had to make arrangements. I had to tie up every loose end before I disappeared.

I started with my documents—passport, visa, and birth certificate. I placed them in a waterproof pouch and tucked it into the bottom of my bag. Then I gathered my clothes—a few saris, a couple of pairs of jeans, and some shirts and blouses. I packed lightly, leaving behind everything that was not essential.

I paused beside the photograph of my mother that had been sitting on my nightstand for months. She was smiling, her face full of joy, her eyes bright with hope. I picked it up and held it to my chest, overcome by a surge of love and loss.

I tucked the photograph into my bag beside the wooden box that held her letters and her blessings. I was carrying her with me, just as I had promised. Wherever I went, she would be there. Her love, her hope, and her faith were now woven into the fabric of my being.

That evening, I called my mother. I had promised Mr. Narinedatt that I would not tell anyone about my plans, but I could not keep this from her. She was my mother. She had a right to know.

"Ma," I said, my voice steady despite my nerves. "I have something to tell you."

"What is it, child?" she asked, her voice cautious.

"I'm leaving," I said. "I'm going to India. I got the visa."

There was a long pause on the other end. When my mother spoke again, her voice was filled with a mixture of fear and hope. "India? You're really going to India?"

"Yes, Ma. I'm leaving in three days."

"Did you find a way to escape the gangs?"

"I found someone who can help me. A man named Mr. Narinedatt. He's the High Commissioner for India. He's going to take care of me."

"And what about us?”

I reassured her that Mr. Narinedatt had already taken steps to ensure their safety. He had personally spoken with the Commander of Police in Berbice, who had assured him that my parents would be protected from any harm or harassment. I told her she didn't need to worry. They were in good hands, and the authorities would keep a close watch over them.

She was silent for a long moment. I could hear her breathing, could almost hear her thinking, weighing my words and deciding whether to trust me.

"Be careful, beta," she finally said. "Be careful and come back to me. I will be waiting."

"I will, Ma. I promise."

We talked for a few more minutes before I hung up. I sat in the darkness of my apartment, staring at the wall, my

mind racing with fear, hope, and anticipation. The wait was finally over. I had a way out. I had a future.

I was going to India.

Now there was only one thing left to do: Sell my car.

Chapter Four: The Car

I had spent the previous evening packing my belongings—not much, just a single suitcase and a small carry-on bag. I had gathered my documents, my photographs, and the letters from my mother's relatives in India. I had folded my clothes carefully, placing them in the suitcase with the precision of someone who knew she was not coming back. I had said goodbye to the apartment that had been both my prison and my sanctuary, running my hand along the cracked walls and tracing the water stain on the ceiling. I had left a small offering at the shrine—a fresh diya, a stick of incense, and a prayer whispered into the darkness.

Then I had lain on my bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering if I would ever see this room again.

When the first light of dawn filtered through the curtains, I rose, showered, and dressed. I wore the same deep blue sari my mother had given me for graduation, the one that made me feel strong, beautiful, and capable of anything. I pinned my hair back, applied a touch of lipstick, and looked at myself in the mirror.

You can do this. I told myself. *You are strong. You are brave. You are a survivor.*

I had gathered my belongings and walked out the door for the last time.

I'll never forget the day I told my father I wanted to move to Georgetown. He sat quietly for a moment, rubbing his chin the way he always did when something weighed on

his mind. Then he simply said, "If that's what you want, then we'll make it happen." From that week on, he worked double shifts at the sugar estate, often coming home with his clothes soaked in sweat and his hands raw from labour. He never once grumbled or made me feel guilty. He just kept going—day after day, night after night—saving every dollar he could until, one Saturday morning, he handed me the keys to a modest but sturdy car. That car wasn't just metal and rubber; it was every exhausted hour he had given, every meal he had skipped, every ache he had hidden behind his smile.

But I could not take it with me to India. And I needed the money for the journey.

The morning of my departure, I posted an ad on a local Facebook group: *Mazda Axela for Sale. Good condition. Negotiable. Must sell today.*

For about a month after I first arrived in Georgetown, that car was my lifeline. I drove it everywhere—to work, to the market, through the busy streets I was still learning to navigate. But somewhere along the way, my courage began to fade. The constant honking, the narrow roads, the fear of an accident I couldn't afford—it all became too much. So I parked it, threw a cover over it, and left it in the lot. Every now and then, I'd take it out to have it cleaned, but the joy of driving had gone. Still, I couldn't forget what it had meant to me during those first weeks. It had carried me to work on mornings when I could barely drag myself out of bed. It had taken me to the temple when my heart was too heavy to carry alone, its engine humming quietly while I sat and cried. For a little while, it had been my

escape, my sanctuary, my freedom—before fear parked it for good.

And now I was giving it up.

I walked around the car one last time, running my hand along its smooth white surface. I opened the door and sat in the driver's seat, feeling the familiar curve of the steering wheel, the worn fabric of the seat, and the faint scent of the air freshener I had bought months ago. I whispered a silent goodbye, thanking the car for everything it had given me.

Then I stepped out, locked the doors, and walked away.

Sanjay arrived within the hour, a middle-aged man with a kind face and a quiet demeanour. He wore a simple polo shirt and jeans, his hands calloused from years of honest work. He walked slowly around the car, examining it carefully, his eyes missing nothing.

"Nice car," he said, popping the hood. "Well maintained."

"I took care of it," I replied. "It's been my pride and joy."

He nodded as he checked the tires, the brakes, and the interior. He asked me a few questions—how old it was, how many miles it had, whether it had ever been in an accident—and I answered truthfully. There was no point in lying. The car was what it was, and I needed to sell it.

"Do you mind if I take it for a test drive?" he asked.

"Go ahead," I said, handing him the keys.

He drove off, the car disappearing around the corner. I stood there, my heart in my throat, waiting for him to return. The minutes stretched on, each one feeling like an hour. I wondered whether he would come back, whether he would like the car, whether he would make me an offer.

Then he returned, pulling into the parking lot with an ease that made me smile. He parked the car and stepped out, his face unreadable.

"How much?" he asked.

I named a price—lower than what I might have gotten if I'd had more time, but fair for a quick sale. He nodded, his expression thoughtful.

"Deal," he said.

We went to the bank, a small branch on the corner of Main Street. I stood in line, clutching the title to the car, feeling the weight of the transaction. When we reached the counter, the teller transferred the money into my account—the money that would fund my journey, the money that would buy my freedom.

As we walked back outside, Sanjay looked at me with curiously. "You seem sad," he said. "Are you sure you want to sell this?"

"I'm sure," I said, though my heart was breaking. "I'm leaving the country. I can't take it with me."

"Where are you going?"

"India."

He raised his eyebrows. "India? That's a long way."

"Longer than you think," I said softly.

He nodded, not pressing further. Some people understand that there are things you cannot explain, pains you cannot articulate. He was one of those people.

I handed him the keys and the title. We shook hands, and I watched him drive away in the car that had been mine for so long.

I stood there on the sidewalk, watching the car disappear around the corner, feeling as though a piece of myself had gone with it. The white Mazda Axela had been more than just a car—it had been a symbol of my independence and determination. It had been proof that I could make something of myself, that I could build a life, that I could succeed.

And now it was gone.

I thought about the first time I had driven it, the feel of the steering wheel in my hands, the hum of the engine beneath me. I thought about the road trips I had taken, the songs I had sung, the conversations I had had with friends and family.

The car had been there for all of it. And now it was gone.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to push the sadness away. I could not afford to dwell on the past. I had a future to build, a dream to fulfil. The car was gone, but I was still here. And I was still fighting.

I turned and walked away, my steps quick and purposeful. I had a flight to catch, a journey to begin, a life to rebuild. The car was gone, but I was still here. And I was determined to make the most of the chance I had been given.

The streets of Georgetown were familiar, but they felt different now. They were no longer my home—they were a place I was leaving behind. I walked past the market where I had bought my vegetables, the temple where I had prayed, the café where I had drunk my morning coffee. I said goodbye to all of it, quietly, in my heart.

I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. I thought about the promise I had made to her, the promise that had brought me to this moment. I thought about India, about the land of my ancestors, about the journey that lay ahead.

The car was gone, but the dream was still alive. And I was going to make it come true.

I reached the airport, the familiar chaos of travellers and luggage swirling around me. I walked through the doors, my suitcase rolling behind me, my bag clutched tightly against my chest. I found the check-in counter for my flight and stood in line, my heart pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement.

The woman at the counter checked my documents, weighed my luggage, and printed my boarding pass. "Gate 7," she said. "Boarding in two hours."

I thanked her and walked toward the security checkpoint. I paused at the entrance, looking back over my shoulder at the terminal behind me. The glass walls offered a view of the city beyond—the familiar skyline of Georgetown, the place I had called home for so long.

I was leaving it all behind. My apartment, my friends, and my parents. The car I had loved, the job I had hated, the fear that had consumed me. I was leaving everything I had known, everything that had defined me, and stepping into the unknown.

It was terrifying. But it was also exhilarating.

I turned and walked through the security checkpoint, my heart light with hope. I had sold my car. I had said my goodbyes. I was ready to begin the next chapter of my life.

India, I thought. *I'm coming.*

Chapter Five: The Departure

The airport was chaotic, as it always was in Georgetown. Crowds of travellers pushed and shoved, trying to get through security, find their gates, and escape the heat, the noise, and the people. I stood in the immigration line, clutching my passport and boarding pass, my heart pounding with fear and excitement.

The immigration officer looked at my passport, then at me, then back at my passport. "Going to India?" he asked, his voice flat.

"Yes," I said, my voice steady despite my nerves. "Visiting family."

He stamped my passport and handed it back to me. "Have a good trip."

I walked through the gate and boarded the plane that would take me to the United States, where I would catch my connecting flight to India. I found my seat, buckled myself in, and stared out the window as the plane taxied down the runway.

As we lifted off the ground, I looked down at Georgetown, growing smaller and smaller beneath me. I watched the coast of Guyana disappear into the clouds, and I felt tears streaming down my face. I was leaving everything behind—my home, my family, and my country. I was leaving behind the life I had known, the person I had been, the past that had haunted me for so long.

But I was also moving toward something new. Something unknown. Something that I had dreamed about for as long as I could remember.

India.

The word echoed in my mind like a prayer. India. The land of my ancestors. The land of my dreams. The land that had been calling to me for so long, whispering its secrets in the wind, singing its songs in my blood.

I closed my eyes and let the tears fall. As the plane climbed higher and higher into the sky, I felt a sense of peace settle over me. I was finally on my way.

The plane levelled off at cruising altitude, and the seatbelt sign flickered off. Around me, passengers began to stir—unfolding newspapers, pulling out headphones, and reaching for the small pillows and blankets that had been provided. The flight attendants began their service, rolling carts down the aisles, offering drinks and snacks. The hum of conversation filled the cabin, a low murmur of voices in English, Hindi, and the lilting Creole of Guyana.

I sat in my seat, staring out the window at the endless expanse of clouds below. They stretched out like a white sea, soft and billowing, their peaks catching the golden light of the morning sun. I had never seen anything so beautiful, so peaceful, so vast. It was as if the world below had disappeared, and I was floating in a dream.

But I could not relax. The fear was still there, lurking at the edges of my consciousness. I kept glancing at the passengers around me, searching for familiar faces, for

signs of danger. I could not shake the feeling that the gangs had followed me, that they were on the plane, that they would find me no matter how far I ran.

They're not here, I told myself. *You're safe. You're on a plane, heading to the United States. No one can hurt you here.*

But the fear did not listen to reason. It was a primal thing, a survival instinct honed by months of constant danger. I had learnt to trust it, to listen to its warnings, to let it guide my actions. And now, even in the safety of the plane, it refused to let go.

I reached into my bag and pulled out the photograph of my mother, the one I had carried with me through everything. Her face smiled up at me, radiant and full of hope, and I felt a surge of love and longing so powerful that it took my breath away.

“I'm going, Ma,” I whispered, my voice barely audible. “I'm going.”

The flight to the United States was long, but it passed in a blur. I slept fitfully, waking at every sound, every jolt of turbulence. I ate the meals that were served, though I could barely taste them. I watched the movies on the small screen in front of me, though I could not focus on the plots. My mind was elsewhere, racing ahead to India, to the unknown, to the life that awaited me.

I thought about my mother, about the dreams she had carried with her all her life. I thought about the stories she had told me, the tales of her grandmother, the keeper of

the family's traditions. I thought about the ancestors who had crossed the *kala pani*—the dark waters—not knowing if they would survive, not knowing if they would ever see their families again. I thought about their courage, their resilience, their refusal to let their culture die.

They had crossed an ocean to build a new life. I was crossing an ocean to reclaim an old one. The irony was not lost on me.

I thought about my father. He had worked on the land his entire life, without complaining or asking for anything. He had given me everything he had, everything he could. And now, I wished he were here with me, to see me achieve my dreams, to hug me and kiss me and tell me how proud he was of me. “I miss you, Papa,” I whispered quietly.

I thought about the promise I had made to my mother, the promise that had brought me to this moment. I would go to India. I would see the land of our ancestors. I would find a way to start over. And I would bring her with me, someday.

I will not let you down, Ma, I thought. *I will not let you down.*

When we landed in the United States, I had a few hours to wait before my connecting flight to India. I walked through the airport, trying to stay calm, trying not to think about what might happen if someone from the gangs had followed me. But I saw no familiar faces, no men in dark suits, no one who seemed to be watching me.

The airport was a world of its own—a sprawling labyrinth of terminals and corridors, filled with travellers from every corner of the globe. I heard languages I did not recognise, saw faces of every colour and ethnicity, smelled foods from a dozen different cuisines. It was overwhelming, disorienting, but also exhilarating. I was no longer in Guyana. I was no longer trapped. I was on my way to a new life.

I found a quiet corner and sat down, pulling out my phone to check for messages. There was nothing from Mr. Narinedatt, nothing from Ramnarine, nothing from my mother. I had told them not to call, not to text, not to reach out. It was safer that way.

But I could not help feeling lonely. I was surrounded by thousands of people, yet I had never felt more alone. I was a woman without a country, a daughter without a mother, a traveller without a destination. I was adrift in a sea of strangers, and I had no idea where I would land.

I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer. *Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity, please guide me. Hanuman, protector of the faithful, please protect me. Ganesh, remover of obstacles, please clear the path before me. I am lost, and I need your help. Please, please, help me find my way.*

When I opened my eyes, I felt a sense of calm settle over me. I was not alone. My ancestors were with me. My mother was with me. The gods were with me. And I would not let them down.

I boarded the Air India flight with a sense of relief. The plane was filled with people who looked like me—brown

skin, dark eyes, hair that curled and waved. They spoke languages I recognised, ate foods I had grown up with, and laughed at jokes I understood. For the first time in my life, I felt as though I was surrounded by my people.

The flight attendant welcomed me aboard in Hindi, her voice warm and friendly. I found my seat and settled in, watching as the plane filled with passengers. The woman next to me was elderly, dressed in a sari, her silver hair pulled back into a bun, her hands folded in her lap. She smiled at me, and I smiled back.

"First time going to India?" she asked, her voice soft, her accent familiar.

"Yes," I said. "First time."

"Ah, you'll love it," she said. "India is not a place—it's a feeling. It gets into your bones, your blood, your heart. Once you go, you'll never be the same."

I nodded, feeling tears prick at my eyes. "I've heard that before."

"It's true," she said. "My grandmother used to say that India is like a river. You can try to resist it, but it will carry you where it wants you to go. You just have to surrender."

I thought about her words. I had been fighting for so long, struggling against the current, trying to stay afloat. Perhaps it was time to surrender. Perhaps it was time to let the river carry me.

The flight attendant came by with a cart of food, and I chose a vegetarian meal—rice, dal, vegetables, and a small

portion of yogurt. The food was simple but delicious, and I ate with more appetite than I had in weeks. The woman next to me watched with a satisfied smile, nodding approvingly.

"You eat like you're hungry," she said. "That's good. You'll need your strength for India."

"I'm nervous," I admitted. "I don't know what to expect."

"Expect nothing," she said. "India will show you what it wants you to see. Just be open. Be humble. And let the country teach you."

I nodded, her words settling into my heart like a seed planted in fertile soil. I would be open. I would be humble. I would let India teach me.

The flight attendants dimmed the lights, and most of the passengers settled in for the night. I leaned my head against the window and stared out at the darkness below. The clouds had cleared, and I could see the lights of cities scattered across the landscape like jewels on black velvet. They were tiny, fragile, beautiful—proof of the millions of lives being lived below, each one a story, each one a dream.

I thought about my own story, my own dream. I had come so far and overcome so much. I had survived the gangs, the threats, and the sleepless nights. I had escaped the prison of my apartment and the cage of my fear. I had boarded a plane and flown halfway around the world. I was still fighting. Still surviving. Still hoping.

And I was not finished yet.

PART TWO: THE ARRIVAL

Indira Gandhi International Airport, New Delhi
August 2022

Chapter Six: The Landing

I closed my eyes and let the hum of the engines lull me to sleep. For the first time in months, I slept without fear. I slept without nightmares. I slept with the knowledge that I was safe, that I was on my way, that I was finally free.

When I woke, the first light of dawn was creeping over the horizon. The sky was a pale blue, streaked with gold and pink, and below me, I could see the outline of a vast landmass emerging from the clouds. It was India. I knew it in my bones, in my blood, in my heart.

I pressed my face against the window, my breath fogging the glass. I could see mountains in the distance. I could see rivers winding through green valleys, their waters gleaming in the morning light. I could see villages and cities, roads and fields, millions of lives being lived below.

I was here. I had finally arrived.

The plane began its descent, and I felt a surge of emotion so powerful that I could not contain it as I watched Delhi spread out beneath me. Tears streamed down my face, hot and unstoppable. I was coming home to a place I had never been, a place I had always known, a place that had been calling to me for as long as I could remember.

“I'm here, Ma,” I whispered. “I'm here.”

The plane touched down at Indira Gandhi International Airport at 4 AM local time with a gentle bump, and the passengers burst into applause. It was a tradition, I had heard, a way of thanking the pilots for a safe journey. I

joined in, clapping my hands, feeling a sense of joy and relief unlike anything I had experienced before.

I had been flying for what felt like days—from Guyana to the United States, from the United States to India—and I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

We taxied to the gate, and the seatbelt sign flickered off. The passengers began to rise, gathering their belongings and preparing to disembark. I stayed in my seat for a moment, taking it all in. I was in India. I had made it. The dream was real.

The woman next to me placed a hand on my arm, her eyes warm and kind. "Welcome home, beta," she said. "Welcome home."

I smiled through my tears, and I felt a sense of peace settle over me. I was home. I was finally home.

I gathered my bag and stood, joining the stream of passengers heading for the exit. As I stepped off the plane, the air hit me—warm and humid, carrying the scent of spices and incense and something else, something I could not name. Perhaps it was the scent of India, the scent of home.

I walked through the jetway, my heart pounding with excitement. I was in India. I was finally in India. And nothing would ever be the same.

The airport was a chaos—beautiful, overwhelming chaos. Hundreds of people were everywhere, moving in every direction, their voices rising in a cacophony of languages. I had expected that. I had read about Indian airports, about

the crowds, the noise, and the confusion. But nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it—the press of bodies, the shouts of porters, the blare of announcements, the smell of spices, sweat, and jet fuel mingling together in the humid air. I saw families reuniting, their embraces fierce and joyful. I saw businessmen in suits, their faces set in expressions of determination. I saw travellers like me, their eyes wide with wonder, their hearts full of anticipation.

I made my way through the crowds, following the signs to immigration. The line was long, but I did not mind. I was in India. I had all the time in the world.

When I reached the counter, the officer looked at my passport, then at me, then back at my passport. He asked me a few questions—where I was from, why I was visiting, and how long I planned to stay—and I answered them truthfully. He stamped my passport and handed it back to me with a smile.

"Welcome to India," he said.

I walked through the gate, my heart soaring. I was in India. I had made it. The dream was real.

I walked toward the arrival hall, scanning the crowd for a familiar face. And there he was—Mr. Narinedatt, standing near the back of the crowd, his face lit up with a warm smile. Next to him stood a younger man, tall and lean, with dark hair and sharp eyes.

"Miss Devi!" Mr. Narinedatt called out, waving his hand. "Over here! Welcome to India!"

I walked toward him, my legs trembling, my eyes filling with tears. I could barely speak. "Mr. Narinedatt," I said, my voice cracking. "I don't know how to thank you. I don't know what to say."

"Say nothing," he said, pulling me into a warm embrace. "You're here. That's what matters. Everything else will be fine."

He stepped back and gestured to the younger man. "This is my driver, Mr. Ravindra. He'll be taking care of you during your stay. He knows the city well, and he'll make sure you get wherever you need to go."

Mr. Ravindra extended his hand, and I shook it. His grip was firm, and his smile warm. "Welcome to India, madam," he said, his accent carrying the lilting cadence of Punjabi. "It's an honour to meet you. Mr. Narinedatt has told me so much about you."

"I'm honoured to meet you too," I said, feeling overwhelmed. "I can't believe I'm actually here."

"Believe it," Mr. Narinedatt said, putting his arm around my shoulder. "You're here, and everything is going to be wonderful. Now come, let's get your bags and go home."

We walked through the airport, and I felt like I was floating. I was in India. I was finally in India. The land of my ancestors, the land of my dreams, the land that had been calling to me for as long as I could remember.

I was home.

Chapter Seven: The Drive

The car was a sleek black BMW, air-conditioned and comfortable. I sat in the back seat next to Mr. Narinedatt, while Mr. Ravindra drove. The streets of Delhi were quiet at this hour, the city still sleeping. The lights were dim, the roads were empty, and the world felt still and peaceful.

"Tell me about the flight," Mr. Narinedatt said, leaning back in his seat. "How was it?"

"Long," I said, laughing. "I feel like I've been in the air forever. But it was good. I was on an Air India flight, and the people were wonderful. Everyone was so kind."

"Air India is a good airline," he said, nodding. "You'll find that Indians are a hospitable people. We take care of our own."

"Your own?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

He smiled. "You're one of us now, Devi. You've come home."

I felt tears sting my eyes again. "I've always wanted to feel like that," I said softly. "Like I belonged somewhere. Like I had a home."

"You do," he said. "And India will show you that. It will show you who you really are."

The car drove on through the quiet morning, past neighbourhoods and empty streets. Mr. Ravindra navigated the winding roads with ease; his eyes focused on the path ahead. I watched the city go by, taking in the

sights, sounds, and smells, feeling a sense of peace settle over me.

The streets of Delhi unfolded before me like a waking dream as we drove through the city. I rested my cheek against the cool glass and gazed out, drinking in every detail. The city was a tapestry of contrasts—ancient and modern, rich and poor, sacred and profane. I saw crumbling colonial buildings standing alongside gleaming glass towers. I saw street vendors sleeping on their carts, their bodies curled up beneath thin blankets. I saw stray dogs nosing through piles of garbage, their ribs visible through patchy fur. I saw temples, mosques, and churches, their spires and domes reaching toward the sky like hands clasped in prayer.

The air was thick with smells—the sweet scent of jasmine, the earthy aroma of wet soil, the sharp tang of diesel exhaust, the smoky perfume of burning incense. It was overwhelming, intoxicating, and beautiful. I breathed it in, feeling it fills my lungs, feeling it becomes a part of me.

I thought about my mother, about the stories she had told me. She had described India in such vivid detail that I felt like I had already been here, like I was simply returning to a place I had always known. She had spoken of the bustling streets of Delhi, the quiet villages of Uttar Pradesh, and the sacred waters of the Ganges. She had painted a picture of a country that was chaotic and beautiful, overwhelming and serene, broken and whole.

India is not a place, she had said. *It's a feeling. It's a heartbeat. It's a prayer.*

I understood now what she had meant. The city pulsed with a rhythm that I could feel in my bones, a rhythm that matched the beating of my heart. It was as if India was singing to me, calling to me, welcoming me home.

I turned to Mr. Narinedatt, my curiosity getting the better of me. "How long have you been in India?" I asked. "You seem so... comfortable here. Like you've always been here."

He smiled, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. "I've been here for nearly a decade," he said. "I came as a diplomat, initially assigned to the High Commission for a few years. But India has a way of holding onto you. I extended my stay, then extended it again, and now I can't imagine leaving."

"It must be wonderful," I said, my voice filled with longing. "To have a place that feels like home."

"It is," he said. "But it took time. It took patience. It took a willingness to let go of everything I thought I knew and embrace something new. India has a way of breaking you down and rebuilding you, piece by piece. It's not always easy, but it's always worth it."

I nodded, absorbing his words. I had been broken down—by fear, by loss, by the weight of everything I had endured. Perhaps India would rebuild me. Perhaps I would emerge stronger, wiser, and more whole.

Mr. Ravindra drove with practiced ease, navigating the winding streets with the confidence of someone who had done it a thousand times before. He was a quiet man, his

eyes focused on the road, his hands steady on the wheel. But every now and then, he would glance at me in the rear-view mirror, his eyes warm with curiosity and kindness.

"You must be tired, madam," he said, his voice soft. "It's a long journey from Guyana."

"Exhausted," I admitted. "But also excited. I've been dreaming of this for so long."

"And now you're here," he said. "India is a country that dreams with you. It will give you what you need, even if you don't know what that is yet."

His words stayed with me as we drove, settling into my heart like a seed planted in fertile soil. I was a dreamer, and India was a land of dreams. Perhaps, together, we would create something beautiful.

We drove through neighbourhoods that seemed to grow more affluent as we went. The streets widened, the buildings grew taller, and the lights grew brighter. The cars that passed us were newer, sleeker, their drivers dressed in crisp shirts. The people walking on the sidewalks were better dressed, their faces more relaxed, their steps more leisurely.

This was a different India, an India of wealth and privilege, of opportunity and success. It was an India that existed alongside poverty and chaos, an India that reminded me that the country was a land of contrasts, contradictions, and endless possibilities.

I thought about my own journey, about the life I had left behind. I had been poor, struggling, and desperate. I had been a woman without a country, without a future, without hope. But now, sitting in the back of a sleek black sedan, driving through the streets of New Delhi, I felt like I was entering a new world, a world where anything was possible.

Mr. Narinedatt leaned forward, pointing out the window. "That's the Lodhi Gardens," he said. "A beautiful park, filled with ancient tombs and lush greenery. You'll have to visit it during your stay. It's one of my favourite places in the city."

I followed his gaze, taking in the sight of the gardens in the moonlight. The trees were dark silhouettes against the sky, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. The tombs were ancient, their stones weathered by centuries of sun and rain. I could see the faint outlines of pathways winding through the grounds, lit by soft golden lights.

"It's beautiful," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe I'm really here."

"Believe it," Mr. Narinedatt said. "You're here, and this is just the beginning. There's so much more to see."

We continued driving, passing through neighbourhoods that grew quieter and more exclusive. The buildings became larger, more elegant, their facades adorned with intricate carvings and ornate balconies. The streets were lined with trees, their branches forming a canopy that filtered the sunlight into soft golden patches on the ground.

"This is where I live," Mr. Narinedatt said, gesturing toward the window. "It's a gated community, very secure. You'll be safe here."

I looked out the window, my eyes widening at the sight of the gated community. The gates were tall and made of wrought iron, flanked by armed guards in crisp uniforms. The buildings beyond were modern and elegant, their frontages gleaming in the soft glow of streetlights. The streets were clean and quiet, the gardens manicured and lush. The air smelled of jasmine and fresh grass, and the only sound was the chirping of crickets and the distant hum of the city beyond the walls.

This was a world away from the Georgetown I had left behind. It was a world of safety and comfort, of privilege and peace. I had never imagined I would be here, in a place like this, surrounded by such beauty and security.

Mr. Ravindra rolled down his window and spoke to the guard, who nodded and waved us through. The gates opened slowly, and we drove into a world that felt like a different country altogether.

"Welcome to your new home," Mr. Narinedatt said, smiling. "This is the community where I live. You'll be staying with me until you get settled."

"It's beautiful," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe this is real."

"It's real," he said.

We drove to the far end of the community, where a large villa stood surrounded by trees and flowers. The house

was three storeys tall, with a terrace on the roof and a garden at the front. It was elegant, tasteful, and undeniably luxurious.

"This is my home," Mr. Narinedatt said, pointing to his house. "And this is where you'll be staying. I hope you like it."

"I love it," I said. "I can't believe this is happening. I can't believe any of this is happening."

"Believe it," he said, his voice gentle. "You're safe now. You're home."

We got out of the car, and Mr. Ravindra helped me with my bags. I stood in front of the house, staring up at it. I felt my eyes grow wet with tears. I had never felt so overwhelmed, so grateful, or so hopeful.

A security guard—a young man with a kind face—came out of the house to greet us. He was tall and lean, with a warm smile and bright eyes.

"Welcome, madam," he said, bowing slightly. "I'm Ravi. It's my honour to serve you."

"Thank you, Ravi," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you."

Mr. Narinedatt put his arm around my shoulder. "Come inside," he said. "Let me show you to your room. You need to rest."

We walked through the front door, and I stepped into a world that took my breath away. The interior of the house was spacious and elegantly decorated, with high ceilings,

marble floors, soft lighting, and tasteful furnishings. The walls were adorned with paintings and photographs, each one telling a story. The air was cool and fragrant, carrying the scent of sandalwood and roses.

I followed Mr. Narinedatt up a flight of stairs, my feet silent on the soft carpet. He led me to a room at the end of the hallway, opening the door to reveal a space that was both beautiful and welcoming.

The room was spacious and elegantly furnished, with a large bed covered in crisp white linens, a writing desk, and a wardrobe. The walls were painted in soft shades of cream and gold, and the windows looked out onto the garden below. Attached to the room was a small bathroom with a modern shower and sink.

"Everything is set up for you," Mr. Narinedatt said. "There are clean towels in the bathroom, and fresh clothes in the wardrobe. If you need anything, just call Ravi or Sunita."

"Sunita?" I asked.

"She's the housemaid. She'll be taking care of you during your stay. She's very sweet—you'll like her."

I nodded, feeling overwhelmed. "Thank you, Mr. Narinedatt. I don't know how to repay you."

"By being happy," he said, his voice soft. "By making the most of this opportunity. By finding yourself in India."

He left, and I stood alone in the room, listening to the sound of his footsteps fading down the hallway. I walked

to the window and looked out at the garden below, at the flowers swaying in the breeze.

I had finally arrived. I was finally home.

I took a long, hot shower, feeling the water wash away the grime and fatigue of the journey. The soap was scented with sandalwood, and it smelled like incense and dreams. I let the water run over my hair, my face, and my body, feeling the tension and fear of the past months slowly begin to dissolve.

When I was done, I wrapped myself in a soft towel and lay down on the bed. The sheets were crisp and cool, and the pillows were soft and plush. My eyes fluttered closed, and for the first time in months, the knot in my chest loosened just enough for me to breathe.

I thought about the journey that had brought me here—the threats, the fear, the hope, the escape. I thought about my mother, about the dream that had carried her through her life, about the promise I had made to her. I thought about Mr. Narinedatt, about his kindness, his generosity, and his willingness to help a stranger.

Finally, I was in India, and I was ready to discover who I really was.

I let the tears fall, letting them wash away the fear, the pain, and the loneliness. And then I let sleep take me, dreaming of India—of its colours, sounds, and smells; of its beauty and its chaos; of the land that had been calling to me for so long.

When I woke, the sun was shining through the curtains, casting a warm, golden glow across the room. I stretched, feeling a sense of peace and contentment that I had not felt in years.

I rose from the bed and walked to the window, looking out at the garden below. The flowers were in full bloom, their petals glowing in the morning light. A bird was singing somewhere, its melody sweet and clear. The air was cool and fresh, carrying the scent of jasmine and dew.

I smiled, feeling a sense of joy and gratitude that I could not put into words. I sensed that everything was going to be okay.

I dressed in the clothes that had been provided for me—a soft cotton kurta and jeans—and made my way downstairs. The house was quiet, but I could hear the sound of someone moving in the kitchen. I walked in and found Sunita, the housemaid, preparing breakfast.

"Good morning, Didi," she said, using the Hindi honorific for an elder sister. "I hope you slept well."

"I slept wonderfully," I said, returning her smile. "Everything is so beautiful. I can't believe I'm here."

She nodded, her eyes twinkling. "India is a wonderful country. You will love it. Now sit down and eat. I've made you some parathas and aloo sabzi."

The breakfast was delicious—flaky, golden parathas filled with layers of butter, served with a fragrant spiced potato curry with cumin and ginger. I ate with enthusiasm,

savouring every bite. Sunita watched me with a satisfied expression, clearly pleased that I was enjoying her cooking.

"Thank you, Sunita," I said when I was done. "Everything was wonderful."

"You are welcome, Didi," she said. "If you need anything, just call me. I'll be here all day."

The delicious parathas and aloo sabzi had filled my stomach with a comfort I hadn't felt in months. But despite the excitement coursing through my veins, a profound exhaustion had settled deep into my bones—the kind of weariness that comes from eighteen hours of flying across oceans and continents, from countless hours in cramped seats and sleepless nights, from the relentless adrenaline that had kept me going for so long. I could feel my eyelids growing heavy, my body finally demanding the rest it had been denied. I excused myself, promising Sunita I would see her later, and made my way back upstairs to the beautiful room that had been prepared for me. The bed looked impossibly inviting, its crisp white linens and plush pillows calling out to me like a sanctuary. I lay down, still in my kurta, and within moments, I was drifting into a deep, dreamless sleep—the first truly peaceful rest I had experienced since before the threats began, since before fear had become my constant companion, since before my life had been upended by forces beyond my control.

Chapter Eight: The Food

I woke up to the sound of my phone buzzing on the nightstand. The room was dark, the only light filtering through the curtains from the distant glow of the city beyond. For a moment, I was disoriented, unsure of where I was—the soft sheets beneath me, the unfamiliar scent of sandalwood in the air, the gentle hum of the air conditioning. Then the memories came flooding back: the flight, the arrival, the drive through the sleeping city, the beautiful room that had been prepared for me.

I reached for my phone, my fingers clumsy with sleep, and squinted at the bright screen. A message from Mr. Narinedatt glowed in the darkness:

I've left dinner for you in the kitchen. I assumed you would like Indian food. Let me know if you need anything. Welcome to India.

I smiled, a warmth spreading through my chest that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room. He had thought of everything—even my hunger, even my exhaustion, even my unspoken need for comfort. I checked the time on my phone and was surprised to see that I had slept for nearly six hours. The sun had long since set, and the city had settled into its night-time rhythm. I had slept through the afternoon and into the evening.

I stretched, feeling the pleasant ache in my muscles that comes from a deep, uninterrupted sleep. The bed was impossibly comfortable, the pillows soft and supportive, the sheets cool against my skin. After a long time, I had

slept without nightmares, without fear and the constant vigilance that had become my way of life. I felt almost like a new person, as if the sleep had washed away the layers of exhaustion and fear that had accumulated over the past months.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, my feet sinking into the plush carpet. A soft robe had been placed on the chair near the window—a beautiful silk garment in a deep shade of burgundy, embroidered with delicate gold threads along the edges. I wrapped it around myself, feeling the luxurious fabric against my skin, and made my way out of the room.

The house was quiet, the only sounds being the soft hum of the air conditioning and the distant chirping of crickets from the garden outside. The hallway was dimly lit, with small sconces casting warm pools of golden light on the walls. I walked slowly, taking in the details I had been too tired to notice the night before—the elegant paintings, the carefully arranged flowers, the subtle scent of incense that seemed to permeate every corner of the house.

I made my way down the stairs, my hand gliding along the polished wooden banister. The living room was bathed in soft lamplight, the furniture arranged in comfortable groupings that invited conversation and relaxation. I paused for a moment, taking it all in, feeling a sense of wonder that this beautiful place was my home, at least for now.

The kitchen was at the back of the house, a spacious room with modern appliances and warm wooden cabinets. A

small light was on above the stove, casting a gentle glow over the countertops. And there, on the large wooden table in the centre of the room, was a spread of food that made my mouth water and my eyes widen in amazement.

There was fragrant biryani, the rice golden and fluffy, layered with tender pieces of chicken and a symphony of spices that released their aroma into the air—cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and saffron. The meat was perfectly cooked, falling apart at the touch of a fork, its juices mingling with the rice to create a dish that was both hearty and elegant.

There was creamy dal, rich with butter and garlic, its surface drizzled with a swirl of fresh cream and sprinkled with chopped coriander. The lentils had been cooked until they were soft and velvety, their earthy flavour enhanced by the slow-simmering process that had transformed simple ingredients into something extraordinary.

There were fluffy naan breads, charred from the tandoor, their surfaces blistered and golden, their interiors soft and pillowy. They were still warm, and I could see the glisten of butter that had been brushed on top, melting into the bread and creating a richness that was impossible to resist.

And there were sweets—a tray filled with delicacies that looked almost too beautiful to eat. Gulab jamun, soft and syrupy, its golden-brown exteriors soaked in a fragrant rose-water syrup that glistened like liquid amber. Jalebi, crispy and sweet, their orange spirals twisted into intricate patterns that reminded me of the mehndi designs my mother used to paint on my hands. And ras malai, delicate

and creamy, its soft white discs floating in a pool of sweetened milk, garnished with slivers of pistachio and saffron threads.

I stood there for a moment, my hand pressed to my chest, overwhelmed by the generosity and thoughtfulness of the meal. This was not just food—it was a welcome, an embrace, a promise that I was cared for and wanted. Mr. Narinedatt had gone to such trouble, arranging a feast that would remind me of home while introducing me to the flavours of my ancestral land.

I sat down at the table, my legs suddenly weak with emotion. I reached for the biryani first, serving myself a generous portion, the fragrant steam rising to meet my face. I took a bite, and the flavours exploded on my tongue—the warmth of the spices, the tenderness of the chicken, the fluffiness of the rice. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted, even though I had grown up eating Indian food in Guyana. This was different. This was authentic. This was the real thing.

The dal was next, its creaminess coating my tongue, its subtle heat warming my throat. I dipped a piece of naan into it, the soft bread soaking up the rich sauce, and I felt tears streaming down my face. The tears were not of sadness, but of joy—a release of all the tension and fear that had built up over the past months, a letting go of the pain and loss that had haunted me for so long.

I thought about my mother as I ate, about the meals she had cooked for me as a child. She had never been to India, but she had learnt the recipes from her own mother, who

had learnt them from hers, and so on, stretching back through generations to the villages of Uttar Pradesh. My mother had poured her love into every dish she made, her hands working with the skill and precision of someone who had been cooking since she was old enough to hold a ladle. She had taught me to appreciate the flavours, to respect the ingredients, to understand that food was not just sustenance but a connection to our ancestors and our heritage.

“Eat, child,” she would say, pressing a warm roti into my hands. “You need your strength. You have a big day ahead of you.”

I smiled through my tears, remembering her voice, her touch, her love. She had given me so much, and I had promised to honour her by coming to India. Now, sitting in this beautiful kitchen, eating the food of my ancestors, I felt closer to her than I had in years.

I finished the biryani and dal, wiping the last traces of sauce from my plate with a piece of naan. Then I turned to the sweets, sampling each one with the reverence it deserved. The gulab jamun was soft and syrupy, its sweetness balanced by the delicate floral notes of rose water. The jalebi was crispy and sweet, its orange spirals crunching between my teeth, leaving a trail of sugary goodness on my tongue. And the ras malai was divine—light and creamy, with just a hint of cardamom and the subtle crunch of pistachios.

I sat back in my chair, my stomach full, my heart even fuller. I had never felt so nourished, so cared for, so at

peace. The food had been more than a meal—it had been a gift, a gesture of kindness that I would never forget.

When I was done, I called Mr. Narinedatt. The phone rang twice before he picked up, his voice warm and welcoming.

"Thank you," I said, my voice thick with emotion. "The food was amazing. I can't believe how incredible it was."

"I'm glad you liked it," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "You have a lot more of India to see and taste. Get some rest. Tomorrow, the adventure begins."

I smiled, feeling a surge of excitement at the thought of what lay ahead. "I will," I said. "Thank you, Mr. Narinedatt. For everything."

"You're welcome, Devi. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," I said, and I hung up the phone.

I sat there for a moment, the silence of the kitchen wrapping around me like a blanket. The food had filled me, the warmth of the house had enveloped me, and the kindness of Mr. Narinedatt had touched my heart. I was still tired—the journey had taken so much out of me—but I was also hopeful, excited, and ready to embrace whatever India had in store for me.

I rose from the table, my body heavy with the satisfaction of a good meal, and made my way back upstairs. I paused at the window in my room, looking out at the garden below, at the stars twinkling in the dark sky. I thought about my mother, about the promise I had made to her, about the journey that was just beginning.

“I'm here, Ma,” I whispered. “I'm here. And I'm going to make you proud.”

I lay down on the bed, the soft sheets cool against my skin, and closed my eyes. The exhaustion of the journey was still there, but it was no longer a burden—it was a reminder of how far I had come, of everything I had survived, and of the strength I had found within myself.

I smiled, and I let sleep take me, dreaming of the adventures that awaited me in the morning.

Chapter Nine: The First Day

I woke up early the next morning, eager to begin my journey. The sun was just rising over the city, casting a warm golden glow over the streets of New Delhi. The first rays of light streamed through the curtains, painting the room in shades of amber and rose, and I lay there for a moment, simply savouring the feeling of waking up in India. It still felt surreal, like a dream from which I was afraid.

I stretched, feeling the pleasant ache in my muscles from the deep, restful sleep I had enjoyed. The exhaustion of the eighteen-hour flight had finally faded, replaced by a bubbling excitement that made my heart race and my mind whirl with anticipation. Today was the day—the first real day of my journey, the first step into a world I had only ever known through stories and dreams.

I rose from the bed and walked to the window, pushing aside the sheer curtains to gaze out at the garden below. The flowers were in full bloom, their petals glowing in the soft morning light, and a gentle breeze rustled through the leaves of the trees. Birds were singing somewhere, their melodies sweet and clear, and in the distance, I could hear the faint sounds of the city waking up—the distant honk of a horn, the murmur of voices, and the call to prayer from a nearby mosque.

I smiled, feeling a sense of peace and wonder settle over me. I was here. I was really here.

I dressed in the clothes that Mr. Narinedatt had thoughtfully provided—a light cotton kurta in a soft shade of cream, paired with comfortable jeans. The fabric was cool and breathable, perfect for the warm Delhi morning, and I felt a sense of gratitude for his thoughtfulness. He had thought of everything, even the clothes I would wear.

I made my way downstairs, my steps light and eager. The house was quiet, but I could make out the faint rustle of someone moving about in the kitchen, the gentle clatter of pots and pans, and the soft hum of someone singing a Hindi melody. I followed the sound, my curiosity piqued, and walked into the kitchen.

Sunita was there, the housemaid who had been introduced to me the morning before. She was a small woman with a kind face and warm eyes, her silver-streaked hair pulled back in a neat bun, and her sari was a simple but cheerful shade of orange. She moved with the practiced ease of someone who had been cooking for decades, her hands working quickly and efficiently as she prepared breakfast.

"Good morning, Didi," she said, looking up and smiling as I entered. Her voice was soft and melodic, and she once again used the Hindi honorific for elder sister with a warmth that made me feel instantly welcomed. "I hope you slept well."

"I slept wonderfully," I said, returning her smile. "Everything is so beautiful."

She nodded, her eyes twinkling with understanding. "India is a wonderful country. You will love it. Now sit down and

eat. I've made you some parathas and chicken tikka masala."

I took a seat at the small table in the corner of the kitchen, my eyes widening as Sunita placed a plate in front of me. The parathas were flaky and golden, their surfaces glistening with layers of butter that had melted into the roti, creating a richness that was impossible to resist. The chicken tikka masala was a spiced chicken curry, fragrant with cumin, ginger, and other aromatic spices, its vibrant orange colour a feast for the eyes. There was also a small bowl of yogurt, a wedge of lemon, and a handful of fresh coriander leaves.

I took a bite of the paratha, and my eyes closed in pleasure. It was unlike anything I had ever tasted—crispy on the outside, soft and layered on the inside, with a richness that came from the generous amount of butter that had been worked into the dough. I dipped it into the creamy chicken tikka masala, which complemented the flaky paratha perfectly. The spices danced on my tongue—the warmth of the cumin, the slight heat of the ginger, and the earthiness of the turmeric.

Sunita watched me with a look of quiet satisfaction, clearly delighted to see me savouring her food. Her hands rested neatly in front of her, her stance patient and poised, and from time to time, she gave a small, approving nod as I reached for another bite.

"This is incredible," I said, my mouth half-full. "I've never tasted anything like this."

She chuckled softly, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "It's just simple food, Didi. But I'm glad you like it. You need to eat well—you have a long day ahead of you."

I ate with enthusiasm, savouring every bite, feeling the warmth of the food spread through my body. It was more than just breakfast—it was a welcome, a gift, a reminder that I was cared for and wanted. I thought about my mother, about the breakfasts she used to make for me, and I felt a pang of longing mixed with gratitude.

When I was done, I wiped my hands on the napkin and turned to Sunita. "Thank you, Sunita," I said, my voice filled with sincerity. "Everything was wonderful. You're an amazing cook."

"You're welcome, Didi," she said, beaming.

I nodded, rising from the table, feeling energised and ready for whatever the day would bring. I walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, and there, standing by the window with his back to me, was Mr. Narinedatt.

He turned as he heard my footsteps, and I saw that he was dressed in a crisp white shirt and tailored trousers, his silver hair neatly combed, his face lit up with a warm smile. The morning light caught the edges of his face, illuminating the kind lines around his eyes and the gentle curve of his lips.

"Good morning," he said, his voice warm and welcoming. "Are you ready for your first day in India?"

I felt a surge of excitement course through me, chasing away any lingering traces of exhaustion. "More than

ready," I said, my voice bright with anticipation. My heart was racing, my palms were slightly damp, and I could feel a smile spreading across my face that I could not contain.

"Good," he said, his smile widening. "Then let's go. I have someone I want you to meet."

I nodded eagerly, falling into step beside him as he led me toward the front door. Mr. Ravindra was already waiting by the car, the sleek black sedan gleaming in the morning sunlight. The air outside was warm and fragrant, carrying the scent of jasmine and freshly baked bread from a nearby bakery. Birds were chirping in the garden, and the distant hum of the city provided a gentle backdrop to the peaceful morning.

As I settled into the back seat of the car, I felt a sense of anticipation building in my chest. I had no idea who Mr. Narinedatt wanted me to meet, but I trusted him completely. He had already given me so much—safety, comfort, and shelter—and I knew that whoever this person was, they would be kind and welcoming, just like everyone else I had encountered since arriving in India.

The car pulled out of the gated community and onto the busy streets of Delhi. I pressed my face against the window, drinking in every detail of the city that was unfolding before me. The streets were alive with activity—colourful rickshaws weaving through traffic, street vendors calling out their wares, and groups of schoolchildren, their uniforms fresh and crease-free, walking hand in hand. The buildings were a mix of old and new, ancient temples

standing alongside modern glass towers, and crumbling colonial structures next to gleaming shopping malls.

I watched a woman in a beautiful silk sari walk past, her bangles chiming with each step. I saw a man in a saffron robe sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk, his eyes closed in meditation. I heard the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, its melodic tones rising above the noise of the city. Every sight, every sound, every smell was a revelation, and I drank it all in, feeling more alive than I had in months.

"Delhi is a city that never sleeps," Mr. Narinedatt said, his voice warm and conversational. "It has a rhythm all its own—chaotic, beautiful, and endlessly fascinating. You'll find that every corner of this city has a story to tell."

I nodded, unable to tear my gaze away from the window. "It's incredible," I said, my voice filled with wonder. "I've never witnessed anything quite like this before."

"You will see many more incredible things in the days to come," he said. "But for now, let's start with something simple. I want you to meet someone who will help you understand this city—and this country—in a way that I never could."

The car continued through the bustling streets, past markets and temples, past parks and monuments. I watched the city transform around me, the neighbourhoods shifting from affluent to modest, from modern to ancient. Every turn revealed something new, something unexpected, something beautiful.

My heart brimmed with gratitude. This was India and I stood poised to receive whatever came my way.

PART THREE: THE JOURNEY BEGINS

New Delhi

Chapter Ten: Ryan

We drove through the streets of New Delhi, past bustling markets and ancient temples, past modern skyscrapers and colonial-era buildings. The city was alive with colour and noise, and I soaked up every moment, feeling a sense of wonder and excitement that I had never experienced before. Every turn revealed something new—a woman in a vibrant silk sari balancing a basket of flowers on her head, a group of children laughing as they chased a stray dog through the streets, and a street vendor expertly flipping dosas on a hot griddle, the steam rising in fragrant clouds. The air was thick with the mingled scents of spices and incense, diesel exhaust and blooming jasmine, freshly brewed chai and frying samosas. It was overwhelming, intoxicating, and utterly beautiful.

I pressed my face against the cool glass of the window, my eyes wide, my heart racing. I had seen photographs of Delhi, had watched documentaries and films, and had read countless descriptions in books and articles. But nothing—absolutely nothing—had prepared me for the reality of it. The city was a living, breathing entity, pulsing with energy and life. It was chaotic and ordered, ancient and modern, sacred and profane. It was everything I had ever imagined, and so much more.

Mr. Ravindra navigated the winding streets with practiced ease, his hands steady on the wheel, his eyes focused on the road ahead. He seemed to know every shortcut, every hidden alley, and every back route that would get us to our destination faster. The car hummed softly as we

drove, the air conditioning providing a welcome respite from the warmth of the morning sun.

Mr. Narinedatt sat beside me, his posture relaxed, his expression content. He watched me with a gentle smile, clearly enjoying my reaction to the city. "What do you think so far?" he asked, his voice warm with amusement.

"I can't even put it into words," I said, shaking my head in disbelief. "It's like nothing I've ever experienced. It's beautiful, chaotic, overwhelming, and wonderful all at once. I feel like I'm seeing the world for the first time."

He chuckled softly. "That's exactly how I felt when I first arrived here. Delhi has a way of stripping away everything you thought you knew and showing you something new. It's a city that demands your attention, your respect, and your heart. And if you give it those things, it will give you back more than you could ever imagine."

I nodded, absorbing his words. I had already given my heart to India, long before I ever set foot on its soil. It had been calling to me for as long as I could remember, whispering its secrets in the wind, singing its songs in my blood. Now that I was here, I felt like I was finally coming home.

We drove for a while longer, the city unfolding around us in a mixture of colour and movement. I saw ancient temples with towering spires, their walls covered in delicately chiselled motifs and paintings alive with colour. I saw modern glass towers that gleamed in the morning light, their exteriors glowing with an amber sheen, reflecting the sky like mirrors. I saw crumbling colonial

buildings, their faded grandeur a reminder of a bygone era. I saw bustling markets overflowing with goods—brightly coloured fabrics, gleaming brassware, fragrant spices, and fresh produce piled high on wooden carts.

The streets were filled with people from every walk of life—businessmen dressed in sharply pressed suits, their briefcases clutched tightly in their hands; women in elegant saris, their bangles chiming with each step; children in school uniforms, their laughter echoing through the air; and holy men in saffron robes, their faces serene and peaceful. There were rickshaws and bicycles, scooters and cars, all weaving together in a dance that seemed chaotic but somehow worked.

I noticed a group of women sitting by the side of the road, their hands busy weaving garlands of marigolds and roses. The flowers were bright and fragrant, their petals glowing in the morning light. One of the women looked up as we passed, and she smiled at me—a warm, genuine smile that made my heart ache with gratitude. I smiled back, feeling a connection that transcended language and culture.

I saw a man walking a camel down the street, the animal's large feet padding softly on the pavement. I saw a group of musicians playing drums and flutes, their music rising above the noise of the city. I saw a young couple sitting on a park bench, their heads bent together in quiet conversation. Every moment was a story, every face a universe, every sound a melody.

A sudden pricking sensation bloomed behind my eyelids, and I blinked it away, not wanting to miss a single detail. I

had dreamed of this moment for so long, and now it was real. I was here, in India, surrounded by beauty, chaos, and life.

We turned onto a quieter street, the noise of the main road fading behind us. The buildings here were smaller, more intimate, their surfaces painted in soft shades of pastel. Trees lined the sidewalks, their branches forming a canopy that filtered the sunlight into dappled patterns on the ground. The air was cooler here, fresher, carrying the scent of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods.

Mr. Ravindra pulled the car to a stop in front of a small café. It was a charming establishment; its exterior painted in warm shades of terracotta and cream. Colourful umbrellas shaded the outdoor tables, and potted plants lined the entrance, their leaves lush and green. A chalkboard sign stood by the door, its surface covered in elegant handwriting advertising the day's specials.

"This is the place," Mr. Narinedatt said, his voice bright with anticipation. "I hope you're hungry."

I smiled, feeling a flutter of excitement in my chest. "I could always eat," I said, laughing.

We stepped out of the car, and I took a moment to look around. The street was quiet and peaceful; a hidden gem tucked away from the chaos of the city. I could hear the gentle chirping of birds, the soft murmur of conversation from the café, and the distant hum of traffic that seemed miles away. It was the perfect place for a first meeting, a sanctuary of calm in the heart of the bustling city.

Mr. Narinedatt led me toward the café, his steps confident and purposeful. I followed, my heart pounding with anticipation. Who we were about to meet remained a mystery, but I trusted him without reservation. He had shown me nothing but care and generosity, and I felt sure that this next person would show me the same hospitality that had greeted me at every turn in this country.

We stepped through the entrance of the café, and I was immediately struck by its cosy, inviting atmosphere. The interior was small but charming, with wooden tables and mismatched chairs, and shelves lined with books and vintage knick-knacks. The walls were adorned with paintings and photographs, each one telling a story. The air was filled with the rich aroma of coffee and the faint sweetness of baked goods.

A man was waiting for us at a corner table, and he stood as we approached. He was in his forties, I guessed, with a handsome face and a warm smile that seemed to light up the room. He was wearing a navy-blue kurta with gold embroidery that caught the light, its elaborate patterns shimmering with every movement. His hair was thick and black, with a few streaks of silver at the temples that added to his distinguished appearance. He had a neatly trimmed beard that gave him an air of sophistication, and his eyes—warm, intelligent, and kind—sparkled with genuine warmth as he looked at me.

"This is Ryan," Mr. Narinedatt said, introducing us. "He's been my friend since I came to India. He knows everything about Delhi, and he's offered to show you around."

"It's an honour to meet you," Ryan said, standing and extending his hand. His voice was deep and melodic, with a warmth that made me feel instantly at ease. His grip was warm and firm, his handshake confident and sincere. His eyes met mine with genuine warmth, and I felt like he was truly seeing me, truly welcoming me.

"Thank you," I said, shaking his hand. "I'm so grateful to have someone to show me around. I feel like I've been dropped into a whole new world."

He chuckled softly, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "That's exactly how I felt when I first arrived here. But don't worry, Delhi has a way of making you feel at home. You just have to give it a chance."

"Mr. Narinedatt has told me so much about you," I said. "He speaks very highly of you."

"As he does of you," Ryan replied. "I hear you've had quite a journey."

"You have no idea," I said, shaking my head with a rueful smile. The memories of the past months—the threats, the fear, the sleepless nights—flashed through my mind, but I pushed them away. This was a new beginning, and I wanted to focus on the present, on the beauty and wonder of this moment.

"But I'm so glad to be here," I continued, my voice bright with sincerity. "I've dreamed about this my whole life. My mother always wanted to come to India, and I promised her I would see it for the both of us. Now I'm here, and it's even more incredible than I ever imagined."

Ryan nodded, his eyes filled with understanding. "Dreams are meant to come true," he said, his voice soft but certain. "And India is the perfect place for them to do so. It's a land of possibilities, of endless potential. If you open your heart to it, it will give you everything you've ever wanted and more."

I felt a surge of emotion at his words. He understood. He understood the longing, the hope, the dream that had carried me across an ocean. He understood what it meant to be here, to stand on the soil of your ancestors, to feel the weight of history and the promise of the future.

"Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "That means more than you know."

Mr. Narinedatt placed a hand on my shoulder and told me he had to attend to a few matters, leaving me with Ryan at the café. He looked me in the eye and promised I'd be well looked after. Though a small part of me felt nervous being left behind, the sincerity in his voice and the quiet confidence in Ryan's posture told me I had nothing to fear.

Ryan smiled, his eyes warm and kind. "Now," he said, gesturing for me to sit, "what would you like to see first? Delhi is a vast city with a thousand stories to tell. We can visit the Red Fort, the Qutub Minar, the temples, or the markets. Or we can simply wander the streets and see where they take us. The choice is yours."

I felt a surge of excitement at the question. There was so much I wanted to see, so much I wanted to experience. The Red Fort, the Qutub Minar, the Lotus Temple, the

bustling bazaars, the quiet gardens. I wanted to see it all, to soak in every moment, to capture every memory.

"Everything," I said, laughing. "I want to see everything."

Ryan chuckled, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "That's a tall order. But we'll do our best. Delhi has a way of revealing itself slowly, one layer at a time. Let's start with something that will give you a true sense of the city's history and beauty. How about the Red Fort?"

I nodded eagerly, my heart racing with anticipation. "That sounds perfect."

He smiled, rising from his seat. "Then let's go. The adventure begins."

Chapter Eleven: The Historic Sites

The first stop on our tour was the Red Fort. The fort loomed over the city; its massive red sandstone walls a testament to the power and glory of the Mughal Empire. I stood at its entrance, looking up at the towering gates, feeling a sense of awe and reverence that I had never experienced before. The walls seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky, their deep reddish-brown hue glowing in the morning sunlight. The sheer scale of the structure was breath-taking—it was not just a building but a fortress, a palace, a city unto itself.

I could see the elaborate battlements along the top of the walls, the arched windows that dotted the front of the building, and the massive doors that had once welcomed emperors and their armies. The air around me felt charged with history, as if the very stones were whispering secrets from centuries past. I thought about all the people who had stood in this very spot—the emperors and their consorts, the generals and their soldiers, the common people who had come to seek justice or offer tribute. I was standing where history had been made, where empires had risen and fallen, where the course of a nation had been shaped.

"The Red Fort," Ryan said, his voice filled with pride. "Built by the great Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in the 17th century. For centuries, it was the seat of power for the Mughal Empire. It's one of the most important historical sites in India."

I turned to him, my eyes wide with wonder. "Shah Jahan," I repeated, the name rolling off my tongue like a prayer. "The same emperor who built the Taj Mahal?"

"The very same," Ryan confirmed, nodding. "He was a great patron of architecture. The Red Fort was one of his masterpieces, a symbol of his power and his vision. It took nearly a decade to build, and it was designed to be the centre of Mughal rule in India."

We walked through the entrance, passing through the massive gates and into the courtyard beyond. The fort opened up before me like a dream—vast courtyards, elegant pavilions, intricate gardens, and grand halls. The red sandstone walls gave way to white marble in some places, the contrast striking and beautiful. I could see the delicate carvings that adorned every surface, the floral patterns and geometric designs that spoke of a civilization at the height of its artistic achievement.

"These are the *Diwan-i-Aam* and the *Diwan-i-Khas*," Ryan said, gesturing to two grand halls on either side of the courtyard. "The Hall of Public Audiences and the Hall of Private Audiences. In the *Diwan-i-Aam*, the emperor would hear the petitions of his subjects. In the *Diwan-i-Khas*, he would meet with his most trusted advisors and foreign dignitaries."

I walked into the *Diwan-i-Aam*, my footsteps echoing on the marble floor. The hall was vast, its ceiling supported by rows of ornate pillars. At the far end, a raised platform held a throne—a simple but elegant structure that had once been the seat of the most powerful man in India. I

imagined the emperor sitting there, his subjects gathered before him, their voices rising in petition and praise. I imagined the power of judgment and justice, the power to change lives with a single word.

"Can you feel it?" Ryan asked, his voice soft. "The history, the weight of the past. It's almost tangible, isn't it?"

I nodded, unable to find words. The emotion was too strong, too overwhelming. My eyes grew misty, and I blinked the tears away, not wanting to miss a single detail of the beauty around me.

We walked through the fort, exploring its courtyards and halls, its temples and palaces. I marvelled at the intricate marble work, the delicate carvings, and the beautiful mosaics. I could almost imagine the emperors who had walked these halls, the generals and courtiers who had stood in these chambers, and the concubines and queens who had whispered secrets in the shadows.

I saw the Rang Mahal, the Palace of Colours, its walls adorned with vibrant paintings and sophisticated mirror work. I saw the Mumtaz Mahal, a palace dedicated to Shah Jahan's beloved wife, its marble screens carved with such precision that they seemed to shimmer in the light. I saw the gardens, lush and green, their pathways lined with fountains that once danced with water.

I stopped in front of a marble screen, its delicate latticework catching the sunlight. I pressed my fingers against the cool stone, tracing the patterns, feeling the history that pulsed through them. I thought about the hands that had carved this screen, the artisans who had

spent countless hours perfecting every detail. They were gone now, their names lost to history, but their work lived on—a testament to their skill, their dedication, and their love.

"It's incredible," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe I'm actually here."

"Believe it," Ryan said, smiling. "We've barely scratched the surface. So much more lies ahead."

We left the Red Fort and drove through the bustling streets of Delhi, the city unfolding around us like a living tapestry. I rested my face against the window, my eyes drinking in everything outside, watching the scenes pass by—street vendors selling fresh fruit and steaming chai, women in colourful saris carrying baskets on their heads, and children playing cricket in the narrow lanes. The sights, the sounds, the smells—they were all a revelation, and I drank them in, feeling more alive than I had in months.

Our next stop was the Qutub Minar. The towering minaret rose into the sky, its red sandstone walls covered in sophisticated calligraphy and carvings. I stood at its base, looking up, feeling the weight of history pressing down on me. The minaret was impossibly tall, its height making me feel small and insignificant. But it was not a feeling of insignificance—it was a feeling of connection, of being part of something larger than myself.

"This was built in the 12th century," Ryan said, his voice filled with reverence. "It's one of the oldest surviving

monuments in Delhi. It's a symbol of the arrival of Islam in India."

I walked around the monument, taking in the details—the floral patterns, the Arabic inscriptions, and the detailed brickwork. The carvings were exquisite, their lines sharp and precise, their designs complex and beautiful. I could see the confluence of Persian and Indian art, the fusion of cultures that had shaped the history of this land.

My fingertips brushed against the cold stone, tracing the patterns left by hands long since stilled. I wondered about their lives—their joys, their pains, their quiet hopes—all lived out in the presence of this tower. I felt oddly close to them, as if time had folded and we were standing side by side, sharing the same breath.

"India is a land of many cultures," I said softly. "Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian. All of them have left their mark."

"Yes," Ryan said, his voice thoughtful. "That's what makes India so beautiful. It's a melting pot of cultures, a medley of traditions. You can see it everywhere—in our temples and mosques, in our food and music, in our festivals and daily life."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words deep in my heart. India was not just a country—it was a living, breathing panorama of history and culture. It was a place where the past and the present coexisted, where ancient traditions thrived alongside modern innovations. It was a place where diversity was not just tolerated but celebrated, where differences were seen as strengths rather than weaknesses.

I looked up at the Qutub Minar, its shadow stretching across the ground like a finger pointing toward the sky. I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. She had never seen this place, had never walked these grounds, had never touched these stones. But I was here, seeing it for her, feeling it for her, carrying her with me in every step.

"This is for you, Ma," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "This is for you."

We spent the rest of the day exploring the historic sites of Delhi. We visited the Lotus Temple, its flower-like shape rising from the ground like a prayer made manifest. We walked through its gardens, their pathways lined with fountains and flowers, and we sat in its silent halls, feeling a sense of peace settle over us.

We visited the India Gate, a war memorial that honoured the fallen soldiers of India's wars. The names of the dead were carved into its walls, their sacrifices etched into stone for eternity. I stood before it, feeling a sense of gratitude for the courage and bravery of those who had given their lives for their country.

We visited the Jama Masjid, one of the largest mosques in India. Its towering spires and vast courtyard were a testament to the grandeur of Mughal architecture. We removed our shoes and walked through its halls, the cool marble beneath our feet a relief from the heat of the day. The air was filled with the sound of prayers, the faithful gathered in rows, their heads bowed in devotion.

"India is a land of faith," Ryan said as we left the mosque. "Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Buddhists—they all have a place here. They worship in their own ways, but they share a common love for this land. That's what makes India special."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. I had seen the temples and the mosques, the churches and the gurdwaras. I had heard the calls to prayer and the chants of devotion. I had felt the presence of something sacred, something transcendent, something that bound all of these people together.

"It's beautiful," I said. "I've never experienced anything like it."

"India has a way of unveiling the world's hidden splendour," Ryan murmured. "Let it touch your soul, and it will transform you completely."

I smiled, feeling a sense of gratitude for the journey that had brought me here. I had come to India seeking answers, seeking connection, seeking home. And I was finding all of it, one moment at a time.

As the sun began to set, we made our way back to the car. The sky was painted in shades of orange and pink, the city bathed in a soft, golden light. I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a contentment that I had not felt in months. I had seen so much, experienced so much, learnt so much. And I knew that this was just the beginning.

"Thank you, Ryan," I said as we headed toward the car. "Today was incredible. I can't thank you enough for showing me all of this."

"It was my pleasure," he said, his voice warm. "Seeing Delhi through your eyes has been a gift. You have a way of making everything feel new and wonderful."

I smiled, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks. "I just want to soak it all in," I said. "I feel like I've been waiting my whole life for this."

"And now you're here," he said. "The journey is just beginning. There's so much more to see, so much more to experience. And I'll be here to help you every step of the way."

Tears welled in my eyes again, but this time they were tears of gratitude. I had been given so much—kindness, generosity, friendship. And I knew that I would carry these moments with me for the rest of my life.

India was not just a place. It was a feeling. A homecoming. A promise fulfilled.

Chapter Twelve: The Markets

Our final stop of the day was a market in the heart of Delhi. The market was a chaotic symphony of noise and colour—vendors calling out their wares, customers haggling over prices, children running through the crowds. The smell of spices, incense, and fried food hung in the air, and I felt a sense of excitement and joy that I had never felt before.

I stepped out of the car and was immediately enveloped by the energy of the market. It was as if I had been dropped into the middle of a living, breathing organism—pulsing with life, vibrating with sound, shimmering with colour. The noise was overwhelming. Somewhere in the distance, a man was singing, his voice rising above the chaos in a melody that was both haunting and beautiful.

"This is the real India," Ryan said, gesturing around us. His voice was filled with pride and affection, his eyes shining with the joy of sharing this experience with me. "The markets are the heart of our country. They are where we live, eat, work, and play. They are where you'll find the true essence of India."

I nodded, unable to find the words. The market was overwhelming, but in the best possible way. It was raw and authentic, a place where the masks of formality fell away and people revealed their true selves. I could see it in the faces around me—the determination of the vendors, the joy of the shoppers, and the curiosity of the

children. This was not a place for tourists or outsiders. This was a place for life, for connection, and for community.

I walked through the market, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells. I saw stalls selling everything—silk saris in every colour imaginable, their fabrics shimmering in the afternoon light. I saw gold jewellery glinting in glass cases, its intricate designs speaking of centuries of craftsmanship. I saw fresh vegetables piled high on wooden carts—bright red tomatoes, deep green spinach, and golden yellow turmeric roots. I saw exotic spices in burlap sacks—cinnamon sticks and cardamom pods, whole cloves and star anise, their fragrances mingling in the air like a symphony of flavour.

I saw hand-carved statues of Hindu gods and goddesses, their faces serene and beautiful. I saw beautiful paintings of landscapes and temples, their colours vibrant and alive. I saw brass lamps and copper pots, wooden toys, and clay diyas, all arranged in a riot of colour and texture.

I saw women in colourful saris, their bangles chiming as they shopped. Their movements were graceful, their laughter melodic, and their faces radiant with the joy of simple pleasures. I saw men in lungis and turbans, their faces weathered by the sun, their hands calloused from years of honest work. They moved with purpose, their eyes sharp, their voices loud as they negotiated prices with the vendors.

I saw children running and laughing, their faces bright with joy. They chased each other through the crowds, their small bodies weaving between the legs of adults with the

ease of practice. Their laughter was infectious, and I found myself smiling despite the chaos around me. They were the heart of the market, the spark that kept it alive.

But I couldn't ignore the poverty that surrounded me—the cracked pavements, the thin clothing, and the tired eyes of the elderly. I saw it in the makeshift shelters cobbled together from scraps of wood and faded tarpaulin, their interiors barely visible through gaps in the fabric. I saw it in the faces of the children—their eyes bright but their bodies thin, their clothes patched and frayed. I saw it in the mothers cradling infants on the pavement, their gazes distant yet somehow hopeful. The stallholders called out their wares with practiced cheer, but behind them, I caught glimpses of families huddled together, their possessions reduced to a few worn pots and frayed blankets. The market was a place of transaction, but for many, it was also a place of survival.

I stopped at a stall selling bangles—thin circles of glass and metal in every colour imaginable. I remembered my dream, the one that had haunted me for so long. The old woman in the marketplace, the crimson bangle she had placed in my palm. I touched the bangles at the stall, feeling their smooth surfaces beneath my fingers, and I felt a connection to that dream, to that moment, and to the promise that had guided me here.

I bought a small set of bangles in shades of deep blue—colour that reminded me of the Indian flag, of hope, and of courage. I slipped them onto my wrist, feeling their weight and their warmth. They were a reminder of where I had

come from and where I was going, a symbol of the journey that had brought me here.

Ryan led me deeper into the market, past rows of stalls and crowds of people. He seemed to know everyone—the vendors, the customers, and the children who ran past. He greeted them with warmth and familiarity, and they responded with kind smiles, their faces lighting up at the sight of him.

"Ryan bhai! How are you?" one vendor called out, a large man with a beaming smile and hands covered in flour.

"Never better, Kamal bhai!" Ryan replied, clasping the man's hand in a warm greeting. "I've brought a visitor today—a friend from Guyana. She's seeing India for the first time."

Kamal's eyes widened with interest. "Guyana?" he said; his voice filled with curiosity. "A long way from home. But you are welcome here, beta. India is your home now."

I smiled, feeling warmth spread through my chest. "Thank you," I said. "Everyone has been so kind. I feel like I've been welcomed into a family."

"That's because you have," Kamal said, his voice sincere. "We are all one family in this market. We take care of our own."

He pressed a small packet into my hands—a mixture of spices, fragrant and colourful. "A gift," he said. "For good luck on your journey."

I thanked him, my voice choked with emotion, and tucked the packet into my bag. It was a small gesture, but it meant so much. It was a reminder that kindness was everywhere, that generosity was a language that transcended borders.

We continued walking through the market, and I felt myself being drawn deeper into its embrace. The vendors called out to me, their voices warm and welcoming.

"Madam! Madam! Look at these beautiful saris—perfect for a special occasion!"

"Fresh mangoes! Sweet as sugar! Try one, just one!"

"Bangles, bangles! Beautiful bangles for beautiful hands!"

I smiled and shook my head, but I could not resist the pull of the market. I stopped at a stall selling fresh fruit, its tables piled high with mangoes, lychees, sitaphals, and jamuns. The vendor, an old woman with silver hair and a kind face, pressed a slice of mango into my hand.

"Eat," she said, her voice firm but affectionate. "It's good for you."

I took a bite, and the sweetness exploded on my tongue. It was unlike any mango I had ever tasted—ripe and juicy, with a flavour that was both familiar and new. I closed my eyes, savouring the moment, feeling a sense of gratitude for this simple pleasure.

"Thank you," I said, opening my eyes. "It's delicious."

The old woman smiled, her eyes crinkling at the corners. "You have a good heart," she said. "I can see it in your face. You will find what you are looking for in India."

I felt a shiver run down my spine. Her words echoed the dream, of the old woman in the marketplace who had placed the crimson bangle in my palm. Was this a coincidence, or was it something more? I did not know, but I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a sense that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

We walked further into the market, and I saw a group of women sitting in a circle, their hands busy as they wove garlands of marigolds and roses. The flowers were bright and fragrant, their petals glowing in the afternoon light. I stopped to watch them, mesmerised by the skill and grace of their movements.

They worked quickly, their fingers deft and precise, their conversations flowing like a gentle stream. One of the women looked up and smiled at me, her eyes warm and welcoming.

"Would you like to learn?" she asked, her voice soft. "It's easy. You just have to let your hands do the work."

I nodded, and she gestured for me to sit beside her. She handed me a string of flowers and showed me how to thread them together. My fingers were clumsy at first, but she was patient, guiding my hands with gentle corrections.

"Like this," she said, her voice soft. "Slowly, carefully. Let the flowers guide you."

I followed her instructions, and soon I was weaving the garland, my movements becoming more confident. The flowers were soft and fragrant; their petals cool against my skin. I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a sense of connection to the women around me.

When I was done, the woman took the garland from my hands and placed it around my neck. The weight of the flowers was light, but the gesture was heavy with meaning. I was being welcomed, accepted, and embraced.

"Now you are one of us," she said, her eyes shining with warmth. "Welcome to India."

The familiar burn returned behind my eyes, and I blinked it away. I had been given so much—kindness, generosity, and love. I would carry these moments with me forever.

"The people are so beautiful," I said to Ryan as we walked away from the women. My voice was choked with emotion, the words barely able to escape my lips. "They are so alive."

"They are," Ryan said, his voice filled with affection. "And they will welcome you with open arms. You are one of them now."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words in my heart. I was not just a visitor in India—I was a daughter, a sister, and a friend. I was part of a community that stretched back through generations, a community that had welcomed me with open arms and open hearts.

My mind drifted to my mother, to the dream she had held close to her heart for as long as I could remember. She had

never been to India, but she had always known that this was her home. Now I was here, seeing it for her, feeling it for her, carrying her with me in every step.

"This is for you, Ma," I whispered, my voice barely audible. "This is for you."

We continued walking through the market, the sun beginning to set in a blaze of orange and pink. The market was still alive with activity, the crowds growing larger as the evening approached. The vendors were lighting oil lamps, their flames flickering in the gathering darkness. The air was filled with the sound of music and laughter, and the smell of spices and incense.

I felt a sense of joy and gratitude that I had never experienced before coming to India. I was in India, surrounded by beauty, kindness, and love. I was home.

Ryan looked at me, his eyes warm and knowing. "Are you ready to leave?" he asked. "We can come back tomorrow if you like."

I shook my head, a smile spreading across my face. "Not yet," I said. "I want to stay a little longer. I want to soak it all in."

He nodded, his smile widening. "Then we'll stay," he said. "The market will always welcome you. Just like India will always welcome you. You are home now, Devi. Never forget that."

Tears hovered on my lashes again, trembling but not yet falling. I let them fall. I was home. I was finally home. And I would never forget it.

Chapter Thirteen: The Food Shops

Ryan glanced at me, a knowing smile playing on his lips. "We're not leaving just yet," he said. "There's a little stall I come to every time I'm here—the best food in the market, hands down. You can't come all this way and miss it." He gestured for me to follow, and I found myself swept along by his enthusiasm, the promise of something delicious cutting through the exhaustion of the day.

He took me to a small food shop tucked away in a corner of the market. The shop was simple—just a few plastic tables and chairs, a counter laden with dishes, and a cook who worked tirelessly over a hot stove. The entrance was modest, marked only by a faded sign and the irresistible aroma that wafted out into the narrow lane. I could see steam rising from large pots, hear the sizzle of oil and the clatter of utensils, and feel the warmth of the kitchen spreading through the small dining area.

The shop was humble, but it was filled with people—locals who had clearly been coming here for years, their faces familiar to the cook, their orders known by heart. They sat at the plastic tables, their heads bent over their plates, their expressions a mixture of concentration and delight. The atmosphere was warm and inviting, the kind of place where you could forget about the world outside and simply focus on the pleasure of good food and good company.

"This is the best food in Delhi," Ryan said, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. "Trust me, you won't be disappointed."

I looked around, taking in the simple surroundings. The walls were covered in faded posters and handwritten menus, their edges curling with age. The counter was laden with dishes—bowls of colourful chutneys, plates of freshly fried breads, and steaming pots of curry and dal. The cook was a large man with a kind face and sweat on his brow, his hands moving with practiced precision as he worked over the hot stove. He glanced up as we entered and gave Ryan a wide grin, waving a ladle in greeting.

"Ryan bhai! Long time, no see!" he called out, his voice booming across the small shop.

"Arvind bhai!" Ryan replied, clasping the man's hand in a warm greeting. "I've brought a special guest today. She's visiting from Guyana, and I wanted her to taste the best food Delhi has to offer."

Arvind's eyes widened with interest, and he wiped his hands on his apron before extending one to me. "Welcome, welcome! Any friend of Ryan is family here. Sit down, sit down—I'll make you something special."

"Thank you," I said, smiling. "I'm honoured to be here."

We sat down at one of the small plastic tables, its surface worn smooth by years of use. Ryan gestured to the cook, his hands moving in a series of quick, confident gestures that clearly conveyed his orders. Arvind nodded, his face

lighting up with understanding, and immediately set to work.

The cook brought us a feast—piping hot dosa, its surface golden and crisp, its interior soft and fluffy. It was served with a small bowl of sambar, a lentil soup fragrant with tamarind and spices, and coconut chutney, its creaminess a perfect contrast to the heat of the dosa. There was creamy butter chicken, its sauce rich and velvety, the chicken tender and succulent, the flavours of tomato, cream, and spices melding together in perfect harmony. There was fragrant biryani, the rice fluffy and golden, layered with tender pieces of meat and a symphony of spices—cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and saffron. There were a variety of breads—fluffy naan, charred from the tandoor; flaky parathas, their layers glistening with butter; and soft rotis, their surfaces speckled with the tell-tale marks of the griddle.

And there were chutneys—a rainbow of flavours and colours. There was mint chutney, its green hue vibrant and fresh, its taste cool and refreshing. There was tamarind chutney, its deep brown colour rich and earthy, its flavour a perfect balance of sweet and sour. There was mango chutney, its golden colour bright and cheerful, its taste a burst of fruity sweetness. And there was a spicy red chilli chutney, its heat a pleasant burn that lingered on the tongue.

I stared at the spread before me, my mouth watering, my eyes wide with wonder. I had never seen so much food in one place, never smelled such an intoxicating array of

aromas. I felt like a child on the morning of Diwali, surrounded by gifts, sweets, and the promise of joy.

I ate with abandon, feeling the flavours explode on my tongue—the tang of the tamarind, the heat of the chilli, the creaminess of the yogurt, the earthiness of the spices. I dipped a piece of dosa into the sambar, its crispness giving way to the softness of the lentil soup. I tore a piece of naan and used it to scoop up the butter chicken, the bread soaking up the rich sauce. I took a bite of the biryani, the rice, meat, and spices melding together in a symphony of flavour.

"This is incredible," I said, my mouth half-full. "I can't believe how good this is."

"Indian food is the best in the world," Ryan said, laughing. "And it's only going to get better. You haven't tasted anything yet."

I laughed too, feeling a sense of joy and freedom that I had not felt in years. I had been so consumed by fear and worry, so focused on survival, that I had forgotten how to simply enjoy life. But here, in this small food shop in the heart of Delhi, surrounded by the sights, smells, and tastes of India, I felt alive again.

We stayed at the shop for hours, talking, eating, and laughing. The food kept coming—Arvind would appear with a new dish, his face beaming with pride, and we would taste it, praise it, and ask for more. The other customers came and went, their faces familiar and friendly, and they would stop by our table to greet Ryan and welcome me to India.

Ryan told me stories about his life, about his family, about the India he loved. He told me about his childhood in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, a place where the streets were unpaved and the houses were made of mud and thatch. He told me about the river that ran through the village, its water cool and clear, where he would swim and play with his friends. He told me about his mother, a woman of fierce love and unwavering faith, who had taught him to pray, to work hard, and to never give up on his dreams.

He told me about his education in Delhi, about the scholarship that had brought him to the city, and the struggles he had faced as a young man from a rural background. He told me about his career as a journalist, about the stories he had covered and the people he had met, about the joy of giving voice to the voiceless and shining a light on the truth. He told me about his love of travel, about the places he had been and the adventures he had had, about the beauty and diversity of the world.

"India is a country of stories," he said, his voice thoughtful. "Every street, every village, every person has a story to tell. And the stories are not just about the past—they are about the present, about the future, about the hope that drives us forward."

I listened, captivated by his words, feeling a connection to him that I had not felt with anyone in a long time. He understood what it meant to carry the weight of history, the burden of dreams, and the hope of a better future. He understood what it meant to be a child of the diaspora, to

be caught between two worlds, and to search for a home that had never been yours.

"I think you've found your home," he said, looking at me with kind eyes. "I think India is where you were always meant to be."

Tears sprang to my eyes once more, and I blinked them away. "I think so too," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I feel like I've been searching for this my whole life. And now that I'm here, I don't want to leave."

"You don't have to," he said. "India will always welcome you. You are one of us now."

I smiled, feeling a sense of peace settle over me. I had found my home, and I would never lose it again.

As the evening wore on, Arvind appeared with one final offering—a platter of sweets that seemed to glow under the warm light. There were gulab jamun, pillowy and glistening with rosewater syrup, their golden surfaces catching the flicker of the lamps. Jalebis curled into tight orange spirals, their crispy edges promising a burst of sweetness with every bite. And there was ras malai, impossibly delicate, floating like a small cloud in a sea of creamy, saffron-kissed milk. It looked almost too beautiful to eat. But as I gazed at them, a quiet realization settled over me—these were not just desserts. They were the very same sweets Mr. Narinedatt had bought for me on my first day in India, a gesture of welcome that had felt so small then but now seemed to hold the weight of everything that had followed. Perhaps this was no coincidence. Perhaps this was his way of reminding me

that I had come full circle—that the sweetness of arrival and the sweetness of belonging were never really separate.

"These are the best sweets in Delhi," Arvind said, his voice filled with pride. "You can't leave without tasting them."

I reached for a gulab jamun, its soft exterior yielding to my touch. I took a bite, and the sweetness exploded on my tongue—the syrup coating my mouth, the soft interior melting like butter. I closed my eyes, savouring the moment, feeling a sense of gratitude for the simple pleasure of good food and good company.

"Thank you, Arvind," I said, my voice filled with sincerity. "Everything was incredible."

"You are welcome, beta," he said, his voice warm. "Anytime you want to eat, come here. I will always have something for you."

I nodded.

We left the shop as the night settled over the city. The market was still alive with activity, the vendors lighting their oil lamps, the crowds gathering in the warmth of the evening.

I walked through the market, my heart full, my spirit light. I had eaten the best food of my life. I had made a new friend. I had found a home.

"Thank you, Ryan," I said, my voice soft. "Today was perfect. This was a moment I would never be able to forget."

"Neither will I," he said, his eyes warm. "Witnessing your first encounter with India has been its own kind of blessing. You carry a light that turns the ordinary into something extraordinary."

I felt my cheeks flush as a smile broke through. "I don't want to miss a single thing," I admitted. "It's like I've been holding my breath for years, and now I can finally breathe."

"And now you're here," he said. "The journey is just beginning. There's so much more to see, so much more to experience. And I'll be here to help you every step of the way."

I felt a surge of gratitude for this man, for his kindness and generosity, for his willingness to share his time and his heart with a stranger. I knew that I would carry this day with me forever, that it would become a part of who I was and who I would become.

"Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you for everything."

He nodded, his smile warm and genuine. "You're welcome, Devi. Welcome to India. Welcome home."

PART FOUR: THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh

Chapter Fourteen: The Swami

One week into my stay, Mr. Narinedatt told me that I would be having visitors. "A Swami and his student," he said, his voice filled with excitement. "They are staying with us for a few days. I think you will like them."

I felt a flutter of curiosity and anticipation at his words. A Swami—a holy man, a spiritual teacher. I had heard stories about such figures, had read about them in books, and had seen them in films, but I had never met one in person. The idea of having a Swami stay in the same house felt both intimidating and thrilling, like stepping into a world I had only ever glimpsed from afar.

"What kind of Swami?" I asked, my voice tinged with curiosity. "Is he from a particular tradition?"

"He's a wandering sage," Mr. Narinedatt explained, his eyes bright with enthusiasm. "He travels across India, teaching and guiding those who seek spiritual wisdom. He's been doing so for over forty years. His knowledge is vast, and his presence is... transformative. I've had the privilege of hosting him several times before, and each visit has been a profound experience."

I nodded, feeling a sense of reverence settle over me. A wandering sage, a man who had dedicated his life to seeking truth and sharing it with others. I wondered what he would be like, what he would teach, and what wisdom he would share. I felt a mixture of nervousness and excitement at the prospect of meeting him.

"When will they arrive?" I asked.

"Tomorrow," Mr. Narinedatt said. "They will stay for a few days. I thought you might enjoy the opportunity to speak with him, to learn from him. His presence has a way of bringing clarity and peace to those who are open to it."

I felt a surge of gratitude for his thoughtfulness. He had given me so much already—a safe place to stay, delicious food, and the opportunity to explore the city. And now he was offering me something even more precious: the chance to connect with India's spiritual heritage, to learn from a man who had dedicated his life to the pursuit of wisdom.

"Thank you," I said, my voice sincere. "I would be honoured to meet him."

Swami Naryan arrived the next day. I was in the living room when I heard the sound of the door opening, followed by Mr. Narinedatt's warm voice greeting the visitors. I stood, smoothing down my kurta, feeling a flutter of nervous anticipation in my chest.

He was a short, imposing man with a flowing white beard and a simple saffron robe. The robe was worn but clean, its colour a deep, earthy orange that seemed to glow with an inner light. His face was weathered and lined, a map of a life lived fully and deeply. But his eyes—oh, his eyes. They were the most striking feature, piercing and luminous, filled with a wisdom that seemed to see beyond the surface of things, beyond the physical world, into the very soul of the person before him.

His presence filled the room with a sense of peace and tranquillity. It was as if the chaos of the outside world simply melted away in his presence, replaced by a stillness that was both calming and profound. I felt my racing heart slow, my breath deepen, and my mind quieten. It was as if he radiated an energy that could not be resisted, an energy that demanded nothing but offered everything.

His student, Aditya, was a young man in his twenties, with a shaved head and a quiet demeanour. He was tall and slender, his movements graceful and deliberate, as if each gesture was a meditation. He carried a small bag and a rolled-up yoga mat, the tools of a life dedicated to spiritual practice. He did not speak, but his eyes were watchful and kind, and he smiled at me with a warmth that felt genuine and welcoming.

"Welcome," Mr. Narinedatt said, stepping forward with his hands pressed together in a traditional namaste. "We are honoured to have you."

"The honour is ours," Swami Naryan said, his voice deep and resonant, like the sound of a temple bell. It carried a weight that seemed to vibrate in the air, filling the room with a sense of sacredness. "This is a beautiful home. And we are grateful for your hospitality."

He turned to me, and his eyes seemed to see straight into my soul. I felt a shiver run down my spine as he held my gaze, his eyes exploring the depths of my being, seeing the pain, the fear, and the hope that I carried within me. It was an intimate moment, a moment of connection that transcended words.

"And you must be Devi," he said, his voice softening. "I've heard so much about you. Your journey has been long, but you are finally here. You are finally home."

I felt tears prick at my eyes, the emotion of his words washing over me like a wave. How could he know? How could he see so deeply into my heart, into the very core of my being? It was as if he had known me all my life, as if he had been waiting for me, as if my arrival was not a coincidence but a destiny fulfilled.

"Thank you, Swamiji," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe I'm actually here."

"Believe it," he said, smiling. The smile transformed his face, softening the weathered lines and illuminating his eyes with a gentle light. "You are exactly where you need to be."

We gathered in the living room, and Swami Naryan settled into a comfortable chair, his posture relaxed but upright. Aditya sat cross-legged on the floor beside him, his eyes closed, his breathing slow and even. Mr. Narinedatt took a seat across from the Swami, and I sat nearby, my hands clasped in my lap, my heart open and ready.

"I understand you've had quite a journey," Swami Naryan said, his eyes meeting mine. "Not just the physical journey from Guyana to India, but the journey of the heart, the journey of the soul."

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. "It's been... difficult," I said, my voice faltering. "There were times

when I didn't think I would make it. When I didn't think I would survive."

"But you did," he said, his voice gentle. "You are here, now, in this moment. And that is a testament to your strength, your courage, and your faith."

I shook my head, feeling a sense of humility wash over me. "I don't feel strong," I said. "I feel tired. Broken. I feel like I've been running for so long that I don't know how to stop."

"Running is a form of strength," he said. "It is the will to survive. But there comes a time when running must end, when you must stop and face what you have been running from. That is when the true journey begins."

A shiver coursed through me at the sound of his voice. He was right. I had been running for so long—from the gangs, from the fear, from the pain. And now, sitting in this beautiful room in India, I was beginning to realise that the journey was not just about escaping my past, but about confronting it, understanding it, and ultimately, healing from it.

"How do I do that?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "How do I stop running?"

"You begin by being still," he said. "You sit with your pain, your fear, your sadness. You allow yourself to feel it, to acknowledge it, to accept it. And then you let it go, one breath at a time."

We sat in silence for a long moment, the truth of his words settling over me like a gentle blanket. I felt a sense of

peace begin to creep into my heart, a stillness that I had not felt in months. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, feeling the air fill my lungs, feeling the tension begin to ease from my shoulders.

"India is a land of spiritual seekers," Swami Naryan continued, his voice a soft murmur. "We have been asking the big questions for thousands of years—Who am I? Why am I here? What is the purpose of this life? Our ancestors sought answers in the mountains, in the forests, and in the silence of their own hearts. And they discovered something profound: that the answers are not outside us, but within us."

I opened my eyes and looked at him, my heart filled with a longing that I could not fully express. "I want to find those answers," I said. "I want to understand who I am, why I'm here, and what I'm meant to do."

"Then you must be still," he said. "You must listen to the silence, to the voice of your own heart. The answers are already within you, Devi. You just need to be quiet enough to hear them."

I nodded, feeling a sense of determination settle over me. I had come to India seeking answers, seeking connection, and seeking home. And now, sitting in the presence of this wise and gentle man, I felt like I was finally on the path to finding them.

Over the next few days, Swami Naryan taught me about the spiritual traditions of India. We sat together in the living room each evening, the candles flickering, the incense burning, the world outside fading away. He spoke

of the gods and goddesses, of karma and reincarnation, of the cycle of birth and death. He spoke of the Bhagavad Gita, of Arjuna's struggle on the battlefield, and of Krishna's teachings on dharma and duty.

He taught me to meditate, to sit in stillness and observe my breath, to let go of the thoughts that crowded my mind. At first, it was difficult—my mind was restless, always jumping from one thought to the next. But with his gentle guidance, I began to find a sense of peace, a sense of stillness that I had never experienced before.

He taught me to chant, to repeat the sacred sounds that had been passed down for generations. The vibrations of the chants resonated in my chest, filling me with a sense of connection to something greater than myself. I felt like I was tapping into an ancient tradition, a lineage of seekers who had walked this path before me.

He taught me about the power of gratitude, of focusing on the blessings in my life rather than the challenges. Each evening, he would ask me to list three things I was grateful for, and I would search my heart for the small moments of joy that I had often overlooked.

And he listened. He listened to my fears, my doubts, and my pain, and he held space for them without judgment. He did not offer solutions or advice—he simply listened, and in doing so, he gave me the gift of being truly heard.

On the final evening of his stay, Swami Naryan sat with me alone in the garden. The stars were out, scattered across the sky like diamonds on black velvet, and the air was cool and fragrant with the scent of jasmine. We sat in silence

for a long moment, the only sounds being the chirping of crickets and the distant hum of the city.

"Devi," he said, his voice soft, "I want you to know that you are not alone. The ancestors walk with you. The gods watch over you. And the spirit of India lives in your heart."

Once again, my eyes grew heavy with the weight of unshed tears, my emotions overflowing. "Thank you, Swamiji," I said, my voice choked with gratitude. "Thank you for everything. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"You don't need to," he said, his smile gentle. "The best way to honour the teachings I have shared with you is to live them. Carry them in your heart. Let them guide your steps. And one day, when you are ready, you will share them with others."

I nodded, feeling a sense of purpose settle over me. I had been given so much—wisdom, guidance, and love. And I knew that I would carry it with me, that it would become a part of who I was and who I would become.

As he stood to leave, he placed his hand on my head in blessing. "Go in peace, Devi," he said. "Your journey is just beginning."

Chapter Fifteen: The Temple

That weekend, Mr. Narinedatt took me to Akshardham Temple. The temple was a sprawling complex of marble and sandstone, with stunning carvings and majestic domes. It was a masterpiece of Indian architecture, a symbol of the devotion and artistry of the Indian people.

I stood at the entrance, my breath catching in my throat as I took in the sheer scale and beauty of the structure. The temple rose before me like a vision from a dream—its domes gleaming in the afternoon sunlight, its intricate carvings telling stories of gods and goddesses, of ancient legends and timeless truths. The pink sandstone seemed to glow with an inner warmth, and the white marble shimmered like liquid light. It was impossible to believe that human hands had created something so beautiful, so perfect, so transcendent.

The main temple building was a breath-taking fusion of traditional Indian architectural styles, drawing inspiration from the ancient temples of Orissa, Gujarat, and Rajasthan. The central dome soared high above the structure, its surface adorned with elaborate carvings of lotus petals and divine figures. Surrounding it were smaller domes and shikharas—towering spires that reached toward the heavens like fingers of devotion. Each spire was covered in complex stonework, depicting scenes from Hindu mythology, celestial beings, and sacred symbols.

The entrance gates were massive, carved from teak wood and inlaid with brass. They depicted the ten avatars of

Vishnu, each figure rendered with exquisite detail—their expressions serene, their postures graceful, their garments flowing as if caught in a divine breeze. As I passed through the gates, I felt as though I was crossing a threshold between the mundane world and the sacred realm, leaving behind the noise and chaos of the outside world and entering a space of peace and devotion.

We walked through the temple grounds, exploring its gardens and galleries, its temples and shrines. The gardens were a testament to the artistry of the landscape designers—lush and green, their pathways lined with flowers of every colour, their fountains dancing in the sunlight. The air was filled with the scent of jasmine and roses, of marigolds and frangipani. Peacocks roamed freely, their iridescent feathers catching the light, their calls echoing through the grounds.

The gardens were divided into thematic sections, each one dedicated to a different aspect of India's spiritual and cultural heritage. There was a garden of medicinal plants, its beds filled with herbs and shrubs that had been used in Ayurvedic medicine for millennia. There was a garden of contemplation, its pathways winding through quiet groves and meditation pavilions. There was a garden of devotion, its centrepiece a beautifully carved shrine dedicated to the divine.

The galleries were filled with exhibits that told the story of India's spiritual heritage—paintings and sculptures, dioramas and multimedia displays, all designed to educate and inspire. We walked through the Hall of Values, where life-sized animatronic figures depicted scenes from the

lives of great spiritual leaders and reformers. We visited the Hall of Saints, where paintings and sculptures honoured the contributions of holy men and women from across the ages. We explored the Cultural Boat Ride, a gentle journey through India's history that brought the past to life with stunning visuals and immersive soundscapes.

The Cultural Boat Ride at Akshardham Temple was a journey through time itself, an immersive experience that transported visitors through 10,000 years of India's glorious history in just a few minutes. We boarded a small boat that glided silently along a winding water channel, and as we floated through the darkness, the walls on either side came alive with breathtaking animatronic scenes depicting India's rich cultural heritage. The boat carried us through ancient India, where we witnessed the wisdom of the Vedic sages, the architectural marvels of the Indus Valley Civilization, the teachings of the Buddha, and the magnificent empires of the Mauryas and Guptas. We floated past scenes of royal courts, bustling markets, and sacred temples, each tableau rendered with such exquisite detail that the figures seemed to move and breathe. We saw scholars writing ancient texts, artisans crafting intricate sculptures, and dancers performing classical traditions that have survived for millennia. The narration, a melodic voice that accompanied us throughout the journey, wove together stories of India's contributions to mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy—from the concept of zero to the wonders of Ayurveda. The boat then carried us through the medieval period, past the grandeur of the Mughal Empire and the

resilience of the Rajput kingdoms, before arriving at the modern era, where we witnessed India's struggle for independence and its emergence as a vibrant, democratic nation.

The highlight was a stunning depiction of India's cultural diversity—Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, and Buddhists living together in harmony, their traditions intertwining like the threads of a beautiful embroidery. As the boat glided toward the end of the journey, the walls opened to reveal a spectacular vision of India's future—a land of hope, progress, and unity. I sat mesmerised throughout the ride, feeling as though I had travelled through the very soul of India, witnessing the triumphs and trials, the joys and sorrows, the beauty and complexity of a civilization that has endured for millennia. When the boat finally returned to the dock, I felt a profound sense of connection to the land and its people, as if I had been granted a glimpse into the heart of a nation.

The air was filled with the scent of incense, its fragrance a mixture of sandalwood and rose, of jasmine and camphor. The smell was intoxicating, transporting me to a place of peace and devotion. I breathed it in, filling my lungs, and feeling the calm in my racing heart.

We entered the main temple, and I felt my breath catch in my throat. The interior was even more magnificent than the exterior—marble pillars rising toward a vaulted ceiling, intricate carvings covering every surface, the soft glow of oil lamps casting dancing shadows on the walls. The floor was polished to a mirror shine, reflecting the light of the lamps like a pool of liquid gold.

The central shrine was a vision of gold and jewels, the image of Bhagwan Swaminarayan surrounded by flowers and offerings. The deity was depicted in a posture of blessing, his hands raised in a gesture of protection and grace. The shrine was encased in a magnificent archway of carved marble, its surface covered in elaborate designs of lotus flowers, divine figures, and sacred symbols.

Devotees gathered before the shrine, their hands pressed together in prayer, their heads bowed in devotion. Some sang bhajans, their voices rising in harmonious melody. Others chanted mantras, their words a rhythmic meditation that seemed to vibrate through the very stones of the temple. The sound was hypnotic, transporting a wave of devotion that washed over me and carried me along.

I knelt before the shrine; my hands pressed together in prayer. I did not know the words to say or the rituals to perform. But I knew that I was in the presence of something sacred, and I opened my heart to it, offering my gratitude and my hopes, my fears and my dreams.

I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a sense that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. The months of fear and struggle, the sleepless nights and endless worries—they all seemed to melt away in this moment, replaced by a stillness that I had not felt in a long time.

We walked through the temple complex, and I was struck by the attention to detail, the artistry that had gone into every element. The carvings on the walls told stories from the Hindu scriptures—the *Ramayana* and the

Mahabharata, the *Puranas* and the *Vedas*. I saw images of Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha, and Shiva and Parvati. I saw scenes of battle and devotion, love and sacrifice, and triumph and loss.

The carvings were rendered with such skill and precision that they seemed to come alive. The figures appeared to move, their expressions shifting in the changing light, their garments flowing as if caught in a gentle breeze. I could see the individual strands of hair on the heads of the divine figures, the delicate folds of their robes, and the intricate designs of their jewellery. It was as if the artisans had poured their very souls into their work, creating a sacred space that was both beautiful and profound.

I stopped in front of a carving that depicted the crossing of the *kala pani*—the dark waters that my ancestors had crossed from India to Guyana. The image showed a ship on a stormy sea, its passengers huddled together in fear and despair. But at the centre of the scene was a figure of light—a guru, a guide, a source of hope and strength.

I felt tears stream down my face as I looked at the carving. It was my story—my ancestors' story, my mother's story, my story. They had crossed the *kala pani* with nothing but their faith and their courage, and they had built a new life in a new land. And now, generations later, I had crossed the same ocean to return to the land of my ancestors.

"Are you alright?" Mr. Narinedatt asked, his voice soft with concern.

I nodded, wiping my tears with the back of my hand. "Yes," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'm just...

overwhelmed. This place is so beautiful, and it means so much to me. I feel like I'm connecting with something I've been searching for my whole life."

He placed a gentle hand on my shoulder. "That's the power of India," he said. "It has a way of connecting you to your roots, to your heritage, and to your soul. You are not just visiting a temple, Devi—you are coming home."

As the sun began to set, we made our way to the amphitheatre for the Sahaj Anand Water Show. The amphitheatre was a vast open-air structure, its tiers of seats rising around a central pool of water. The setting sun painted the sky in shades of orange and pink, casting a warm glow over the gathered crowd. The air was cool and still, carrying the faint scent of incense and the distant sounds of the city.

We found our seats near the front, and I settled in, my heart filled with anticipation. I had heard about the water show, had been told that it was a breathtaking experience that combined light, water, and music to tell the story of India's spiritual heritage. But nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to witness.

As the last light faded from the sky, the amphitheatre was plunged into darkness. A hush fell over the crowd, the silence heavy with expectation. And then, without warning, a single beam of light shot into the sky, illuminating the darkness like a pillar of fire.

The show began with the creation of the universe. Fountains rose from the pool, their jets of water reaching toward the sky like the fingers of a sleeping giant. The

water shimmered with an inner light, its surface rippling and dancing in the darkness. A voice began to narrate, deep and resonant, its words telling the story of Brahma, the creator, and his cosmic dream.

The music swelled, a symphony of drums and flutes, of sitars and voices. The fountains responded to the rhythm; their movements synchronised with the melody. They rose and fell, spun and danced, creating patterns that were both beautiful and hypnotic. Coloured lights illuminated the water, transforming it into a canvas of liquid colour—deep blues and vibrant greens, fiery reds and golden yellows.

The story unfolded before me like a tapestry. I saw the gods and goddesses, their images formed from water and light. I saw Vishnu reclining on the cosmic serpent, his eyes closed in meditation. I saw Brahma emerging from his navel, his four heads turning towards the four directions. I saw Shiva, the destroyer, performing his cosmic dance, his movements a symphony of creation and destruction.

The fountains took on the shapes of mountains and rivers, of forests and oceans. They rose to form the Himalayas, their peaks covered in shimmering light. They cascaded to form the Ganges, its waters flowing with a liquid grace. They swirled to form the churning of the ocean, the great cosmic event that gave birth to the nectar of immortality.

I was mesmerised, unable to tear my eyes away from the spectacle before me. The water seemed to come alive, taking on the forms of gods and demons, of heroes and villains, of the great cosmic forces that had shaped the

universe. The music swelled and receded, carrying me through the story, making me feel like I was part of it, part of something ancient and sacred.

The narration continued, its voice deep and resonant, telling the story of the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth, of karma and dharma, of the journey of the soul through the ages. I felt tears stream down my face as I listened, the words touching something deep within me, something that had been waiting for this moment.

The climax of the show was a depiction of the great war of Kurukshetra, the battle that had been the setting for the *Bhagavad Gita*. The fountains rose to form armies of warriors, their weapons gleaming in the light, their faces fierce with determination. The music became urgent and driven, a symphony of drums and trumpets that seemed to echo the clash of swords and the shouts of battle.

And then, at the centre of the chaos, a single figure emerged—Arjuna, the great warrior, his chariot drawn by white horses, his bow raised to the sky. Beside him stood Krishna, his divine guide, his face serene and calm. The fountains formed the shape of Krishna, his image towering above the battlefield, his hand raised in blessing.

The voice of Krishna spoke, his words echoing through the amphitheatre. "You have the right to perform your prescribed duties, but you are not entitled to the fruits of your actions. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty."

I felt a shiver run down my spine as I heard the words. They were the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the sacred text that had guided millions of souls through the ages. And they resonated with me, speaking to the fear and the doubt that I had carried with me for so long.

I had been so focused on the outcome, so worried about whether I would succeed or fail, that I had forgotten the importance of the journey itself. I had forgotten that my duty was simply to act, to do what was right, and to leave the results to the divine.

The fountains rose to their highest point, their waters reaching toward the heavens like a prayer. And then, slowly, they began to fall, their descent accompanied by a gentle display of light and sound. The show ended as it had begun—with a single beam of light shooting into the sky, illuminating the darkness like a pillar of fire.

The crowd erupted in applause, their cheers echoing through the night. But I sat in silence, my heart full, my eyes wet with tears. I had witnessed something profound, something that had touched me on a level I could not fully articulate.

I turned to Mr. Narinedatt, my voice barely above a whisper. "This is enough," I said. "This is enough to call my trip a success."

He smiled, putting his arm around my shoulder. "We have barely scratched the surface," he said, his voice warm and gentle. "There is so much more to see. But I'm glad you feel that way."

I nodded, feeling a sense of peace settle over me. I had come to India seeking answers, seeking connection, seeking home. And in this beautiful temple, in this breathtaking show, I had found a glimpse of what I was looking for.

I stood, my legs shaky with emotion, and walked toward the exit. The night air was cool and fragrant, carrying the scent of flowers and the distant sound of chanting. I looked up at the stars, flung across the heavens like a handful of scattered pearls, and I felt a sense of gratitude so profound that it almost hurt.

"Thank you," I whispered, my words directed at no one and everyone. "Thank you for this gift. Thank you for this moment. Thank you for bringing me here."

I walked through the temple grounds, my heart light, my spirit free. This was not an ending, but a beginning. And in the heart of it all, I had found something priceless—something that would remain etched in my soul forever.

As we drove back to the house, I sat in silence, my mind still filled with the images of the water show. I thought about the fountains dancing in the night, the music swelling and receding, the story unfolding before my eyes. I thought about the words of Krishna, the teachings of the *Gita*, the wisdom that had been passed down through the ages.

India was a land of stories, I realised. A land of myths and legends, of ancient wisdom and timeless truths. And in this moment, I was not just a visitor—I was a participant, a seeker, a soul on a journey.

I closed my eyes, the image of the fountains still dancing behind my lids. And I felt a sense of peace that I had not felt in a long time.

I was home.

Chapter Sixteen: Vanita

A few days after Swami Naryan left, a new visitor arrived. Her name was Vanita, and she was a Guyanese woman who visited India often. She was in her forties, with a warm smile and a cheerful disposition. She had come to visit Mr. Narinedatt and had offered to accompany me on my explorations of the city.

I met Vanita in the living room, where she was sitting with Mr. Narinedatt, sipping chai and laughing at something he had said. She rose as I entered, her face lighting up with a smile that seemed to fill the room with warmth. She was a petite woman with sparkling eyes and a head of dark curls, dressed in a vibrant kurta that matched the energy she exuded. Her presence was magnetic, drawing me in with an ease that felt almost magical.

"So you're the famous Devi," she said, extending her hand. Her accent was unmistakably Guyanese, a familiar cadence that made my heart ache with a sudden longing for home. "I've heard so much about you. Mr. Narinedatt has been singing your praises since I arrived."

I shook her hand, feeling a blush creep up my cheeks. "I hope they were good things," I said, laughing nervously.

"Only the best," she assured me, her eyes twinkling. "He told me about your journey, your courage, your determination. And he told me about your mother—about her dream of India, and your promise to her. That takes a lot of strength, Devi. A lot of love."

I fought to hold back the tears threatening to spill, the mention of my mother catching me off guard. "Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "It's been a long journey, but I'm glad I'm here."

Vanita nodded, her expression softening with understanding. "I know what it's like to be far from home, to carry the weight of your family's dreams. I've been coming to India for years now, and every time I come, I feel a little more connected to my roots. It's a healing process, isn't it?"

I nodded, feeling a sense of kinship with this woman I had just met. She understood. She knew what it was like to be a child of the diaspora, to be caught between two worlds, to search for a home that had never been yours.

Vanita and I became fast friends. We explored the markets of Delhi together, visiting the colourful stalls of Chandni Chowk, and the elegant boutiques of Connaught Place. We visited ancient temples and modern malls, tasted street food and fine dining. We talked for hours about our lives, our families, and our dreams.

Our first adventure together was to Chandni Chowk, the oldest and busiest market in Old Delhi. The moment we stepped into the narrow lanes, I was overwhelmed by the sensory assault—the vibrant colours of the fabrics and spices, the cacophony of vendors hawking their wares, and the pungent aroma of street food mingling with the sweet scent of incense. Vanita navigated the chaos with practiced ease, her small frame weaving through the crowds like a fish through water.

"Come on, Devi!" she called back to me, her laughter ringing through the air. "Don't be shy. This is where the real India lives."

I followed her, my eyes wide, my senses reeling. We passed stalls selling everything imaginable—silk saris in every shade of the rainbow, gold and silver jewellery that gleamed in the sunlight, handcrafted leather goods, and intricately embroidered fabrics. The vendors called out to us, their voices a symphony of persuasion, and Vanita responded with banter that made them laugh and lower their prices.

"You have to haggle," she explained, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "It's part of the experience. If you pay the first price they offer, they'll think you're a tourist. And if they think you're a tourist, they'll charge you double."

I watched her in action, amazed by her confidence and charm. She had a way with people, a gift for making them feel seen and valued. She asked about their families, their children, their dreams, and they responded with warmth and openness. It was not just shopping—it was connection, community, and the heartbeat of India.

We visited the elegant boutiques of Connaught Place, their sleek storefronts a stark contrast to the chaos of Old Delhi. Here, the pace was slower, the atmosphere more refined. We browsed through racks of designer clothing, admired handcrafted jewellery, and sipped coffee at a café that overlooked a bustling square. Vanita shared stories of her own travels, her own struggles, and her own journey of self-discovery.

"I came to India for the first time ten years ago," she said, her voice thoughtful. "I was going through a divorce, and I felt like my whole world had fallen apart. I didn't know who I was anymore, didn't know what I wanted. But India showed me that there was more to life than the pain I was carrying. It showed me that I could start over, that I could rebuild, that I could find joy again."

I listened, feeling a sense of hope blossom in my chest. If Vanita could find healing in India, then so could I. If she could rebuild her life after such pain, then there was hope for me too.

We visited ancient temples together, their stone walls steeped in centuries of devotion. We walked through the quiet halls of the Lotus Temple, its flower-like shape a symbol of unity and peace. We sat in the cool darkness of the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, listening to the melodic chanting of Sikh hymns. We explored the intricately carved shrines of the Jain temples, their marble surfaces gleaming in the soft light.

We also visited modern malls, their glass frontages and escalators a reminder of India's rapid development. We shopped for clothes and souvenirs, ate at restaurants that served fusion cuisine, and watched Bollywood movies in air-conditioned theatres. Vanita introduced me to the India of the present—a country of contradictions, where ancient traditions coexisted with modern aspirations.

Tasting the street food was an adventure in itself. Vanita led me to a small cart on a busy street corner, where a man was frying samosas in bubbling oil. The golden

pastries were crispy and fragrant, filled with spiced potatoes and peas. I bit into one, and the flavours erupted in my mouth, each one more intense than the last—the heat of the chilli, the earthiness of the cumin, the sweetness of the peas. It was simple, humble, and absolutely delicious.

"Try this," Vanita said, handing me a plate of chaat—a mixture of crispy fried dough, boiled potatoes, chickpeas, and yogurt, topped with a tangy tamarind chutney and a sprinkle of chaat masala. It was a symphony of textures and flavours, each bite a new discovery. I ate with abandon, savouring the happiness that came from delicious food and warm companionship.

We also enjoyed fine dining, visiting restaurants that served exquisite Indian cuisine in elegant settings. I tasted dishes I had never even heard of—paneer tikka, dal makhani, and butter naan. Each meal was a revelation, a celebration of the artistry and diversity of Indian cooking. Vanita taught me about the different regional cuisines, the subtle variations in spices and techniques that made each dish unique.

We talked for hours while eating. Vanita shared stories of her childhood in Guyana, of her parents and grandparents, of the traditions they had carried with them across the ocean. She spoke of her marriage, its dissolution, and the years of healing that had followed. She spoke of her children, her pride in their accomplishments, and her hopes for their future.

I shared my own story—the fear and the struggle, the promise I had made to my mother. I spoke of the gangs, the threats, the sleepless nights. I spoke of my father, his quiet strength, his gentle love. I spoke of my dreams—to build a new life, to find a sense of belonging, and to honour my mother's legacy.

Vanita listened without judgment, her eyes filled with empathy and understanding. She did not offer solutions or advice—she simply held space for me, letting me speak my truth, letting me release the pain that had been building inside me.

"You are so lucky," she said one afternoon, sitting in a café. "To be here, in India, discovering yourself. It's a gift."

I looked at her, my heart full of gratitude for this woman who had become my friend, my guide, and my sister. "I know," I said. "I feel like I've been blessed. I don't know how to repay everyone who's helped me."

"You don't have to," she said, reaching across the table to take my hand. "Just be happy. That is enough. That is the greatest gift you can give to all of us—to yourself, to your mother, and to everyone who has loved and supported you."

Tears rushed to my eyes, unbidden and unstoppable, and I let them fall. I was surrounded by kindness, by generosity, by love. And for the first time in a long time, I knew, with absolute certainty, that this was where I belonged.

Over the days that followed, Vanita and I grew closer, our friendship deepening with each shared experience. We

wandered through the streets of Delhi, discovering hidden gems and forgotten corners. We visited the Qutub Minar and the Red Fort, the India Gate and the Jama Masjid. We took rickshaw rides through the narrow lanes of Old Delhi, their drivers navigating the chaos with skill and determination.

We attended a classical music concert, the sound of the sitar and tabla filling the air with their haunting melodies. We watched a Kathak dance performance, the dancers' movements graceful and precise, their expressions telling stories of love and longing. We visited a village on the outskirts of Delhi, where we were welcomed with open arms and treated to a feast of traditional dishes.

Vanita taught me to appreciate the small moments—the warmth of the sun on my face, the taste of freshly brewed chai, and the laughter of children playing in the streets. She taught me to slow down, to savour the present, to find joy in the simple pleasures of life.

"India has taught me to live in the moment," she said one evening, as we watched the sunset from the rooftop of the house. "There's so much beauty here, so much wisdom, so much love. It's easy to get caught up in the chaos, to lose sight of what's important. But if you open your heart to it, India will show you the way."

I nodded, feeling the truth of her words. I had been so focused on survival, so consumed by fear, that I had forgotten how to live. But India was teaching me, moment by moment, to embrace life, to embrace joy, and to embrace the beauty of the world around me.

When Vanita's visit came to an end, I felt a pang of sadness that was both sharp and sweet. I had grown so close to her, and had come to depend on her warmth and wisdom. She had become a sister to me, a guide, and a friend.

We stood at the airport, our arms wrapped around each other, tears streaming down our faces. "Thank you," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for everything. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Don't thank me," she said, her voice equally choked. "Just keep living, keep loving, keep growing. That's all I could ever ask of you."

"Will I ever see you again?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Of course," she said, pulling back to look at me. "We'll meet again. In this beautiful country or in ours."

She pressed a small bracelet into my hand—a simple silver chain with a small charm shaped like a lotus flower. "A gift," she said. "To remind you of your journey, of your strength, and of the home you carry in your heart."

I slipped the bracelet onto my wrist, feeling its love, its warmth. It was a symbol of everything I had experienced, everything I had learnt, and everything I had become.

I hugged her one last time, and then she turned and walked through the security checkpoint. I stood there, watching her disappear into the crowd, my heart heavy with gratitude and love. She had given me so much—her friendship, her wisdom, and her love.

Chapter Seventeen: The University

One morning, Mr. Narinedatt and I were invited to a lecture at IIMT University, a prestigious institution in the outskirts of Delhi. The university was a sprawling campus of modern buildings and lush gardens, filled with bright-eyed students eager to learn.

We drove through the bustling streets of Delhi, leaving behind the chaos of the city centre and entering a world of calm and order. The campus emerged on the horizon like a vision of the future—gleaming glass-and-steel structures rising against the blue sky, their exteriors reflecting the morning sun. As we approached the entrance, I was struck by the sheer scale of the institution. It was not just a university; it was a city unto itself, a community of scholars and dreamers, of teachers and learners.

The main gate was an impressive structure, its pillars adorned with the university's emblem—a lotus flower symbolising knowledge and enlightenment. Security guards in neat uniforms stood at attention, their postures formal and respectful. Beyond the gate, I could see manicured lawns stretching toward the horizon, their green expanse dotted with trees and flower beds. The pathways were lined with students walking in groups, their backpacks slung over their shoulders, their conversations animated and passionate.

Mr. Ravindra drove through the gate. Leaning in until my breath fogged the pane, I feasted my eyes on every single detail. The campus was a masterpiece of modern

architecture—buildings with sweeping curves and glass frontages, their designs both functional and beautiful. There were lecture halls and laboratories, libraries and student centres, sports facilities and meditation gardens. Every structure seemed to have been designed with care and intention, creating a space that was both inspiring and nurturing.

"This is incredible," I breathed, my voice filled with awe. “Nothing in my experience had ever come close to this.”

Mr. Narinedatt smiled, his eyes warm with pride. "IIMT is one of the finest institutions in India," he said. "It was established to nurture the next generation of leaders, thinkers, and innovators. The students here come from all over the country—and from around the world—to study and grow."

We pulled up to the main administrative building, and I was struck by its grandeur. The entrance was flanked by towering columns, their surfaces carved with elaborate designs. A fountain stood in the centre of the courtyard, its waters dancing in the sunlight. The air was filled with the sound of birdsong and the distant murmur of students.

As we stepped out of the car, we were greeted by a small group of university officials, their faces lit up with warm smiles. They approached us with folded hands, their greetings a chorus of "Namaste" and "Welcome." I was taken aback by the warmth of their reception, and by the genuine joy in their eyes.

The lead official, a distinguished man in his fifties with silver hair and a kind face, stepped forward. "Mr.

Narinedatt, it is an honour to have you here," he said, his voice resonant and sincere. "And you must be Devi," he added, turning to me. " We've been so eager to hear about all that you've experienced. Welcome to IIMT University."

Before I could respond, two young women stepped forward, each carrying a beautiful bouquet of flowers. The flowers were a stunning array of colours—vibrant marigolds, delicate roses, fragrant jasmine, and golden chrysanthemums. They were arranged with artistry and care, their petals fresh and dewy, their scent intoxicating.

"These are for you," one of the young women said, her voice soft and melodic. She placed the bouquet in my arms, and I felt a wave of emotion wash over me.

"Thank you," I managed, my voice choked with gratitude. "Thank you so much. This is... this is overwhelming."

Next, another official stepped forward, carrying a beautifully folded shawl. It was made of fine wool, its fabric soft and warm, its edges embroidered with ornate patterns in gold thread. He draped it over my shoulders with a reverence that made me feel like royalty, his movements slow and deliberate.

"A gift from the university," he said, his voice filled with sincerity. "To welcome you to our community. We hope you will always feel at home here."

I touched the shawl, feeling its softness, its warmth. It was more than just a piece of clothing—it was a symbol of acceptance, of belonging, and of the kindness that had been shown to me since I arrived in India. I felt moisture

gather at the corners of my eyes, and I blinked it away, not wanting to miss a single moment of this beautiful experience.

"We are honoured to have you here," the lead official continued. "Please, let us show you around. There is so much to see, so much to share."

We walked through the campus, the officials guiding us with pride and enthusiasm. The university was even more impressive up close—its buildings a testament to modern design and engineering, its grounds a sanctuary of peace and beauty. I saw lecture halls with tiered seating and state-of-the-art technology, laboratories filled with gleaming equipment, libraries with floor-to-ceiling windows and shelves upon shelves of books.

We visited the student centre, a bustling hub of activity where students gathered to study, socialise, and relax. The centre was filled with energy—groups of students huddled over laptops, others engaged in animated discussions, and still others simply enjoying a moment of peace in the comfortable seating areas. The walls were adorned with posters and banners, announcing events and opportunities, and celebrating achievements and milestones.

The officials introduced me to several students, each one bright-eyed and eager to share their experiences. I was amazed by their passion, their curiosity, and their determination. They spoke of their studies with enthusiasm, their eyes lighting up as they described their projects and aspirations.

And then I met a young woman who seemed barely old enough to be in high school. Her face was youthful, her features soft and unlined. But her eyes held a wisdom that seemed far beyond her years, and her manner was poised and confident.

"How old are you?" I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

"I am sixteen," she replied, her voice steady and proud. "I am in my first year of the Bachelor of Science program, studying computer science and artificial intelligence."

I felt my jaw drop in astonishment. Sixteen. In Guyana, sixteen-year-olds were still in secondary school, still navigating the challenges of adolescence. But here, this young woman was already pursuing a university degree, already laying the foundation for a career that would shape the future.

"That's incredible," I said, my voice filled with genuine awe. "I can't believe you're already in university at sixteen."

She smiled, a hint of pride in her expression. "In India, we have a system that allows advanced students to accelerate their education. I was fortunate to have teachers who recognised my potential and encouraged me to pursue my dreams."

I shook my head in amazement. "Your teachers must be very proud of you," I said. "And your parents too."

"They are," she said, her eyes softening. "My mother is a teacher, and my father is an engineer. They have always

believed in me, always supported me. I am grateful to have such wonderful role models in my life."

I felt a surge of emotion as I listened to her. She was so young, yet so focused, so determined. She had a clear vision of her future, a sense of purpose that many adults never find. I thought about my own journey, about the years I had spent drifting, uncertain, searching for meaning. And I felt a sense of hope for the future—for her, for India, for the world.

We continued our tour, and I was constantly amazed by the university's commitment to excellence. We visited the research laboratories, where scientists were working on cutting-edge projects in fields ranging from renewable energy to artificial intelligence. We visited the art studios, where students were creating beautiful works of art, including paintings, sculpture, and design. We visited the sports facilities, where athletes were training with dedication and discipline.

Everywhere I looked, I saw passion and purpose. The students were not just learning; they were creating, innovating, and dreaming. They were preparing themselves to lead, to serve, to make a difference in the world. And the university was giving them the tools they needed to succeed.

I thought about the universities in Guyana, about the struggles they faced—the lack of funding, the outdated facilities, and the brain drain of talented students who left for opportunities abroad. I thought about the challenges we faced as a nation, the obstacles that seemed

insurmountable. And I felt a pang of sadness for all that we had lost, all that we could have been.

The lecture was held in a magnificent auditorium, its design both modern and elegant. The seating was arranged in a sweeping curve, each seat offering an unobstructed view of the stage. The acoustics were perfect, and the lighting was state-of-the-art. It was a space designed for inspiration, for the exchange of ideas, and for the birth of dreams.

The lecture was about India's economic development and its vision for the future. The speakers were passionate and articulate, their words filled with hope and determination. They spoke of India's journey from poverty to prosperity, from colonialism to independence, and from isolation to global leadership. They spoke of the challenges that remained—the inequality, the corruption, and the environmental degradation. But they also spoke of the opportunities—the youth, the innovation, and the resilience of the Indian people.

"We are a nation of dreamers," one speaker said, his voice resonant and powerful. "We have dreamed of independence, democracy, and a better future for our children. And we have achieved those dreams through hard work, through sacrifice, and through the firm belief that anything is possible."

I sat in the audience, feeling a sense of admiration and envy. The speakers were so confident, so visionary. They spoke of the future with such certainty, such hope. And I wondered what it would be like to live in a country where

the future was so bright, where the possibilities were so endless.

As the lecture drew to a close, the lead official returned to the stage, his face beaming with pride. He spoke of the importance of the university's mission, the students who would shape India's future, and the partnerships that made such work possible. And then, to my surprise, he turned toward where I was sitting.

"And now," he said, his voice carrying across the auditorium, "we would like to invite a very special guest to the stage. Miss Devi Maharaj, who has travelled all the way from Guyana to visit our university. Miss Devi, would you please join us?"

I felt my heart stop. My face flushed with heat, and I looked at Mr. Narinedatt in panic. He smiled encouragingly, nodding for me to go. "They want to honour you," he whispered. "Go ahead. You'll be fine."

I rose on shaky legs, my knees trembling, and walked toward the stage. The audience applauded warmly, their faces kind and welcoming. I climbed the steps, my hands clammy, and my heart pounding in my chest. The officials gathered around me, their smiles genuine, their eyes filled with warmth.

The lead official gestured for me to stand beside him at the podium. "Miss Devi has travelled a long way to be with us today," he said, his voice resonant and clear. "She has faced great challenges and shown remarkable courage. We are honoured to have her here, and we hope her visit to India is filled with joy and discovery."

He then invited Mr. Narinedatt to speak. The High Commissioner stepped forward, his presence commanding yet warm. He spoke of the importance of educational exchange, the bonds between India and the diaspora, and the shared heritage that connected people across oceans.

"Devi's journey is an indication of the enduring power of the Indian spirit," he said, his voice filled with emotion. "She came here seeking connection, seeking home. And she has found both—not just in the temples and monuments, but in the hearts of the Indian people. She is a daughter of the diaspora, and India will always welcome her with open arms."

I stood there, my eyes wet with tears, as the audience applauded. I had never felt so seen, so honoured, so loved. And when they asked me to say a few words, I could barely speak.

"Thank you," I managed, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for this incredible honour. I came to India seeking answers, and I have found so much more than I ever expected. I have found kindness, generosity, and a sense of belonging that I thought I had lost forever. This country has changed me, and I will carry it in my heart always."

The applause swelled, and I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me. Photographers stepped forward, their cameras flashing, capturing the moment for posterity. I stood with the administrative body and Mr. Narinedatt, smiling through my tears, feeling like I was part of something bigger than myself—a community, a family, and a nation.

When the lecture finally ended, I was exhausted but exhilarated. I had been so moved by everything—the university, the students, and the kindness of the officials. As I walked back to the car, I felt like I was floating, my heart full of gratitude and wonder.

The next morning, I woke to find Mr. Narinedatt waiting for me in the living room, a newspaper in his hand. His face was lit up with a broad smile, his eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Devi," he said, holding up the newspaper, "you need to see this."

I walked over, my curiosity piqued, and took the paper from his hands. It was *The Times of India*, one of the country's most widely read and respected newspapers. And there, on the front page, was a photograph of me—standing on the stage at IIMT University, surrounded by the administrative body and Mr. Narinedatt. The caption read: *"Diaspora Daughter Honoured at IIMT University: Guyanese Visitor Devi Maharaj Receives Warm Welcome."*

I stared at the photograph, my mouth agape. I could not believe it. There I was, on the front page of one of India's most prestigious newspapers, my face looking back at me from the glossy pages. I felt a surge of emotion—shock, joy, disbelief—all mingling together in a whirlwind of emotions.

"I can't believe this," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "This is... this is incredible."

Mr. Narinedatt smiled, his eyes warm with pride. "It's well deserved," he said. "Your story has touched so many people, Devi. You are not just a visitor to India—you are a symbol of the enduring connection between the diaspora and the homeland."

I read the article, my eyes scanning the words. It told the story of my journey—the threats, the fear, the escape. It spoke of my mother's dream, the promise I had made to her, and the courage I had shown in coming to India. It described my visit to IIMT University, my amazement at the campus and the students, and my emotional response to the lecture.

And there, at the end, was a quote from me—a simple statement that seemed to capture everything I was feeling: *"India is not just a country. It is a feeling, a homecoming, a promise fulfilled."*

I felt tears stream down my face as I read the words

"Thank you," I said to Mr. Narinedatt, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for everything. I don't know how I can ever repay you."

"You already have," he said, his voice gentle. "By being here. By opening your heart to India. By allowing yourself to be transformed. That is the greatest gift you could ever give."

I nodded, clutching the newspaper to my chest. I would treasure this always—not just the photograph, but the memory of this moment, this journey, this homecoming.

India had changed me in ways I was only beginning to understand.

PART FIVE: THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Jaipur

Chapter Eighteen: The Palaces of Jaipur

The following weekend, we set off on a road trip to Jaipur—the Pink City. The drive through Rajasthan was spectacular, the landscape transforming from the green fields of Delhi to the arid plains and golden deserts of the west. The road wound through small villages and bustling towns, past camels and elephants, past women in colourful saris and men in turbans.

I pressed my face against the window, greedily drinking in every shred of detail I could, my eyes wide with wonder as the scenery unfolded before me. The lush greenery of Delhi gradually gave way to the dry, golden expanse of Rajasthan—a land of ancient forts and royal palaces, desert sands, and vibrant culture. The villages we passed were clusters of mud-brick houses, their walls painted with bright murals and geometric patterns. Women in colourful saris worked in the fields, their dupattas fluttering in the warm breeze. Men in turbans sat by the side of the road, their faces weathered by the sun, their expressions serene and knowing.

Along the roadside, I saw camels plodding along with majestic grace, their long necks swaying, their large eyes calm and wise. Elephants lumbered through the villages, their massive bodies adorned with painted patterns and bells that chimed with each step. Children ran alongside the road, waving at our passing car, their laughter carrying through the air like music.

"This is incredible," I breathed, my voice filled with wonder.

Mr. Narinedatt smiled, his eyes warm with pride. "Rajasthan is the land of kings," he said. "It is a place of legends and stories, of valour and romance. Every fort, every palace, every village has a tale to tell."

As we drove through the countryside, I noticed vast expanses of rice fields stretching toward the horizon. The fields were a brilliant green; their paddies flooded with water that reflected the sky like mirrors. Farmers worked in the fields, their bodies bent over the rice plants, their hands moving with practiced precision. The sight stirred something deep within me—a connection to my ancestors, who had worked the rice fields of Berbice, who had toiled under the Guyanese sun to build a new life in a new land.

"Can we stop?" I asked, my voice filled with a sudden urgency. "I want to see the rice fields up close."

Mr. Narinedatt looked at me, his eyes curious but kind. "Of course," he said. "Mr. Ravindra, please pull over."

We stopped at the edge of a rice field, and I stepped out of the car, my feet sinking into the soft earth. The air was warm and humid, carrying the scent of wet soil and growing plants. I walked along the edge of the field, my heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and reverence.

A farmer looked up as I approached, his face weathered by years of work in the sun. He was an old man, his skin like leather, his hands calloused and strong. But his eyes were

kind, and he smiled at me with a warmth that transcended language.

"Namaste," I said, pressing my hands together. "May I... may I try?"

He nodded, understanding my intent even without words. He handed me a grass knife—a simple tool with a curved blade, its handle worn smooth by years of use. I took it in my hands, feeling its weight, its history. This was the same kind of tool that my ancestors had used, the tool that had shaped their lives and their futures.

I stepped into the rice field, the water cool against my bare feet. I bent over, my body awkward and unaccustomed to the movement. The farmer guided me, his hands gentle on my arms, showing me the proper way to hold the knife and the proper angle to cut the rice stalks.

I swung the knife, and the stalks fell with a soft rustle. I gathered them in my arms, feeling their weight and texture. The rice was golden and ripe, its grains plump and full. I had cut the rice, just as my ancestors had done, just as generations of farmers had done before me.

I carried the bundle of rice stalks to a flat area at the edge of the field, where the farmer had spread a large piece of cloth. He showed me how to beat the stalks against the ground, loosening the paddy from the chaff. I knelt down, taking a handful of stalks, and began to beat them against the cloth.

The rhythm was hypnotic—the thump of the stalks against the ground, the gentle rain of grain falling onto the cloth. I

lost myself in the movement, feeling a connection to something ancient and profound. I was not just cutting rice; I was honouring my ancestors, their labour, their sacrifice, and their love.

I thought about my mother, about the stories she had told me of her own mother, who had worked in the rice fields of Berbice. My grandmother had been a strong woman, a survivor, a woman who had never complained about the hardships of her life. She had worked from sunrise to sunset, her hands calloused, her back aching, but her spirit unbroken. She had done it for her children, for her family, and for the hope of a better future.

I thought about my ancestors who had crossed the *kala pani*, who had left their homeland and travelled across the ocean to an unknown land. They had arrived in Guyana with nothing but their faith and their courage, and they had built a new life from the ground up. They had worked the rice fields and the sugar cane fields, their labour feeding the nation, their resilience shaping the future.

I was doing this for them. I was honouring their memory, their sacrifice, and their love. I was connecting to them in a way that words could never capture.

The farmer watched me with a gentle smile; his eyes filled with approval. He said something in Hindi, and Mr. Narinedatt translated. "He says you have the spirit of a true farmer. He says your ancestors are proud of you."

I felt tears stream down my face, and I let them fall. I had come to India seeking connection, seeking home. And in this simple act—cutting rice with a grass knife, beating the

stalks to loosen the paddy—I had found it. I had found a connection to my ancestors, to my heritage, and to the land that had shaped them and shaped me.

We spent an hour in the rice fields, and I learnt more in that time than I had in months of reading and studying. The farmer taught me about the different varieties of rice, about the rhythms of planting and harvesting, about the challenges and joys of working the land. He spoke of his family, his children and grandchildren, and his hopes for their future. He spoke of the land, its beauty and its bounty, its ability to sustain life and nurture dreams.

When it was time to leave, I hugged the farmer, my tears soaking into his worn cotton shirt. He patted my back gently, his voice soft and reassuring. "You are welcome here, beta," he said, the words translated by Mr. Narinedatt. "This land is yours too. It will always welcome you."

I walked back to the car, my heart full, my spirit light. I had cut rice with my own hands, beaten the stalks myself, and felt the connection to my ancestors in a way that I had never felt before. It was a gift beyond measure, a moment of grace that I would carry with me always.

We continued our journey to Jaipur, the rice fields fading into the distance. But the feeling of connection remained, a warmth in my heart that I could not shake. I had touched the land, worked it with my own hands, honoured the memory of those who had come before me. And I knew that I would never forget it.

When we arrived in Jaipur, I was immediately struck by the city's unique beauty. The buildings were painted in shades of pink and terracotta, their facades glowing warmly in the sunlight. It was as if the entire city had been dipped in rose, creating a vision that was both romantic and majestic.

"This is the Pink City," Mr. Narinedatt said, gesturing out the window. "Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II painted the entire city pink in 1876 to welcome the Prince of Wales. The colour has become a symbol of Jaipur's hospitality and charm."

I drank in the sights around me—the bustling streets filled with rickshaws and vendors, the vibrant bazaars spilling over with textiles and jewellery, and the magnificent palaces that rose above the chaos like sentinels of a bygone era. The air was filled with the scents of spices and incense, and marigolds and sandalwood. It was a city of contrasts, where the ancient and the modern coexisted in a dance of colour and life.

Our first stop was the Hawa Mahal, the Palace of Winds. The structure rose before me like a honeycomb of pink sandstone, its intricately carved windows and balconies stretching five storeys into the sky. The façade was breath-taking—a symphony of arches and screens, each one adorned with delicate lattice work that created a mesmerising pattern of light and shadow.

I stood at the base of the palace, my neck craned upward, my heart filled with wonder. The Hawa Mahal was not a palace in the traditional sense—it was a façade, a screen

that had been built for the royal women to observe the city without being seen themselves. The windows were designed so that the women could watch the processions and festivals below, their presence hidden from the public eye.

"It's beautiful," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can almost imagine the queens and princesses standing behind these windows, watching the world go by."

Mr. Narinedatt nodded, his eyes thoughtful. "The Hawa Mahal was built for privacy," he said. "The women of the royal household could observe the outside world without being observed. It was a way of maintaining their dignity and their freedom, even within the confines of the palace."

We entered the palace, and I climbed the narrow staircases that wound through the interior. Each floor offered a new perspective, a new view of the city below. The windows were designed to catch the breeze, their screens acting as natural air conditioning, cooling the interior even on the hottest days.

From the top floor, I looked out over the city of Jaipur. The Pink City stretched out before me like a living painting—a sea of terracotta and rose, temples and bazaars, life and colour. I could see the markets bustling below, the streets teeming with people, and the distant silhouette of the Amber Fort rising on the horizon. The view was breath-taking, and I felt a sense of connection to the women who had stood in this very spot centuries before, their lives so

different from mine, yet their hopes and dreams so similar.

Our next stop was the City Palace, the heart of Jaipur's royal heritage. The palace was a magnificent complex of courtyards and gardens, museums and galleries, and grand halls and intimate chambers. It was a living museum, a testament to the opulence and artistry of the Rajput kings who had ruled this land.

We entered through the massive gates, their surfaces adorned with ornamental motifs and brass studs. The courtyard opened before me like a vision—a vast expanse of marble and sandstone, adorned with fountains and sculptures, with pavilions and colonnades. The palace was a blend of Rajput and Mughal architectural styles, a fusion that created a unique and magnificent beauty.

We walked through the courtyards, marvelling at the intricate marble work and delicate frescoes that covered every surface. The walls were adorned with paintings that told the stories of the kings and their conquests, their loves and their losses. I saw images of royal processions and epic battles, of celestial beings and mythical creatures. Every corner revealed a new treasure, a new story, and a new glimpse into the rich history of Rajasthan.

We visited the Peacock Gate, one of the most famous features of the City Palace. The gate was a stunning example of Rajput artistry—its surface covered in intricate engravings of peacocks, their feathers spread in a magnificent display of colour and detail. The peacocks were rendered in vibrant shades of blue and green, their

eyes glittering with precious stones, their tails a cascade of intricate patterns.

"This is exquisite," I said, my fingers tracing the delicate carvings. "I've never seen anything like it."

"The peacock is a symbol of grace and beauty in Indian culture," Mr. Narinedatt explained. "It is also the National Bird of India. The Rajput kings were known for their love of beauty and their patronage of the arts."

We continued through the palace, passing through halls filled with silver urns and magnificent chandeliers. The silver urns were enormous—some large enough to hold a person—and they had been used to transport water from the holy Ganges River for the royal household. The chandeliers were crystal masterpieces, their light refracting into a thousand rainbows that danced across the walls and ceilings.

The museum galleries were filled with treasures—ancient weapons and royal costumes, meticulously painted manuscripts, and exquisite miniatures. I saw swords with jewelled hilts and shields adorned with gold. I saw saris embroidered with threads of silver and pearl. I saw paintings so delicate and detailed that they seemed to breathe with life.

We visited the Jantar Mantar, the massive astronomical observatory that stood in the heart of the city. The Jantar Mantar was a collection of towering instruments and geometric structures, built to measure the movements of the heavens with incredible precision.

I stood before the Samrat Yantra, a massive sundial that rose high above the ground. Its shadow moved across the surface, marking the passage of time with an accuracy that was breath-taking. I could see the lines and markings on the stone, each one representing a fraction of time, a moment in the vast dance of the cosmos.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice filled with awe. "How did they build something so precise without modern technology?"

Mr. Narinedatt smiled, his eyes shining with pride. "The Rajput kings were not just warriors and rulers; they were scholars and scientists. Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, who built this observatory, was a brilliant astronomer and mathematician. He understood the movements of the stars and planets, and he created these instruments to study them. They are still accurate today, after more than three centuries."

I walked among the instruments, touching the cool stone, feeling the weight of history and knowledge. There were instruments to measure the position of the sun, the moon, and the planets. There were instruments to calculate eclipses and predict the movements of celestial bodies. Each one was a masterpiece of engineering and science, a testimony to the genius of the human mind.

I looked up at the sky, the blue expanse stretching endlessly above me. The same stars that the Maharaja had studied were still there, still shining, still dancing in their cosmic patterns. I felt a sense of connection to him, to all the scholars and seekers who had looked up at the sky and

wondered, who had sought to understand the mysteries of the universe.

We climbed to the top of a nearby fort, the view of Jaipur spread out before us like a living panorama. The Pink City glowed in the afternoon sun, its buildings a symphony of terracotta and rose, its streets a labyrinth of life and colour. I could see the Amber Fort in the distance, its walls rising against the sky like a sentinel of history.

"It's incredible," I said, standing at the top of the fort, looking out at the city below. "I can't believe how beautiful this is."

"Jaipur is the jewel of Rajasthan," Mr. Narinedatt said. "And you haven't even seen the best part yet."

I turned to him, my eyes wide with curiosity. "The best part? What could be better than this?"

He smiled mysteriously, his eyes twinkling. "The Amber Fort," he said. "It's not far from here. Tomorrow, we will visit it together. You will see what I mean."

I nodded; my heart filled with anticipation. I had seen so much already, experienced so much beauty. But there was always more to discover, more to explore. India was a country of endless wonders, and I was determined to see as much of it as I could.

As the sun began to set, we made our way back to the car. The sky was painted in shades of orange and pink, the city bathed in a soft, golden light. I felt a sense of peace and gratitude wash over me, a feeling that I had been given a gift beyond measure.

I had seen palaces and forts, observatories, and museums. I had walked through courtyards and gardens, climbed towers and staircases. I had touched stones that had been carved centuries ago, stood where kings and queens had once stood. And I had cut rice in the fields, beaten the stalks to loosen the paddy, and felt the connection to my ancestors in a way that words could never capture.

I had come to India seeking connection, seeking home. And I had found both—not just in the temples and monuments, but in the fields and villages, in the kindness of strangers, and in the simple act of working the land with my own hands. I had found a connection to my ancestors, to my heritage, and to the land that had shaped them and shaped me.

"This has been one of the most incredible days of my life," I said to Mr. Narinedatt as we drove back to our hotel. "Thank you for bringing me here."

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "The journey is just beginning, Devi," he said. "There is so much more to see, so much more to discover. And you will not walk this path alone—I will be right beside you."

I leaned my head against the window, watching the lights of Jaipur twinkle in the twilight. I was in India, surrounded by beauty, history, and kindness.

Chapter Nineteen: The Taj Mahal

The next day, we drove to Agra to visit the Taj Mahal. I had seen pictures of the monument countless times and read about its history and beauty, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was actually seeing.

The journey from Jaipur to Agra took us through the heart of Uttar Pradesh, the landscape shifting from the arid plains of Rajasthan to the lush greenery of the Gangetic Plains. As we drove, Mr. Narinedatt began to tell me the story of the Taj Mahal—a story of love, loss, and devotion that would linger in my memory for all my days.

"The Taj Mahal was built by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in memory of his beloved wife, Mumtaz Mahal, the Jewel of the Palace," he began, his voice soft and reverent. "She was his third wife, but she was the love of his life, his soulmate, his greatest companion. They were married for nineteen years, and during that time, she bore him fourteen children. She was his confidante, his advisor, and his greatest source of joy and comfort."

I listened, captivated by the story. I had heard of the Taj Mahal, of course—everyone had. But I had never heard the story behind it, the human story of love and loss that had inspired one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

"According to legend, Mumtaz Mahal was with Shah Jahan on a military campaign in 1631 when she went into labour with their fourteenth child," Mr. Narinedatt continued. "The birth was difficult, and despite the best efforts of the

royal physicians, she died shortly after giving birth. Her last wish was for Shah Jahan to build a monument to their love—a tomb so beautiful that the world would remember their love for eternity."

My vision blurred as tears threatened to spill as I listened. The story was so tragic, so romantic, so deeply human. A man who had lost the love of his life, a man who had been so consumed by grief that he had dedicated the rest of his life to honouring her memory. It was a story that transcended time and culture, a story that spoke to the universal human experience of love and loss.

"Shah Jahan was devastated by her death," Mr. Narinedatt said. "He went into mourning for two years, emerging only to begin the construction of the Taj Mahal. He spared no expense, no effort, and no resource. He brought artisans from all over the world—from India, Persia, Turkey, and Europe—to work on the monument. Over twenty thousand workers laboured for over twenty years to complete it. It is said that the emperor wept every day as he watched the construction progress, his heart still broken, his love still burning."

We arrived at the Taj Mahal in the morning, and I stepped out of the car, my heart pounding with anticipation. The monument rose before me like a vision, its white marble gleaming in the morning sun, its domes and minarets reaching toward the sky like a prayer made manifest. The Taj Mahal was even more beautiful than I had imagined—its surface shimmering with an ethereal glow, its proportions perfect and harmonious.

I walked toward the entrance, my steps slow and reverent. The gardens were lush and green; their pathways lined with fountains and flowering trees. The reflection of the Taj shimmered in the long pools of water that stretched toward the monument, creating a mirror image that was almost more beautiful than the real thing.

I passed through the massive gateway, its red sandstone walls adorned with detailed calligraphy and floral patterns. The arch framed the Taj Mahal perfectly, as if it had been designed specifically to showcase the monument's beauty. I stood there for a moment, taking it all in, feeling tears streaming down my face.

The Taj Mahal rose like a dream against the pale blue sky, its white marble gleaming in the morning sun. The byzantine carvings and inlay work were breath-taking, and I felt tears streaming down my face as I stood in its shadow. Every surface was covered in delicate floral patterns and geometric designs, each one a masterpiece of artistry and devotion. The inlay work was particularly stunning—precious stones of lapis lazuli, jade, turquoise, and carnelian had been carefully set into the marble to create patterns that seemed to glow with an inner light.

I reached out and touched the cool marble, my fingers tracing the delicate carvings. The stone was smooth and warm beneath my fingertips, as if it had absorbed the heat of the sun and the love of the emperor who had built it. I could feel the history of the place, the grief and the devotion that had gone into its creation.

"This is beyond anything I could have imagined," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "I can't believe it's real."

"It's a symbol of love," Mr. Narinedatt said, his voice soft and reverent. "A monument to a great emperor's grief and devotion. That's what makes it so powerful. Shah Jahan poured his heart and soul into this building, and it shows in every detail, every carving, every stone."

We spent hours exploring the Taj, walking through its gardens and halls, marvelling at its beauty and grandeur. I felt a sense of peace and contentment settle over me. The marble was cool beneath my feet, the air filled with the scent of flowers and the gentle sound of fountains. It was a place of serenity, a sanctuary of love and memory.

We entered the main mausoleum, where the cenotaphs of Shah Jahan and Mumtaz Mahal lay side by side. The interior was dimly lit, the light filtering through the delicate marble screens that covered the windows. The atmosphere was reverent and peaceful, the silence broken only by the soft footsteps of visitors and the distant sound of birdsong.

I stood before the cenotaphs; my hands pressed together in a gesture of respect. The marble was intricately carved, covered in delicate floral patterns and verses from the Quran. The cenotaph of Mumtaz Mahal lay at the centre of the chamber, her name carved in beautiful calligraphy. Beside it, slightly off-centre, lay the cenotaph of Shah Jahan—a later addition, placed there by his son after his death.

"They say that Shah Jahan wanted to build a black marble mausoleum for himself across the river," Mr. Narinedatt whispered. "A mirror image of the Taj Mahal, connected by a bridge of silver. But he was deposed by his own son before he could fulfil that dream. He spent his final years imprisoned in Agra Fort, gazing at the Taj Mahal from his window, his heart still aching for the love he had lost."

I felt tears stream down my face as I listened. The story was so tragic, so heart-breaking. A man who had built the most beautiful monument in the world for his beloved wife, only to be imprisoned and forced to watch it from afar in his final years. It was a story of love and loss, of devotion and despair, of the enduring power of the human heart.

We walked through the gardens; their paths lined with cypress trees that symbolised death and immortality. The flowers were in full bloom, their petals a riot of colour—roses and marigolds, jasmine and lilies. The air was fragrant and sweet, carrying the scent of blossoms and the distant sound of birdsong.

I sat on a marble bench, looking out at the Taj Mahal reflected in the long pool of water. The monument seemed to float in the air, its white marble glowing in the sunlight, its domes and minarets reaching toward the sky. It was a vision of perfect beauty, a witness to the power of love and the endurance of the human spirit.

"This is the most peaceful place I've ever been," I said, my voice soft. "I feel like I could stay here forever."

"Many people feel that way," Mr. Narinedatt said. "The Taj Mahal has a way of touching your soul, of reminding you of what truly matters in life. Love, devotion, and memory—these are the things that remain long after we are gone."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. I had come to India seeking connection, seeking home. And in this beautiful monument, built by a grieving emperor for his beloved wife, I had found a reminder of the love that connected us all.

As the sun began to set, we made our way back to the entrance. I paused at the gate, turning to look back at the Taj Mahal one last time. The monument was bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, its marble glowing with an almost ethereal beauty. I knew, in that instant, that I would never fully leave this place behind. It would remain a memory of love and loss and the enduring power of the human heart.

"Thank you," I said to Mr. Narinedatt, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for bringing me here. This has been one of the most incredible experiences of my life."

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "The Taj Mahal is a gift to the world," he said. "It is a reminder that love is the most powerful force in the universe. It can overcome death, it can transcend time, and it can create beauty that lasts for eternity."

I nodded, my heart full of gratitude and peace. I had seen the Taj Mahal, had walked through its gardens and halls, had touched its marble and felt its history. And I knew that

I would never forget it, that it would always be a part of me, a symbol of the love that connected us all.

Chapter Twenty: The Elephants and Camels

In Jaipur, I had the chance to ride an elephant and a camel. The elephant was a majestic creature, its skin rough and wrinkled, its eyes gentle and wise. I climbed onto its back with the help of a guide, and we set off on a slow, swaying journey through the streets of Jaipur.

The morning had begun with a sense of anticipation that I could barely contain. Mr. Narinedatt had told me the night before, that I would have the opportunity to ride an elephant through the streets of the Pink City, and I had hardly slept, my mind filled with images of this magnificent creature carrying me through its ancient streets. When I woke, I dressed quickly in a light cotton kurta, my heart racing with excitement.

The elephant was waiting for us at the base of Amber Fort, its massive body a testament to the power and grace of nature. It was a female elephant, her skin a deep grey, her body covered in exquisite patterns of red and gold paint applied for a festival. Her tusks were short and rounded, her trunk long and expressive, moving with a grace that seemed almost human. Her eyes were the most striking feature—deep and dark, filled with a wisdom that spoke of centuries of coexistence with humans.

"Her name is Lakshmi," the mahout said, his voice soft and reverent. "She is a gentle soul. She will take good care of you."

I approached her slowly, my hand extended, my heart pounding. She reached out with her trunk, her touch

gentle and curious. She smelled me, her trunk brushing against my face, my hair, and my hands. I felt a surge of connection, a sense of trust that was both humbling and profound.

"May I climb on?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

The mahout nodded, producing a rope ladder from a bag at his side. He hooked it onto the howdah—the ornate carriage that sat on the elephant's back—and gestured for me to climb. I took a deep breath and began to ascend, the rope swaying beneath my weight. When I reached the top, I settled into the cushioned seat, my hands gripping the railings, my heart racing with a mixture of fear and exhilaration.

The elephant rose, her movements slow and deliberate. I felt myself lifted into the air, the world dropping away beneath me. I was high above the ground, looking down at the crowd below—the tourists and vendors, the children and families, their faces tilted upward, their eyes wide with wonder. I felt like a queen, like a Maharani from a bygone era, surveying her kingdom from the back of her royal mount.

We set off on a slow, swaying journey through the streets of Jaipur. The elephant's gait was rhythmic and hypnotic, her massive feet padding softly against the pavement. The howdah swayed gently with each step, and I held on to the railings, feeling a sense of peace settle over me.

The streets of Jaipur were a riot of colour and sound—vendors calling out their wares, children running and

laughing, rickshaws weaving through the traffic. The buildings were painted in shades of pink and terracotta, their façades adorned with ornate carvings and delicate balconies. The sun was warm on my face, the breeze cool and fragrant.

I waved to the people on the streets, and they waved back, their faces lit up with smiles. Children ran alongside the elephant, their laughter echoing through the air. Vendors held up their wares, hoping to catch my attention, their voices rising above the noise of the city. I felt a sense of connection to them, to the city, and to the moment.

It was a surreal experience.

We passed through the narrow lanes of the old city, the buildings pressing close on either side. I could see the finely wrought designs etched into every stone surface, the delicate jharokhas—the overhanging balconies that had once been used by royal women to observe the streets below. I imagined them standing there, their faces hidden behind screens, watching the processions and festivals of their time. And now, here I was, riding through the same streets, my face visible to all, my heart open and free.

The mahout guided the elephant through the crowds, his voice soft and reassuring. He spoke to her in Hindi, his words a gentle stream of encouragement. She responded with a low rumble, her trunk reaching out to touch his hand, her eyes filled with trust and affection.

"Lakshmi is a good girl," he said, turning to me with a smile. "She loves people. She knows you are a guest, and she wants you to be happy."

I reached down and patted her head, her skin rough and warm beneath my hand. "Thank you, Lakshmi," I said, my voice filled with gratitude. "Thank you for carrying me."

She responded with a low trumpet, her trunk rising into the air. It was a sound of joy, of connection, and of shared humanity.

The elephant ride lasted for about an hour, and by the end, I felt transformed. I had seen the city from a new perspective, had felt the rhythm of its streets, and had connected with its people and its history. I climbed down from the howdah, my legs shaky, my heart full.

"Thank you," I said to the mahout, pressing a few rupees into his hand. "Thank you for this incredible experience."

He bowed, his eyes warm with gratitude. "You are welcome, madam. May Lakshmi bless you with good fortune."

I hugged the elephant's trunk, feeling her warmth and her presence. "Thank you, Lakshmi," I whispered. "I will never forget you."

The camel ride was equally memorable. We rode across the desert sands, the sun setting in a blaze of orange and red. I felt small and humble, surrounded by the vast beauty of the landscape.

The camel was a tall, elegant creature with a long neck and large, expressive eyes. His name was Raja, the mahout told me—a fitting name for a creature of such dignity and grace. He knelt on the ground, his legs folding beneath him, and I climbed onto his back, settling into the saddle with the help of the mahout.

Raja rose with a slow, graceful movement, and I felt myself lifted into the air. The world opened up around me—the vast expanse of the desert, the golden sands stretching toward the horizon, the sky a canvas of colour. We set off at a gentle pace, the camel's gait a smooth, rhythmic motion that was both relaxing and exhilarating.

The sun was beginning to set, casting long shadows across the desert. The sky was a blaze of orange and red; the clouds painted in shades of gold and pink. The sand beneath us seemed to glow with an inner light, its surface rippled by the wind.

The desert was a place of silence and stillness, a place where the noise of the world faded away and only the essential remained. I thought about my journey, about the struggles and the triumphs, about the people I had met and the lessons I had learnt. I also thought about my mother.

I was here, in India, riding a camel across the desert at sunset. I was living the dream she had never been able to fulfil. And I felt her presence with me, her love guiding me.

Raja carried me through the desert, his steps steady and sure. The wind blew across my face, carrying the scent of sand and spice. I closed my eyes, letting the rhythm of the

journey wash over me, feeling a sense of peace that I had not felt in a long time.

The mahout sang a soft song, his voice rising and falling with the rhythm of the camel's steps. It was a song in Rajasthani, its words a mixture of love and longing, of joy and sorrow. I did not understand the words, but I felt their meaning—a connection to the land, to the people, and to the endless beauty of the desert.

When the sun finally dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in shades of purple and blue, we turned back toward the city. The lights of Jaipur twinkled in the distance, a beacon of warmth and life. I rode in silence, my heart full, my spirit at peace.

As we approached the edge of the city, the mahout guided Raja to a stop. I climbed down from the saddle, my legs shaky, my heart overflowing with gratitude. I placed a generous sum in the mahout's palm, then pressed my cheek to Raja's rough skin and whispered my gratitude into his ear.

"Thank you, Raja," I said. "Thank you for this beautiful journey."

Raja blinked his large, dark eyes and let out a soft grunt, as if in acknowledgment. I smiled, feeling a connection to this creature, this moment, and this place.

I walked back to the car, my steps slow and deliberate. The desert night was cool and clear, and the stars were scattered across the darkness like shards of frozen light. I

felt a sense of wonder and gratitude wash over me, a feeling that I had been given a gift beyond measure.

"Thank you," I said to Mr. Narinedatt as we drove back to the hotel. "I came here expecting nothing, and you gave me everything. Thank you."

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "The journey is not over yet, Devi. There is so much more to see, so much more to experience. But I'm glad you enjoyed today. It is a day you will never forget."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. I had ridden an elephant through the streets of the Pink City, had felt like a Maharani, a queen from a vanished time. I had ridden a camel across the desert sands, had felt small and humble beneath the vast beauty of the night sky. I had connected with the land, the people, and the spirit of India.

And I knew that I would carry these memories with me always—a reminder of the beauty and wonder of this incredible country, a testament to the power of dreams, and a tribute to the love that had brought me here.

The drive back from Jaipur to Delhi was a journey of reflection, the golden landscapes of Rajasthan slowly giving way to the familiar bustle of the capital. As we left the Pink City behind, I watched the palaces and forts fade into the distance, their silhouettes growing smaller against the vast blue sky. The road wound through small villages and towns, past fields of mustard and wheat, past women in colourful saris balancing pots on their heads, and past children waving at our passing car. The landscape shifted from the deserts of Rajasthan to the lush foliage of Uttar

Pradesh, the transformation gradual but unmistakable. I sat in silence for much of the journey, my mind replaying the memories of the past few days—the majestic Amber Fort, the elaborate Hawa Mahal, the grandeur of the City Palace, the breath-taking ride on Lakshmi the elephant, and the serene sunset camel ride with Raja across the desert sands. I thought about the stories I had heard, the people I had met, and the connections I had made. The journey had been transformative, a reminder of the beauty and complexity of India and of the resilience and grace of its people. As the outskirts of Delhi began to appear on the horizon, I felt a sense of both sadness and anticipation—sadness that the adventure was ending, and anticipation for what still lay ahead. India had already given me so much, and I knew that the memories of Jaipur—of the elephants and camels, of the palaces and forts—would be cherished, a treasure trove of moments that I would carry in my heart always.

Chapter Twenty-one: Delhi

The beauty of India was undeniable—the palaces, the temples, the monuments, the rich tapestry of culture and history that had captivated my heart from the moment I arrived. But there was another side to India, a side that was harder to see, harder to accept, harder to reconcile with the beauty that surrounded it. It was the India of poverty and struggle, of people living in shacks on the roadsides, of children begging at traffic lights, of families bathing, drinking, and defecating in the same rivers they worshipped.

I had seen poverty in Guyana, of course. I had grown up in Berbice, had seen the struggles of the sugar cane workers, the rice farmers, the families who lived in small wooden houses with tin roofs. But the poverty in India was different. It was more visible, more pervasive, more heart-breaking. It was everywhere—on the streets, in the slums, along the riverbanks. It was impossible to ignore.

As we drove through the streets of Delhi, I pressed my face against the cold glass, devouring every last detail with my eyes, which were wide with a mixture of shock and sorrow. The roads were lined with makeshift shacks—structures of corrugated metal, plastic sheeting, and discarded wood, their walls patched together with whatever materials could be found. They were crammed together along the roadsides, their occupants living in conditions that were almost unimaginable.

I saw families huddled in these shacks—mothers with infants in their arms, fathers cooking over small fires, and children playing in the dirt. Their clothes were torn and dirty, their faces smudged with grime, their eyes holding a weariness that seemed far beyond their years. They lived in the shadows of the gleaming glass towers and modern buildings, their existence a stark contrast to the prosperity that surrounded them.

I saw a woman sitting on the ground outside her shack, her hands working quickly as she sorted through a pile of garbage. She was searching for scraps of food, for anything that could be salvaged, anything to feed her children. Her face was lined with worry, her eyes hollow with exhaustion. She looked up as our car passed, and I saw the hope in her eyes—the desperate, aching hope that someone might stop, might help, might change her life.

I turned away, unable to bear the weight of her gaze. I felt tears prick my eyes, overwhelmed by emotion. I wanted to help, wanted to reach out, wanted to do something. But I was just one person, a visitor, a stranger. What could I possibly do?

I turned to Mr. Narinedatt and asked him to tell the driver to stop. He raised an eyebrow, puzzled, and asked why. I couldn't find the words at first—how do you explain a pull that strong?—so I simply pointed. There was the woman, a mother hunched over her child with nothing but dust at her feet and desperation in her eyes. I told him I couldn't just pass by, couldn't pretend I hadn't seen her. He nodded slowly, something shifting in his gaze, and gave the order. I stepped out of the car and approached her slowly, not

wanting to startle her. She looked up, wary and worn, her child clinging to her ragged sari. I knelt down and pressed some money into her palm—more than I usually carried, enough, I hoped, to buy food for a few days. She stared at it, then at me, and I saw something change in her face: surprise, disbelief, then a gratitude so raw it nearly undid me. She clutched my hand and murmured a blessing I couldn't understand but felt in my bones. I smiled, nodded, and walked back to the car, carrying her face with me like a wound I didn't want to heal.

We drove along the banks of the Yamuna River, and what I saw there broke my heart. The river was dark and murky; its surface covered with debris and pollution. But despite its condition, it was teeming with people—families bathing in the water, their bodies immersed in the murky depths, their children splashing and playing. Women washed clothes along the banks, their hands working the fabric against the stones, their movements practiced and efficient. Men stood in the water, their bodies bent as they performed their daily ablutions.

I watched in disbelief as a man cupped his hands and lifted the water to his lips, drinking from the same river where others were bathing, where children were playing, and where animals were wading. The water was brown and muddy; its surface covered in a film of scum. And yet, people were using it for everything—bathing, drinking, cooking, and washing.

"People use this water for drinking and cooking?" I asked Mr. Narinedatt, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, his face sombre. "The river is sacred to many Hindus," he said. "They believe that the water has purifying properties, that it can wash away sin and grant salvation. But the reality is that the river is heavily polluted. Industrial waste, sewage, and garbage—it all flows into the Yamuna. The people who use this water are consuming toxins that can make them sick, or even kill them."

I felt a wave of nausea wash over me. I had grown up with clean water, sanitation, and the basic necessities of life. I had never known what it was like to drink from a river, to bathe in water that was shared with animals and waste, or to cook with water that could make me sick. The reality of it was too much to comprehend.

"And they defecate in the same water?" I asked, my voice trembling.

Mr. Narinedatt nodded again. "Many people in India do not have access to proper sanitation. They are forced to defecate in the open, often near the rivers. The waste flows into the water, contaminating it further. It is a cycle of poverty and pollution that is very difficult to break."

We passed a temple on the riverbank, its ghats crowded with devotees. They stood in the water, their hands pressed together in prayer, their eyes closed in devotion. They were seeking blessings, seeking purification, seeking a connection to the divine. The irony was devastating—they were praying in the very water that was making them sick, seeking spiritual salvation from a source of physical illness.

I watched a woman immerse herself in the river, her sari clinging to her body, her face upturned toward the sky. She was praying with all her heart, her lips moving in silent supplication. And yet, as she emerged from the water, I could see the pollution clinging to her skin, the toxins seeping into her body. She was seeking purity from a source of impurity, and seeking health from a source of disease.

"How do they reconcile this?" I asked, my voice filled with confusion and sorrow. "How do they pray in water that is making them sick?"

"They have faith," Mr. Narinedatt said. "They believe that the river is sacred, that it has the power to purify. They may know, on some level, that the water is polluted, but their faith is stronger than their fear. They trust in the divine, even when the physical evidence tells them otherwise."

I shook my head, unable to understand. I had grown up with science, with logic, with the belief that the physical world operated according to predictable laws. The idea of praying in polluted water, of trusting in the divine to protect you from the toxins that surrounded you—it was a form of faith that I could not fully comprehend.

As we continued through the city, I saw more and more children begging on the streets. They were so young—some of them barely old enough to walk, their small bodies fragile and thin, their faces smudged with dirt and grime. They held out their hands as our car approached,

their eyes wide with desperation, their voices pleading for a rupee, some food, anything.

I saw a little girl, no more than three years old, running alongside our car as it slowed at a traffic light. Her feet were bare, her dress was torn, and her face was covered in a mixture of sweat and dust. She knocked on the window, her tiny fist tapping against the glass, her eyes filled with a hunger that was both physical and emotional.

"Please, Didi," she cried, her voice high and thin. "Please, please, give me something. I am hungry. My mother is sick. Please help me."

I felt my heart shatter into a thousand pieces. I reached into my bag, pulling out some rupees, and handed them to her through the window. She took them with a smile, her face lighting up with gratitude, and then she was gone, running toward another car, another potential source of charity.

I watched her disappear into the chaos of the traffic, her small body weaving through the cars with a skill that was both impressive and heart-breaking. She had learnt to survive on the streets, to navigate the dangers of the city, to extract what she could from strangers. But at what cost? What had she lost in the process?

I saw other children—older children, their bodies lean and hungry, their eyes sharp and calculating. They worked in groups, their movements coordinated, their strategies efficient. Some lifted smaller children onto their shoulders, using them to attract sympathy and money. Others ran across the busy roads with no regard for the traffic,

weaving through cars and rickshaws, their lives hanging by a thread.

I watched a small boy, no more than five years old, dart across the road in front of our car. The driver slammed on the brakes, and I heard the screech of tires, the blare of horns. The boy made it to the other side, but just barely. He was laughing, his face bright with excitement, as if he had just completed a game. He had no idea how close he had come to death, no idea how his life hung in the balance with every crossing.

"Why are they out here?" I asked Mr. Narinedatt, my voice choked with emotion. "Why aren't they in school? Why aren't they being cared for?"

"They are victims of poverty, Devi," he said, his voice heavy with sorrow. "Their families are desperate, unable to provide for them. The children are sent out to beg because it is the only way they can survive. Some are orphans, abandoned by families that cannot afford to feed them. Others are sent by their parents, who have no other option. It is a tragedy, but it is a reality that India faces every day."

I shook my head, feeling a sense of helplessness wash over me. I wanted to do something, wanted to change the situation, wanted to make a difference. But I was just one person, a visitor, a stranger. What could I possibly do?

"You can't save them all," Mr. Narinedatt said, as if reading my thoughts. "But you can help where you can. You can give what you can. You can treat them with kindness and dignity. And you can carry their stories with you, share

them with others, and hope that one day, things will change."

I nodded, feeling the impact of his words. I would carry their stories with me. I would share them with others. I would do what I could, even if it seemed small, even if it seemed insignificant.

As we drove away from the river, I looked back at the scene we were leaving behind—the shacks and the slums, the people bathing in the polluted water, the children begging on the streets. It was a scene that would stay with me forever, a reminder of the poverty and struggle that existed alongside the beauty and grandeur.

India was a land of contradictions—of palaces and shacks, sacred rivers and polluted waters, and devotion and despair. It was a land that could break your heart and heal it, all in the same moment. And I knew that I would carry this experience with me, a reminder of the complexity and beauty of the human condition.

I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. She had wanted to see India, to experience its beauty and its wisdom. But she had also known about its struggles, its challenges, its pain. She had taught me to see the beauty in all things, to find hope in the darkest moments, to believe that love could overcome any obstacle.

I closed my eyes and said a silent prayer—for the children on the streets, for the families in the shacks, for the people bathing in the polluted river. I prayed for their safety, their health, their future. I prayed that one day,

their lives would be better, that they would know the peace and comfort that they deserved.

And I carried their stories with me, a reminder of why I had come to India—not just to find my own connection, but to bear witness to the lives of others, to honour their struggles, and to hold them in my heart, always.

PART SIX: THE GRAND TOUR

Gujarat

Chapter Twenty-two: The Weekend in Gujarat

The weekend after we returned from Jaipur, Mr. Narinedatt invited me on a trip to Gujarat—a state in western India. It was a diplomatic event, with ambassadors from across the world in attendance. I had no idea what to expect, but I was excited.

The morning of our departure, I woke before dawn, my heart racing with anticipation. I had heard of Gujarat—the land of the White Desert, ancient stepwells, vibrant festivals, and rich textiles. It was a state I had dreamed of visiting, a place that seemed to embody the spirit of India in all its diversity and beauty. And now, I was being given the opportunity to experience it as part of a diplomatic delegation, surrounded by ambassadors and dignitaries from around the world.

I dressed carefully, choosing a silk saree in shades of deep blue and gold—a gift from Vanita before she left. The fabric was rich and luxurious; its surface embroidered with delicate patterns that caught the light. I pinned my hair back, applied a touch of lipstick, and looked at myself in the mirror. I hardly recognised the woman looking back at me—she was confident, radiant, and ready for whatever lay ahead.

Mr. Narinedatt was waiting for me in the living room, dressed in a neatly ironed white band-gala suit that spoke of elegance and authority. He smiled as I entered, his eyes warm with approval.

"You look beautiful," he said. "Are you ready for Gujarat?"

"More than ready," I said, my voice bright with excitement.

We drove to the airport, where a private jet was waiting for us. The plane was sleek and luxurious, its interior appointed with leather seats and polished wood. I settled into my seat, feeling a sense of wonder wash over me. I had never flown on a private jet before, and I had never imagined I would have such an opportunity. It felt surreal, like a dream I was afraid to wake from.

The plane was filled with ambassadors from across the world—diplomats from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, their faces a mosaic of cultures and traditions. They greeted each other with warm handshakes and polite smiles, their conversations a symphony of languages and accents. I felt a sense of awe, surrounded by so much power and influence, by people who had dedicated their lives to building bridges between nations.

Mr. Narinedatt introduced me to several of them, his voice warm and proud. "This is Devi," he would say. "She is a friend visiting India from Guyana."

They would smile and shake my hand; their eyes filled with curiosity and kindness. "Welcome," they would say. "India is a wonderful country. You will love it."

I felt a sense of gratitude wash over me, a gratitude for this opportunity, this journey, this life. I had come so far, overcome so much, and now I was sitting on a private jet with ambassadors from around the world, about to experience something truly extraordinary.

As the plane lifted off the ground, I turned to the window and absorbed every detail, watching the city of Delhi grow smaller beneath me. The landscape transformed—the green fields giving way to the arid plains of Gujarat, the rivers and lakes appearing like silver threads against the golden earth. I felt a sense of adventure, of possibility, of the unknown.

The flight was short, and soon we were descending toward Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat. The airport was a hub of activity, with diplomats and officials bustling about, their faces serious and focused. I followed Mr. Narinedatt through the terminal, my heels clicking against the polished floor, my heart pounding with a mixture of excitement and nervousness.

As we stepped out of the airport, I was immediately struck by the scene before us. An air-conditioned bus was waiting, its windows gleaming in the afternoon sun, its interior cool and inviting. But before we could board, we were greeted by a spectacle that took my breath away.

A group of young people in vibrant traditional costumes had gathered on the tarmac. The girls wore colourful chaniya cholis, their skirts swirling with embroidered patterns, their dupattas fluttering in the breeze. The boys wore kediyu and chorno, their outfits bright and cheerful, their turbans adding a touch of regal elegance. They were dancers, their bodies poised and ready, their faces lit up with smiles of anticipation.

As the ambassadors and their spouses descended from the plane, the music began—the rhythmic beat of drums, the

melodic sound of flutes, the joyful clapping of hands. The dancers moved with grace and precision, their steps synchronised, their bodies swaying to the rhythm. They performed a traditional Garba dance, their movements a celebration of life and joy, of devotion and community.

I watched, mesmerised, as they twirled and clapped, their faces glowing with happiness. The energy was infectious, and I found myself clapping along, my body swaying to the beat. It was a welcome like no other, a celebration of Gujarat's rich cultural heritage, a gift of beauty and joy.

As the dance came to an end, the performers bowed, their faces beaming with pride. The ambassadors applauded, their faces filled with appreciation and wonder.

Then came the greeting ceremony. A group of officials and young women stepped forward, each carrying beautiful garlands of marigolds and roses. They approached the diplomats one by one, placing the garlands around their necks with reverence and grace. A tilak was placed on each forehead—a mark of red powder that symbolised blessing and welcome.

I watched as the ambassadors received their honours, their faces glowing with appreciation. They were being welcomed to Gujarat, to India, to a land that had opened its arms to them. It was a moment of connection, of unity, of shared humanity.

And then, it was my turn. A young woman stepped forward, her face lit up with a warm smile. She placed a garland around my neck, the flowers fragrant and vibrant,

their petals soft against my skin. Another woman placed a tilak on my forehead, her touch gentle and reverent.

"Swagatam," they said in unison, their voices a chorus of welcome. "Welcome to Gujarat."

I felt tears stream down my face, the emotion of the moment overwhelming me. I was not an ambassador, not a dignitary, not a person of power or influence. I was just a woman from Guyana, a visitor, a stranger. And yet, they had welcomed me with the same warmth and grace as the diplomats, treating me with the same honour and respect.

"Thank you," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you. I don't know how to express my gratitude."

The young woman smiled, her eyes warm with kindness. "You are welcome here, madam," she said. "Gujarat is your home now. We are honoured to have you."

We boarded the air-conditioned bus, its interior cool and comfortable. I settled into a seat by the window, my garland still around my neck, my forehead still marked with the sacred tilak. I looked out at the scene we were leaving behind—the dancers waving goodbye, the officials bowing in respect, the airport bustling with activity. It was a moment I would never forget.

The bus carried us through the streets of Ahmedabad, past bustling markets and ancient temples, past modern glass towers and colonial-era buildings. The city was a symphony of colour and sound, its energy infectious, its beauty undeniable. I pressed my face against the window,

drinking in every detail, feeling a sense of wonder and gratitude.

"This is incredible," I said to Mr. Narinedatt, my voice filled with awe. "I can't believe how beautiful it is."

"Gujarat is a land of many wonders," he said, his voice warm with pride. "It is the land of Mahatma Gandhi, of Prime Minister Modi Ji, of the White Desert, of the world's tallest statue. It is a state that has embraced both tradition and modernity, and its people are some of the most hospitable in India."

We arrived at the hotel, a magnificent property that overlooked the Sabarmati River and were greeted by a scene of breath-taking grandeur—a long red carpet stretched from the entrance all the way to the main doors, its vibrant crimson a striking contrast to the ivory stone of the building. Hotel staff in elegant uniforms stood at attention on either side, their faces lit up with warm smiles of welcome. As we stepped off the air-conditioned bus, a line of young women approached us, each carrying a stunning bouquet of fresh flowers—fragrant roses, golden marigolds, and delicate jasmine, their petals still dewy and vibrant. With graceful reverence, they placed the bouquets into our arms, the sweet scent rising to meet our faces. Before we could even express our gratitude, another group of officials stepped forward, each holding a beautifully embroidered red scarf. One by one, they draped the scarves around our necks, their touch gentle and respectful. I looked down at the vibrant red fabric against my blue saree, feeling its softness, its warmth—a symbol of honour and welcome, of being embraced by this

land. The ambassadors and their spouses received the same treatment, their faces glowing with appreciation. I felt like royalty, like a dignitary of immense importance, and yet I was simply a woman from Guyana, a visitor, a stranger. But Gujarat had welcomed me like a daughter, treating me with the same honour and grace as the diplomats from around the world. I walked down the red carpet, my bouquet in my arms, my red scarf around my neck, my heart overflowing with gratitude and wonder. The warmth of the welcome, the beauty of the gesture, the kindness of the people—it was a moment I would carry with me forever, a memory of being truly and deeply welcomed into the heart of India.

I stood at the window, looking out at the scene before me. The Sabarmati River flowed gently below, its waters reflecting the golden light of the setting sun. The city was a tapestry of lights—the twinkling of streetlamps and the glow of windows, the distant shimmer of temples and monuments. It was a city of beauty and history, a city that had welcomed me with open arms.

I thought about the welcome I had received—the dancers, the garlands, and the tilaks. I thought about the kindness of the people, their warmth and generosity. I thought about the ambassadors and their spouses, their faces filled with appreciation and wonder.

I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. Gujarat had welcomed me like a daughter, and I would carry its memory in my heart forever.

Chapter Twenty-three: The Navratri Dance

The first night, we attended the Navratri festival—a nine-night celebration of dance and music, honouring the goddess Durga. We gathered in a huge open field where thousands of people had come to perform the dance for the nine nights. The energy was electric, and the atmosphere charged with devotion and joy. We were seated on a raised pavilion, looking out over the vast sea of dancers below.

I stood at the edge of the pavilion, my breath catching in my throat as I took in the scene before me. The field stretched out endlessly, a vast expanse of earth that had been transformed into a sacred space of celebration. Thousands upon thousands of people had gathered, their colourful traditional clothing creating a living tapestry of vibrant hues. The women wore stunning chaniya cholis, their skirts swirling with embroidered patterns, their dupattas shimmering with mirror work and gold thread. The men wore kediyu and chorno, their outfits bright and cheerful, their turbans adding a touch of regal elegance. The entire field seemed to pulse with colour and life, a kaleidoscope of humanity moving in perfect harmony.

The field was illuminated by countless lights—strings of bulbs crisscrossing overhead, giant floodlights casting a warm glow over the dancers, and the soft flicker of oil lamps placed around the perimeter. The night sky stretched above us, a canopy of stars that seemed to watch over the celebration below. The air was filled with

the scent of incense and marigolds, sweat and joy, and devotion and community.

The music rose from a massive stage at one end of the field, where a group of musicians played with passionate energy. The rhythm of the dhol echoed across the open space, its beats deep and resonant, vibrating through the earth beneath our feet. The melody of the flute soared above the crowd, its notes sweet and haunting. The voices of the singers rose in devotional chants, their words a tribute to the goddess Durga, their harmonies a celebration of her power and grace.

I watched in amazement as tens of thousands of men, women, and children performed the Garba, their movements synchronised in perfect harmony. They formed massive circles, their hands clapping in rhythmic patterns, their feet moving in intricate steps that seemed to tell a story of devotion and joy. The circles spun and swirled, the dancers moving as one, their bodies swaying to the rhythm of the music. It was a breath-taking sight, a sea of colour and movement that stretched as far as the eye could see.

The energy was irresistible, and even from the pavilion, I found myself clapping along, moving to the beat, feeling the joy and freedom of the dance. My feet tapped against the wooden floor, my body swaying to the music, my hands clapping in rhythm with the dancers below. I felt a sense of liberation, a release from the worries and fears that had weighed me down for so long. In this moment, there was only the music, only the dance, only the joy of being alive.

"This is incredible," I said to Mr. Narinedatt, shouting over the music. "I've never seen anything like this."

"It's one of the most beautiful traditions of Gujarat," he said, smiling. His eyes were bright with pride and joy, his body also swaying slightly to the rhythm. "This is the Navratri festival—nine nights of dance and devotion, honouring the goddess Durga. People come from all over the state, from all over the country, to participate. They dance through the night, their bodies offering a tribute to the divine, their hearts open and devoted."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. The dancers were not just performing—they were praying, their bodies offering a tribute to the goddess, their hearts open and devoted. It was a beautiful and humbling sight, a reminder of the deep spirituality that permeated every aspect of life in India.

I noticed that most of the diplomats had joined in the dance. The ambassadors from across the world had descended from the pavilion and entered the field, shedding their formal attire for traditional Gujarati clothing. Their faces were lit up with smiles of pure joy as they moved among the thousands of dancers, their bodies swaying to the rhythm, their hands clapping in time with the music.

I watched as the Ambassador from Suriname to India twirled across the field, his movements surprisingly graceful, his face beaming with happiness. He was a tall man with a kind face and warm eyes, and he moved with a confidence that was both impressive and endearing.

Beside him, his wife laughed and clapped, her saree shimmering in the light, her joy catching on.

Suddenly, the Ambassador from Suriname broke away from the circle and walked toward the pavilion. His face was flushed with exertion and happiness, his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm. He climbed the steps and extended his hand to me, his smile warm and inviting.

"Devi, you must join us," he said, his voice filled with encouragement. "The dance is meant for everyone. Come, I will show you the steps."

I hesitated, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. I had never danced Garba before, had never even seen it performed until tonight. The thought of stepping into that vast sea of dancers, of thousands of eyes watching my clumsy attempts, filled me with terror. I shook my head, my protests weak and unconvincing.

"Oh, I couldn't," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "There are so many people. I don't know the steps. I would just get in the way."

The Ambassador laughed, his voice warm and reassuring. "Nonsense! Everyone learns the steps as they go. There is no judgment here—only joy. The field is filled with people who have never danced before, who are learning as they go. You will be welcomed with open arms. Come, I will guide you. You will find that the rhythm is in your blood."

I looked at Mr. Narinedatt, my eyes pleading for an excuse, a way out. But to my surprise, he nodded encouragingly, his face lit up with a smile.

"You must join them," he insisted, his voice firm but kind. "This is a celebration, Devi. It's meant to be shared. You cannot simply watch from the side-lines. You must experience it fully, with your whole heart."

"But I don't—" I began, my protests weak and unconvincing.

"Devi," he interrupted, his voice gentle but firm. "This is what India is about. This is what Gujarat is about. It's about community, about connection, about letting go of your fears and embracing the moment. You are part of this now. You are part of us. You must dance."

I felt a surge of emotion at his words. I was part of this. I was part of them. I had been welcomed like a daughter, embraced like family. And now, I was being invited to join in the celebration, to share in the joy, to connect with the divine through movement and music.

I took a deep breath, my heart pounding with a mixture of fear and excitement. I looked at the Ambassador, his hand still extended, his smile warm and patient. I looked out at the vast field below, at the thousands of dancers moving in perfect harmony, their joy and devotion palpable even from a distance. And I made a decision.

"Okay," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I'll try."

His face lit up with joy. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed, taking my hand and leading me down the steps of the pavilion. "Follow my lead. Watch my feet, and listen to the rhythm. The steps will come naturally."

He guided me into the vast sea of dancers, his hand warm and reassuring on mine. I felt the energy of the thousands of people surrounding me, their movements a whirl of colour and sound. I heard the music pulsing through my veins, felt the rhythm vibrating through the earth beneath my feet. I took a deep breath and began to move.

My feet were clumsy at first, my steps uncertain and awkward. I stumbled, nearly tripping over my own feet, my cheeks flushing with embarrassment. But the Ambassador only laughed, his voice warm and encouraging.

"Don't worry," he said, his hand steady on mine. "You are doing wonderfully. Just relax, and let the music guide you."

I followed his lead, my eyes focused on his feet, my body swaying to the rhythm. Slowly, the steps began to come more naturally. My feet found the beat, and my hands found the rhythm of the claps. I felt the music flowing through me, the joy of the dance filling my heart.

I spun and twirled, my saree swirling around me, catching the light. I clapped and swayed, my body moving in sync with the dancers around me. I lost myself in the music, in the movement, in the joy of the moment. The thousands of dancers faded away, and there was only the rhythm, only the dance, only the connection to the divine.

The other diplomats welcomed me with open arms, their faces lit up with smiles of encouragement and joy. They guided me through the steps, their hands warm and reassuring, their voices filled with praise and support. The women adjusted my pallu, the men showed me the proper

hand gestures, and everyone clapped and cheered as I began to find the rhythm.

I danced with the Ambassador, his movements graceful and confident. I danced with the Ambassador from Mauritius, her saree a swirl of vibrant colour. I danced with the High Commissioner from the United Kingdom, his enthusiasm infectious, his smile wide and genuine. I danced with diplomats from Russia and Japan, from France and Brazil, from Kenya and Australia. We were united in our joy, our differences forgotten, our only shared language the music of the dance.

And I danced with Mr. Narinedatt, his eyes warm with pride, his smile filled with affection. He guided me through the steps, his voice soft and encouraging, his presence a steady anchor in the whirl of the dance.

"You are doing wonderfully, Devi," he said, his voice filled with pride. "You are a natural. The rhythm is in your blood."

I laughed, my heart soaring with joy. "I can't believe I was so nervous," I said, shaking my head. "This is the most incredible experience of my life."

"India is full of incredible experiences," he said, his eyes twinkling.

We danced for hours, the music never ceasing, the energy never fading. The vast field was filled with thousands of dancers, their movements a living tapestry of devotion and joy. I felt a sense of freedom and happiness that I had never experienced before, a release from the weight of

the past, a celebration of the present. I was surrounded by kindness and love, by people who had welcomed me like family, by a country that had opened its arms to me.

As the night drew to a close, the musicians began to play a slower, softer melody. The dancers slowed their movements, their circles becoming gentler, their claps softer and more reverent. It was a moment of quiet reflection, of gratitude, of connection to the divine.

I stood in the centre of the circle, my hands clasped in prayer, my eyes closed in gratitude. I felt a sense of peace settle over me. I had come to India seeking home. And in this moment, surrounded by the music and the dance, by the kindness and the joy, I had found both.

I opened my eyes and looked at Mr. Narinedatt. He was smiling, his eyes warm and proud. "Thank you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Thank you for this. For everything."

"You are welcome, Devi," he said, his voice filled with affection. "You belong here. You belong with us."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. I was home. I was finally home.

Chapter Twenty-four: The Ayurvedic Park

The second day, we visited Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Ayurvedic Park—a beautiful garden dedicated to traditional Indian medicine. The park was filled with medicinal plants and herbs, carefully labelled and arranged. It was a tribute to India's ancient wisdom, to its knowledge of healing and balance.

We arrived at the park in the early morning, the sun just beginning to warm the earth, casting a soft golden glow over the landscape. The park was nestled in a serene corner of Gujarat, surrounded by lush vegetation and the gentle sounds of nature. As we stepped through the entrance, I felt an immediate sense of peace wash over me—a stillness that seemed to permeate the very air, a calm that invited reflection and contemplation.

The park was enormous, stretching across acres of carefully curated land. Its sheer size was breath-taking, and I quickly realised that walking through it would take hours, if not an entire day. To accommodate visitors, the park had a fleet of vehicles resembling golf carts—small, open-air electric cars that could carry small groups of people through the winding pathways. The carts were quiet and eco-friendly, their engines emitting only a soft hum as they glided along the smooth stone paths.

Our guide gestured for us to board one of the carts, and I settled into the comfortable seat, feeling a sense of anticipation. The cart was simple but elegant, its canopy providing shade from the warm morning sun. As we set

off, the gentle breeze brushed against my face, carrying the fragrant scents of the garden. It was the perfect way to explore this vast and beautiful place.

The park was a masterpiece of design and intention. Winding pathways of smooth stone led through carefully curated gardens, each section dedicated to a different category of medicinal plants. The paths were lined with informative signs, their surfaces adorned with detailed descriptions of each plant's healing properties, its traditional uses, and the ailments it was believed to treat. The signs were written in both Hindi and English, their words a bridge between ancient wisdom and modern understanding.

As our cart glided through the park, I noticed something remarkable about its layout. The park was not designed in a conventional geometric pattern—it was shaped in the form of the human body. The pathways traced the contours of a giant figure lying supine, its head at the northern end, its feet at the southern. The sections of the garden corresponded to different parts of the body, with plants arranged according to the ailments they were believed to treat. It was a living anatomy chart, a garden that embodied the principles of Ayurveda in its very design.

I walked slowly through the sections where we stopped, my senses heightened, taking in every detail. The plants were arranged with an artistry that was both functional and beautiful—tall trees providing shade over delicate shrubs, flowering plants adding splashes of colour among the greens and browns of the herbs. The garden was a

living panorama, a symphony of textures and hues, of scents and shapes.

The air was filled with the fragrance of the plants—the sharp, clean scent of eucalyptus, the sweet perfume of jasmine, the earthy aroma of sandalwood, the tangy freshness of lemongrass. It was intoxicating, a natural perfume that seemed to cleanse the lungs and calm the mind. I breathed deeply, feeling the scents fill my body, feeling a sense of vitality and well-being wash over me.

"It's like walking through a pharmacy," I said, laughing as our cart paused at another section. "But so much more beautiful."

"It is," Mr. Narinedatt said, his voice filled with admiration. "Ayurveda is one of the world's oldest medical systems, dating back over five thousand years. It's based on the idea of balance—balance between the body, the mind, and the spirit. According to Ayurveda, health is not simply the absence of disease, but a state of complete physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. That's something we can all learn from."

Our cart carried us through the section corresponding to the head, where plants that treated ailments of the brain and senses were cultivated. I saw brahmi, its leaves delicate and fragrant, used to enhance memory and cognitive function. I saw shankhpushpi, its blue flowers believed to calm the mind and reduce anxiety. I saw jatamansi, its roots used to treat headaches and insomnia. The plants were arranged in a pattern that mirrored the

contours of the brain, their placement a visual representation of their healing properties.

"The ancient sages believed that the body and the mind are connected," Mr. Narinedatt explained as we paused to observe the garden. "They understood that physical ailments often have emotional and spiritual roots. The plants in this section are designed to heal not just the brain, but the whole person."

We continued to the section corresponding to the chest and heart. Here, plants that treated respiratory and cardiovascular conditions were cultivated. I saw arjuna, its bark used to strengthen the heart and improve circulation. I saw vasaka, its leaves used to treat coughs and respiratory infections. I saw pushkarmool, its roots believed to support lung health and reduce inflammation. The garden here was shaped like a ribcage, the plants arranged within its contours.

"This is where the heart and lungs are treated," Mr. Narinedatt said. "According to Ayurveda, the heart is not just a physical organ—it is the seat of emotions, of love and compassion. The plants here are designed to heal both the physical heart and the emotional heart."

I thought about my own heart, about the pain and loss I had carried with me for so long. I had been through so much, had suffered so deeply. But here, surrounded by these healing plants, I felt a sense of hope, a belief that I could heal, that I could find peace.

Our cart carried us through the section corresponding to the abdomen and digestive system. Here, plants that

treated gastrointestinal issues were cultivated—ginger, its roots used to soothe nausea and aid digestion; fennel, its seeds used to reduce bloating and gas; licorice, its roots used to soothe stomach ulcers and inflammation. The garden here was shaped like the stomach and intestines, the plants following the lines of its form.

"Ayurveda teaches that digestion is the foundation of health," Mr. Narinedatt explained. "If the digestive system is not functioning properly, it affects every other system in the body. The plants here are designed to support digestion and promote overall well-being."

We passed through the section corresponding to the arms and hands, where plants that treated joint pain and arthritis were planted. I saw guggulu, its resin used to reduce inflammation and relieve joint pain. I saw nirgundi, its leaves used to treat arthritis and muscle pain. The garden here was shaped like outstretched arms, the plants nestled within its curves.

We continued to the section corresponding to the legs and feet, where plants that treated circulatory issues and foot ailments were cultivated. I saw gokshura, its fruits used to support circulation and treat varicose veins. I saw bhumyamalaki, its leaves used to treat foot infections and skin conditions. The garden here was shaped like legs and feet, with the plants situated within its boundaries.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice filled with wonder as our cart paused once more. "The entire park is designed as a human body. Each section corresponds to a different part of the body, and the plants are arranged according to

the ailments they treat. It's like walking through a living anatomy chart."

"It is evidence of the wisdom of Ayurveda," Mr. Narinedatt said, his voice filled with pride. "The ancient sages understood that the body is a whole, that every part is connected to every other part. The park is a physical representation of that philosophy, a reminder that health is not just about treating symptoms, but about restoring balance to the entire system."

Our cart carried us through the section corresponding to the spine, where plants that treated back pain and spinal issues were cultivated. I saw rasna, its roots used to relieve back pain and improve mobility. I saw shallaki, its resin used to reduce inflammation and support spinal health. The garden here was shaped like a spine, and the plants were tucked into its shape.

I stopped at a small plant, its leaves delicate and fragrant. The sign identified it as tulsi, or holy basil, a plant revered for its healing properties. It was located in the section corresponding to the throat, where plants that treated respiratory issues were cultivated.

"Tulsi is one of the most important plants in Ayurveda," Mr. Narinedatt said. "It is used to treat a wide range of conditions, from respiratory infections to stress to skin conditions. It is also considered a sacred plant, a gift from the gods to humanity."

I bent down and touched the leaves, feeling their softness, their warmth. I thought about my mother, about how she had used tulsi in her remedies, how she had brewed tulsi

tea to calm her nerves and soothe her throat. I felt a connection to her, a sense that she was with me, guiding me.

We visited the herbarium, a building dedicated to the preservation and study of medicinal plants. The interior was cool and dim, the air filled with the scent of dried herbs. Shelves lined the walls, their surfaces covered with jars and containers, each one labelled with the name of the plant and its uses.

I walked among the shelves, my fingers trailing over the jars, feeling the texture of the labels, the vast amount of knowledge they contained. I saw bottles of ashwagandha powder, jars of triphala, containers of chyawanprash. I saw herbs I recognised and herbs I had never heard of, a treasure trove of ancient wisdom.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice filled with awe. "I can't believe how much knowledge is here, how much healing is available."

"Ayurveda is a living tradition," Mr. Narinedatt said. "It is not just a collection of ancient texts—it is a system that is still practiced today, still evolving, still relevant. Millions of people in India rely on Ayurveda for their health and well-being. It is an indication of the wisdom of our ancestors, and a testament to the resilience of our culture."

We left the herbarium, and our cart carried us through the final section of the park, a garden dedicated to the future of Ayurveda. Here, researchers were studying the plants, documenting their properties, exploring their potential for modern medicine. It was a tribute to India's commitment

to its ancient traditions, its determination to preserve and promote its cultural heritage.

As we left the park, I felt a sense of gratitude wash over me. I had been given so much—the opportunity to visit this beautiful place, to learn about Ayurveda, to connect with India's ancient wisdom. I had been healed in ways that I was only beginning to understand.

I thought about the shape of the park, about how it mirrored the human body. I thought about the plants, about their healing properties, about the knowledge of the sages who had discovered them. I thought about the principles of Ayurveda—balance, harmony, and connection. And I knew that I would carry these lessons with me, that they would guide me on my journey, that they would help me find peace and well-being.

"Thank you," I said to Mr. Narinedatt, my voice filled with sincerity. "Thank you for bringing me here. This has been one of the most transformative experiences of my life."

He smiled, his eyes warm and proud. "You are welcome, Devi. Ayurveda is a gift to the world, and I am glad you had the chance to experience it. May its wisdom guide you, always."

Chapter Twenty-five: The Statue of Unity

On the third day, we were taken to see the Statue of Unity, the tallest statue in the world. The statue depicted Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, one of India's most important freedom fighters. It stood 182 metres tall, overlooking the Narmada Valley.

We drove through the beautiful landscape of Gujarat, the Narmada River glistening in the distance, its waters a shimmering ribbon of silver against the golden earth. As we approached the statue, I rested my face against the glass and looked through, my breath catching in my throat. The statue rose from the landscape like a colossus, its figure dominating the horizon, its presence both awe-inspiring and humbling.

The Statue of Unity was a marvel of modern engineering and artistry. Standing at a staggering height of 597 feet, it was nearly twice the height of the Statue of Liberty in New York. From its base to the top, the statue towered over the surrounding landscape, a testament to human ambition and devotion. Its width was equally impressive, with the statue's shoulders spanning over 197 feet across. The sheer scale of the structure was difficult to comprehend—it was taller than the Qutub Minar, taller than the Taj Mahal, taller than any other statue in the world.

The statue depicted Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the Iron Man of India, in a dignified standing pose. He was dressed in a traditional dhoti and a simple shawl draped over his shoulders, his posture commanding and resolute. His face

was carved with remarkable detail, his expression one of determination and wisdom, his eyes gazing out over the Narmada Valley as if watching over the nation he had helped to unite. The statue was clad in bronze, its surface shimmering in the sunlight, its contours catching the light and shadow in a play of texture and depth.

The statue stood on a massive base, a three-storey structure that housed a museum, an exhibition hall, and an audio-visual gallery dedicated to the life and legacy of Sardar Patel. The base was surrounded by beautifully landscaped gardens, their pathways winding through lush greenery and vibrant flower beds. The Narmada River flowed nearby, its waters reflecting the statue's grandeur, creating a mirror image that was almost as spectacular as the real thing.

The driver parked, and we walked toward the statue, the sheer scale of it becoming more apparent with every step. As we approached its base, I had to crane my neck to see its full height. The statue seemed to pierce the sky, its figure framed against the blue expanse, its presence both overwhelming and inspiring.

I stood at its feet, looking up, feeling a sense of awe and reverence. The statue was a symbol of unity, of the strength and resilience of India. Sardar Patel had been the man who had united hundreds of princely states into a single, unified India after independence. He was a leader of extraordinary vision and determination, a man who had worked tirelessly to build a nation that could stand strong against the challenges of the world.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "I can't believe how huge it is."

"It's a tribute to India's strength," Mr. Narinedatt said. "To the unbreakable spirit of its people. Sardar Patel is remembered as the architect of modern India. This statue is a reminder of his vision, his courage, and his firm commitment to unity."

We learnt that visitors could go inside the statue via elevators that ascended through the body of the structure. The statue had been designed with a viewing gallery at the chest level, offering a magnificent panoramic view of the Narmada Valley and the surrounding landscape. The elevator system was state-of-the-art, capable of carrying large numbers of visitors to the top in a matter of minutes.

The tour was not just about the view—it was an immersive experience that told the story of Sardar Patel's life and India's journey to independence. The base of the statue housed a museum and exhibition hall, where visitors could learn about Patel's legacy through interactive displays, artifacts, and multimedia presentations. The experience was designed to educate and inspire, to remind visitors of the sacrifices and struggles that had shaped modern India.

But inside the statue itself was the most extraordinary part. Visitors could ride the elevators up through the body of the statue, ascending through its core until they reached the viewing gallery near the heart. From there, they could look out over the Narmada Valley, the river winding through the landscape, the hills and forests stretching toward the horizon. It was a view that few

people in the world had ever experienced, a perspective that was both humbling and exhilarating.

When we arrived at the entrance to the elevator, I looked at Mr. Narinedatt with excitement. "Are you coming?" I asked, my voice filled with anticipation.

To my surprise, he shook his head, a nervous smile on his face. "I'm afraid of heights, Devi," he admitted, his voice apologetic. "I cannot bring myself to go up. But you must go. This is a once-in-a-lifetime experience."

I felt a pang of disappointment that he would not be joining me, but I also understood. The statue was impossibly tall, and the thought of being suspended so high in the air was not for everyone. I squeezed his hand reassuringly.

"I'll tell you all about it," I promised. "Every detail."

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "I'll be waiting for you at the base. Take your time. Enjoy every moment."

The elevator ride was smooth and almost silent, the glass panels offering a view of the interior structure as we ascended. I watched as the levels passed by—the bronze layers, the steel framework, the intricate engineering that held the statue together. It was a marvel of modern construction, a testament to human ingenuity and determination.

When the elevator doors opened at the viewing gallery, I stepped out into a space that took my breath away. The gallery was spacious and open, with large windows that offered a 360-degree view of the surrounding landscape.

The Narmada River wound through the valley below, its waters catching the light and sparkling like liquid silver. The hills and forests stretched toward the horizon, their greens and browns a patchwork of natural beauty. The sky was a brilliant blue, with wisps of white clouds drifting lazily overhead.

I walked to the window, pressing my hands against the cool glass. I could see the distant villages, the winding roads, the fields and farms that dotted the landscape. I could see the people below—tiny figures moving through the park, their lives so small and yet so significant. I could see the river, the trees, the endless expanse of the earth.

I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling of connection to something greater than myself. I thought about Sardar Patel, about the vision and determination that had shaped this nation. I thought about my own journey, about the struggles and triumphs that had brought me to this moment. And I felt a sense of gratitude for this incredible opportunity, this unforgettable experience.

I stayed at the gallery for a long time, soaking in the view, letting the beauty of the landscape fill my heart. I took photographs, my camera capturing the moments that words could not fully describe. And I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. She had never seen anything like this, had never imagined such a sight. But I was seeing it for her, feeling it for her, carrying her with me at every step.

When the elevator returned me to the base, I found Mr. Narinedatt waiting for me, his face lit up with relief and curiosity. "Well?" he asked. "How was it?"

I smiled, my eyes still wide with wonder. "It was incredible," I said. "The view from the top is spectacular. You can see the entire valley, the river, the hills. It's like looking at the world from the heavens."

He chuckled, shaking his head. "I'm glad you enjoyed it. I knew it would be a special experience for you."

"It was more than special," I said, my voice filled with emotion. "It was transformative. Standing up there, looking out at all that beauty, I felt so small and yet so connected to everything. I felt like I was part of something larger than myself."

He nodded, his eyes warm with understanding. "That is the power of India, Devi. It has a way of making you feel both small and significant, both humble and empowered. It reminds you that you are part of a story that is bigger than your own."

I nodded, feeling the truth of his words. I had come to India seeking connection, seeking home. And in this moment, standing at the feet of the tallest statue in the world, I had found both. I had found a connection to the land, to its history, to its people. And I had found a home in my own heart.

After descending from the viewing gallery and stepping out into the cooling evening air, the monument I had just explored from within transformed entirely. The world's

tallest statue, which had felt like a vast maze of bronze and steel, now became a colossal canvas for an incredible projection mapping show. As darkness settled over the Narmada, powerful lasers and video projections, beamed from over 600 metres away, swept across the statue's 182-metre form. A stirring musical score rose with the lights, and the bronze surface came alive with vivid narratives of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel's life and his monumental role in uniting India. The sheer scale of the spectacle was overwhelming; the statue seemed to breathe with colour and history, its features highlighted and dramatized in a way impossible to perceive from the inside. Sitting there in the crowd, looking up at the illuminated Iron Man of India, I felt a profound connection not just to the engineering marvel before me, but to the immense story of unity it represents.

We walked back to the bus, the statue still visible in the distance, its figure a constant presence on the horizon. I looked back one last time, taking in its grandeur, its beauty, its meaning. The Statue of Unity was more than just a monument—it was a symbol of hope, strength, and the unbreakable spirit of a nation.

I thought about Sardar Patel, about his vision of a united India. I thought about the struggles he had faced, the obstacles he had overcome, the legacy he had left behind. And I felt a sense of gratitude for his courage, his determination, his staunch commitment to his people.

I carried that gratitude with me as we drove away, a reminder of the power of unity, the strength of the human

spirit, and the beauty of a nation that had welcomed me with open arms.

Chapter Twenty-six: The Return

We flew back to New Delhi on Monday. I was tired but happy, filled with memories that would last a lifetime. I had seen so much, experienced so much, learnt so much. I felt like I had been born again.

The morning of our departure dawned bright and clear over Gujarat. I woke early, my heart heavy with the knowledge that we would soon be leaving this beautiful state. I stood at the window of my suite, looking out at the Sabarmati River one last time, its waters shimmering in the golden light of the rising sun. The city was waking up around me—the distant sound of temple bells, the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, the gentle hum of traffic beginning to stir. I felt a sting of sadness, a longing to stay just a little longer, to soak in just a little more of the beauty and magic of Gujarat.

But I also felt a sense of gratitude that was almost overwhelming. I had been given so much—the chance to experience the warmth and hospitality of Gujarat, the opportunity to witness the Navratri dance with thousands of devotees, the privilege of walking through the Ayurvedic Park shaped like the human body, the wonder of standing before the world's tallest statue. I had danced with ambassadors, learnt from sages, and connected with my ancestors in ways I had never imagined possible. Gujarat had given me a gift beyond measure, and I would carry it in my heart forever.

Mr. Narinedatt was waiting for me in the lobby, his luggage already packed, his face lit up with a warm smile. "Ready to go back to Delhi?" he asked.

I nodded, though a part of me wanted to stay. "I'm ready," I said. "But I'm going to miss this place."

He smiled, his eyes twinkling with understanding. "Gujarat has a way of staying with you. You will carry it with you, even when you are far away."

The journey back to Delhi was smooth and uneventful. The private jet lifted off from Ahmedabad, rising above the city and its surrounding landscapes. I pressed my face against the window, watching the earth fall away beneath me, the patchwork of fields and villages growing smaller and smaller. I saw the Sabarmati River winding through the landscape like a silver ribbon, its waters catching the light. I saw the White Desert of Kutch in the distance, its expanse a surreal vision of salt and sand. I saw the hills and forests, the temples and villages, all the beauty I had experienced over the past few days.

I thought about the moments that had defined this trip—the Garba dance under the stars, the thousands of devotees moving in perfect harmony, the red carpet and the garlands, the sacred plants of the Ayurvedic Park, the incredible view from the Statue of Unity. I thought about the people I had met—the dancers and the diplomats, the farmers and the officials, the strangers who had welcomed me like family. I thought about the lessons I had learnt—the importance of balance and harmony, the power of

devotion and community, the beauty of unity and resilience.

I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling that I had been transformed in ways I was only beginning to understand. Gujarat had opened my heart, expanded my horizons, and connected me to something deeper and more profound than I had ever known.

We landed in New Delhi in the early afternoon, and Mr. Ravindra was waiting for us at the airport. His face lit up with a warm smile as we approached, and I felt a surge of affection for this kind and gentle man who had driven us through the streets of Delhi, who had been a constant presence of quiet support and steadfast patience.

"Welcome back, madam," he said, his voice warm with welcome. "How was Gujarat?"

"Incredible," I said, my voice filled with emotion. "It was one of the most amazing experiences of my life."

He smiled, his eyes twinkling. "I am glad. Gujarat is a special place. It has a way of touching your heart."

We drove through the familiar streets of Delhi, the city unfolding around us like a familiar embrace. The buildings and the markets, the temples and the monuments—they were all the same, yet somehow different. I saw them with new eyes, with a heart that had been opened and expanded by my experiences in Gujarat.

I thought about the journey that had brought me here—the fear and the struggle, the sleepless nights and the constant vigilance. I thought about the kindness of

strangers, the generosity of Mr. Narinedatt, and the friendship of Ryan and Vanita. I thought about the dreams of my mother, the promise I had made to her, the hope that had carried me across an ocean.

We arrived at the gated community, and I felt a sense of relief wash over me. The familiar gates, the armed guards, the lush gardens—they were all symbols of safety and comfort, of the sanctuary that Mr. Narinedatt had provided me. I walked through the front door, and Sunita was there to greet me, her face lit up with a warm smile.

"Welcome back, Didi," she said, her voice filled with affection. "I missed you."

I smiled, feeling a surge of warmth spread through my chest. "I missed you too, Sunita. It's good to be home."

She had prepared a meal for me—simple but delicious, the familiar flavours of home. I ate with enthusiasm, savouring every bite, feeling the warmth of the food spread through my body. It was a reminder of the kindness and generosity that surrounded me, the love and care that had been given to me so freely.

After dinner, I retreated to my room, my body tired but my spirit full. I stood at the window, looking out at the garden below, the flowers swaying gently in the evening breeze. The stars were strewn across the heavens like sequins on a dark cloak, their light a reminder of the infinite beauty of the universe.

I thought about everything I had experienced over the past few days—the dance and the music, the plants and the

herbs, the statue and the view. I thought about the people I had met, the connections I had made, the lessons I had learnt. And I felt a sense of gratitude that was almost overwhelming.

I was tired but happy, filled with memories that would last a lifetime. I had seen so much, experienced so much, learnt so much. I felt like I had been born again.

I thought about my mother and about her dream. She had wanted to see India, to experience its beauty and its wisdom. She had wanted me to succeed, to build a life that would make her proud. And I realised that her dream was not just about India—it was about a better future, a brighter tomorrow, and a world where anything was possible.

I lay down on my bed; the soft sheets cool against my skin. I closed my eyes, and the memories of Gujarat flooded my mind—the dance and the music, the plants and the herbs, the statue and the view. I smiled, my heart full of gratitude and joy. I was home. I was finally home. And I would carry the spirit of Gujarat with me, forever.

Chapter Twenty-seven: The Houseboat in Kashmir

Two weeks after returning from Gujarat, Mr. Narinedatt surprised me with another adventure—a trip to Kashmir, the crown jewel of India. I had heard stories of its magnificent beauty, snow-capped mountains and serene lakes, and floating gardens and houseboats that drifted on tranquil waters. I had seen photographs in travel magazines and films, but I had never imagined I would have the opportunity to experience it myself. When Mr. Narinedatt told me where we were going, I felt a rush of excitement that I could barely contain.

We flew into Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and I was immediately struck by the beauty of the landscape. The plane descended through a veil of clouds, and below us, the valley unfolded like a living painting—lush green fields, winding rivers, and in the distance, the majestic Himalayas, their peaks covered in snow. The air was crisp and cool, a welcome relief from the heat of Delhi, and I breathed it in deeply, feeling a sense of peace wash over me.

We were driven to the Dal Lake, where a beautiful houseboat awaited us. The houseboat was a floating masterpiece, its wooden exterior elaborately carved, its interior decorated with rich Kashmiri carpets and elegant furnishings. It was like a palace on the water, a sanctuary of comfort and beauty. I stepped aboard, my eyes wide with wonder, and I felt like I had entered a dream.

"This is incredible," I said, my voice filled with awe. “In all my days, I've never witnessed such a thing.”

Mr. Narinedatt smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "Kashmir is known as paradise on earth," he said. "And this is the best way to experience it—from the water, surrounded by the beauty of the lake and the mountains."

Ryan was also on this trip, his presence a familiar and welcome comfort. He had become a dear friend during my time in India, and I was grateful to have him with us on this adventure. He stood on the deck, his face lit up with a warm smile, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Welcome to Kashmir, Devi," he said. "You are going to love it here."

The houseboat was moored on the Dal Lake, its wooden decks extending over the water. The lake was vast and serene, its surface reflecting the sky like a mirror. In the distance, I could see the snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas, their white tips gleaming in the afternoon sun. The air was cool and fresh, carrying the scent of pine and blooming flowers. It was a place of peace, a sanctuary of natural beauty.

We settled into our rooms, and I was delighted by the warmth and comfort of the houseboat. The carpets were soft beneath my feet, the furnishings elegant and tasteful. I stood at the window, looking out at the lake, feeling a sense of peace that I had not felt in a long time. I thought about my mother, about how much she would have loved this place. I promised myself that one day, I would bring

her here and would watch her eyes fill with wonder at the beauty of Kashmir.

That evening, we sat on the deck, watching the sun set over the lake. The sky was painted in shades of orange and pink, the mountains silhouetted against the glowing horizon. The water was still, its surface reflecting the colours of the sky like a mirror. It was a moment of perfect beauty; a moment I would carry with me for eternity.

Mr. Narinedatt had learnt that I enjoyed fishing, and he had arranged for us to fish from the deck of the houseboat. The next morning, he took me to the deck, where fishing rods and bait were waiting for us. The water was calm and clear, and I could see the fish swimming beneath the surface, their scales glinting in the morning light.

"I thought you might enjoy this," Mr. Narinedatt said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "It's not quite the same as fishing in the rice fields, but I think you'll like it."

I laughed, feeling a surge of joy. "This is perfect," I said. "Thank you."

We spent the morning fishing, the two of us sitting side by side on the deck, our lines cast into the water. The sun was warm on our faces, the breeze gentle and refreshing. We talked and laughed, sharing stories and jokes, enjoying the simple pleasure of each other's company. I caught a few fish, their scales shimmering in the light, and I felt a sense of accomplishment that was both satisfying and humbling.

Ryan joined us later, his presence adding to the joy of the moment. He brought chai and snacks, and we sat together, enjoying the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the lake. It was a simple moment, but it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life.

In the afternoon, we took a tourist boat for a photoshoot on the lake. The boat was colourful and ornate; its wooden surface painted with sophisticated designs. We glided across the water, the boatman singing traditional Kashmiri songs, his voice rising and falling with the rhythm of the oars.

I posed for photographs, my saree billowing in the breeze, my face lit up with joy. The beauty of the landscape was overwhelming—the mountains in the distance, the floating gardens on the water, the vibrant colours of the houseboats lining the shore. I felt like I was in a dream, a vision of paradise that I could hardly believe was real.

Ryan and Mr. Narinedatt joined me in the photos, their faces warm with smiles. We laughed and posed, capturing the joy of the moment in photographs that I would treasure forever. The boatman continued to sing, his voice a melodic accompaniment to the beauty of the day.

"This is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen," I said, my voice filled with emotion.

Ryan smiled, his eyes warm with understanding. "Kashmir gets into your soul, your heart, and your memory. You will carry it with you always.," he said.

I nodded, as his words rang true somewhere deep inside me. Kashmir was more than just a place—it was a feeling, a connection, a homecoming. It was a reminder of the beauty that existed in the world, the peace that could be found in nature, the joy that came from sharing moments with people you loved.

As the sun began to set, we returned to the houseboat, our hearts full of gratitude and joy. The evening was spent on the deck, watching the stars appear in the sky, their light reflected in the still waters of the lake. I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I was doing living the dream my mother had carried with her. I was seeing it for her and feeling it for her. I was carrying her with me in every step, in every moment, in every breath.

Kashmir had given me a gift beyond measure—a memory of beauty, connection, and love, which I would always carry with me.

PART SEVEN: REFLECTIONS

Delhi

Chapter Twenty-eight: The Days Alone

A few days after our return, Mr. Narinedatt had to leave for Canada. He had diplomatic duties to attend to, and he would be gone for weeks. I was nervous about being left alone, but he reassured me that I would be taken care of.

"Ryan will be here to help you," he said. "He'll take you out, show you around. And Sunita will take care of the house. You'll be fine."

I nodded, trying to hide my anxiety. "I'll be fine," I said. "Thank you for everything, Mr. Narinedatt. I don't know how to repay you."

"By being happy," he said, hugging me. "By making the most of this experience. By finding yourself in India."

He left, and I was alone. But I was not afraid. I was surrounded by people who loved me, by a country that had become my home.

The morning of Mr. Narinedatt's departure, I woke early, a knot of anxiety already forming in my stomach. I had grown so accustomed to his presence, his steady guidance, and his warm reassurance. He had been my anchor in this vast and unfamiliar country, my guide through its chaos and beauty, and my protector in moments of uncertainty. The thought of being without him, even for a few weeks, filled me with a nervous flutter that I could not quite suppress.

I dressed slowly, my movements deliberate, trying to calm my racing heart. I walked downstairs to find Mr.

Narinedatt already in the living room, his luggage packed and waiting by the door. He was dressed in a crisp travel suit, his silver hair neatly combed, his face calm and composed. But I could see the warmth in his eyes, the affection that he held for me, and I felt a surge of emotion that threatened to overwhelm me.

"Good morning, Devi," he said, his voice gentle. "I hope you slept well."

I nodded, my throat tight. "I did," I managed. "Are you all set?"

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Almost. I just wanted to say goodbye to you before I left. I want you to know that I have every confidence in you. You are stronger than you think, Devi. You have survived so much, overcome so many challenges. A few weeks on your own in India will be nothing compared to what you have already endured."

I felt tears prick my eyes, and I blinked them away. "I'm going to miss you," I said, my voice barely above a whisper.

"I'm going to miss you too," he said, pulling me into a warm embrace. "But I will be back before you know it. And in the meantime, you are in good hands. Ryan is a wonderful guide—he will show you the city, introduce you to new experiences. And Sunita will take care of the house. You will be well looked after."

I pulled back, my eyes wet with tears. "Thank you," I said. "For everything."

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection.

I watched him leave, standing at the front door as his car disappeared through the gates of the community. The house felt suddenly empty, the silence pressing in on me. I stood there for a long moment, feeling a mixture of sadness and uncertainty. But then I heard Sunita's voice from the kitchen, humming a soft melody as she prepared breakfast, and I felt a sense of comfort wash over me. I was not alone.

I walked into the kitchen, and Sunita looked up with a warm smile. "Good morning, Didi," she said. "I've made you some parathas and chai. You must eat well, even when Mr. Narinedatt is away."

I smiled, feeling a surge of gratitude. "Thank you, Sunita," I said. "I don't know what I would do without you."

She chuckled softly, her eyes twinkling. "You would manage, Didi. You are stronger than you know. Now sit down and eat."

I sat at the table, the familiar warmth of the parathas and chai filling me with comfort. Sunita bustled around the kitchen, her presence a steady reassurance, her kindness a balm for my anxious heart. I ate slowly, savouring each bite, feeling the warmth of the food spread through my body.

Later that morning, Ryan arrived at the house. He was a young man, perhaps in his early forties, with a warm smile and an easy-going attitude. He wore a simple kurta and jeans, and his eyes sparkled with curiosity and enthusiasm.

He had been Mr. Narinedatt's friend for several years, and he knew the city like the back of his hand.

"Good morning, Devi," he said, his voice friendly and welcoming. "Mr. Narinedatt has asked me to take care of you while he's away. I know the city well, and I'll be happy to show you around."

I smiled, feeling a sense of relief. "Thank you, Ryan," I said. "I appreciate it. I'm still getting used to being on my own here."

He nodded, his expression understanding. "It can be overwhelming at first. But Delhi has a way of welcoming you, making you feel at home. I'll help you discover its hidden gems, its quiet corners, and its beautiful secrets. By the time Mr. Narinedatt returns, you'll feel like a true Delhiite."

I laughed, feeling a spark of excitement. "I'd like that," I said. "I'd like that very much."

The days that followed were filled with new experiences and quiet discoveries. Ryan took me to places we had visited before—hidden temples tucked away in narrow alleys, bustling markets where locals shopped for fresh produce and vibrant fabrics, peaceful gardens where I could sit and reflect. He introduced me to street food vendors whose names I could not pronounce, whose dishes I could not identify, but whose flavours were unforgettable. He took me to the quiet banks of the Yamuna River, where I watched the sun set over the water, its golden light reflecting off the surface like liquid fire.

But I also spent time alone, sitting in the garden, reading books that Mr. Narinedatt had left for me, writing in my journal about everything I had experienced. I began to find a rhythm, a pace of life that was both peaceful and fulfilling. I woke each morning to Sunita's cooking, spent my days exploring the city with Ryan, and returned each evening to the quiet comfort of the house.

I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. She had never made it to India, at least not yet, had never seen the temples and the monuments, had never felt the sacred energy that pulsed through this land. But I was here, seeing it for her, feeling it for her, carrying her with me in every step. I felt closer to her than I had in years, as if she were walking beside me, guiding me, protecting me.

I thought about the journey that had brought me here—the fear and the struggle, the sleepless nights and the constant vigilance. I thought about the kindness of strangers, the generosity of Mr. Narinedatt, the friendship of Ryan and Vanita. I thought about the dreams I had carried with me, the promises I had made, the hope that had carried me across an ocean.

And I felt a sense of peace settle over me, a feeling that I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I was not just visiting India—I was discovering myself, piece by piece, moment by moment. I was learning to trust, to open my heart, and to embrace the beauty and complexity of life.

I began to explore the city on my own, venturing out without Ryan, trusting my instincts and my growing

knowledge of the streets. I visited the markets of Chandni Chowk, its narrow lanes a labyrinth of colour and sound. I walked through the quiet halls of the Lotus Temple, its flower-like shape a symbol of peace and unity. I sat in the Lodi Gardens, surrounded by ancient tombs and lush greenery, feeling a sense of stillness and reflection.

Each day brought new discoveries, new connections, and new insights. I met people from all walks of life—vendors and students, artists and scholars, families and travellers. Each one had a story to tell, a piece of wisdom to share, a glimpse of the beauty and complexity of India. I listened, I learnt, and I grew.

I also spent quiet evenings at the house, sitting in the garden with Sunita, listening to her stories of her family, her village, her life in India. She told me about her childhood in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, about her parents and siblings, about the traditions and customs that had shaped her. She told me about her husband, who had passed away years ago, and her children, who had grown up and moved away. She told me about her dreams, her fears, her hopes for the future.

"India is a country of stories," she said one evening, her voice soft and thoughtful. "Every person, every place, every moment has a story to tell. You just have to listen."

I nodded. I couldn't deny the truth in what she'd said. I had been so focused on my own story—my journey, my struggles, my dreams—that I had forgotten to listen to the stories of others. But India was teaching me to listen, to

pay attention, to open my heart to the experiences of those around me.

As the days passed, I felt myself changing in ways I could not fully articulate. The fear and anxiety that had once consumed me were fading, replaced by a sense of peace and purpose. I was learning to trust myself, to trust others, and to trust the journey. I was learning to be still, to be present, to embrace the beauty of the moment.

I thought about Mr. Narinedatt's words: *By being happy. By making the most of this experience. By finding yourself in India.*

And I realised that I was doing exactly that. I was finding myself in India—not in the temples and the monuments, but in the quiet moments, the simple pleasures, the connections I was making with the people and the place. I was discovering who I was, what I valued, and what I wanted from life.

I was not alone. And I was finally, truly, beginning to find myself.

Chapter Twenty-nine: The Kindness of Strangers

The days that followed were filled with simple pleasures. The familiar aroma would drift up from the kitchen, wrapping around me like a warm embrace, pulling me from my sleep with the promise of comfort and nourishment. I would dress slowly, appreciating the quiet moments, and make my way downstairs to find Sunita already at work, her hands moving with practiced ease, her face lit up with a warm smile.

"Good morning, Didi," she would say, placing a plate of freshly made parathas before me, their surfaces golden and flaky, glistening with butter. Beside them, would be a steaming cup of chai, its fragrance a mixture of ginger, cardamom, and cloves. I would eat slowly, savouring each bite, feeling the warmth of the food spread through my body. Sunita would watch me with a satisfied expression, her eyes twinkling with affection, and I would feel a sense of gratitude that words could not fully express.

I spent my days with Ryan, exploring the city, learning its secrets. He was a patient and thoughtful guide, always attuned to my moods and interests. Some days, we would visit the grand monuments and temples, their history and beauty a testament to India's rich heritage. Other days, we would wander through the narrow lanes of Old Delhi, discovering hidden gems that were not in any guidebook—a tiny temple tucked away in a quiet courtyard, a family-run shop selling sweets that had been made the same way for generations, a rooftop café with a view of the city that took my breath away.

Ryan introduced me to the rhythms of the city, the subtle patterns that lay beneath its chaos. He showed me where to find the best street food, how to navigate the crowded markets, when to visit the gardens to avoid the heat of the midday sun. He taught me a few Hindi words, enough to greet the vendors and thank the shopkeepers, and their faces would light up with surprise and delight when I spoke their language.

"I've never felt so welcomed anywhere," I said one afternoon, as we sat in a quiet garden, the sound of birdsong filling the air. "I've never felt like I belonged."

Ryan smiled, his eyes warm with understanding. "You do belong," he said. "You always have. You just had to come here to realise it."

I visited temples and mosques, gardens and museums. Each place offered a new perspective, a new insight into the soul of India. I walked through the quiet halls of the Jama Masjid, its vast courtyard a sea of devotees, their heads bowed in prayer. I sat in the peaceful gardens of the Lodhi Tombs, surrounded by ancient stones and towering trees, feeling a sense of stillness that was both humbling and profound. I explored the National Museum, its halls filled with artifacts that told the story of India's long and complex history—sculptures and paintings, coins and manuscripts, each one a piece of the great puzzle that was this incredible country.

But it was not the monuments or the museums that touched me most deeply. It was the people—the strangers

who welcomed me with open arms, their kindness a gift that I could not have anticipated.

I talked to strangers who welcomed me with open arms: a vendor at the market who pressed a ripe mango into my hands, refusing to accept payment; a family on the metro who insisted I take their seat, their smiles warm and genuine; a young woman at the temple who helped me understand the rituals, her patience infinite, her generosity boundless; an elderly man at the park who shared his lunch with me, his stories of his youth painting a vivid picture of an India I had never known.

Each encounter was a reminder of the kindness that permeated this land. The people of India opened their hearts to me without hesitation, treating me not as a stranger but as a sister, a daughter, and a friend. They shared their food, their stories, their time, expecting nothing in return. Their generosity was humbling, and I felt a sense of gratitude that I could not fully express.

"India is a land of kindness," Ryan said one afternoon, as we walked through the bustling streets of Chandni Chowk. "We believe in hospitality, in treating guests like family. That's who we are."

I looked around at the crowds, the vendors calling out their wares, the families bustling through the narrow lanes, the children laughing and playing. It was chaos, but it was also beauty—a beauty that came from the connections between people, the bonds of community, the shared humanity that united them.

I thought about my own journey, about the fear and the struggle that had brought me here. I had been so consumed by my own pain, my own survival, that I had forgotten the goodness that existed in the world. But India was reminding me, moment by moment, encounter by encounter, that kindness was everywhere, that generosity was a language that transcended borders, that love was the most powerful force in the universe.

I had spent so much of my life feeling like an outsider—in Guyana, in Georgetown, in the world. I had always felt like I was searching for something, a place where I truly belonged, a home for my restless heart. And now, standing in the middle of a bustling market in Delhi, surrounded by strangers who had become friends, I realised that I had found it.

I found myself looking forward to the small moments—the warmth of Sunita's smile in the morning, the easy laughter of Ryan as we explored the city, the kindness of strangers who crossed my path. I found myself letting go of the fear and anxiety that had once consumed me, replaced by a sense of peace and trust.

I thought about my mother. She had always believed in the goodness of people, in the power of kindness, in the beauty of connection. And now, I was living that belief, experiencing it first-hand, letting it transform me.

I was learning to trust, to open my heart, to embrace the beauty and complexity of life. I was learning that belonging was not about geography or lineage; it was about

connection, about love, about the willingness to open your heart to the world.

And I was learning that India, with all its chaos and beauty, its challenges and joys, was the place where I had finally found myself.

Chapter Thirty: The Grace

Despite the poverty and hardship, I saw acts of kindness everywhere. I saw people sharing their food with strangers, helping each other through difficult times. I saw a community that took care of its own.

The contrast was striking. In the shadow of the slums, in the midst of the suffering, I witnessed moments of grace that took my breath away. A street vendor sharing his meagre meal with a hungry child. A woman offering water to a weary traveller. A group of neighbours coming together to rebuild a collapsed shack. These were not grand gestures, not acts of charity performed for recognition or praise. They were simple, spontaneous acts of kindness, born of a deep and abiding sense of community.

I saw a family sitting on the pavement, their meal spread out on a banana leaf before them—simple dal and roti, the humblest of foods. A stranger walked past, his eyes drawn to the food, his body thin and tired. Without hesitation, the family motioned for him to join them, scooting over to make room, sharing their meagre meal with someone who had even less. The stranger's face lit up with gratitude, and he ate with a hunger that spoke of days without food. The family watched him with a warmth that was almost maternal, their own hunger forgotten in the act of giving.

I saw a young mother carrying her sick child through the crowded streets, her face etched with worry and exhaustion. A group of women stopped her, their hands

gentle, their voices soft. They offered her water, helped her find a doctor, and stayed with her until her child was safe. They had nothing to gain, no reason to help except the simple fact that they were human and she was human and that was enough.

I saw children playing in the slums, their laughter echoing through the narrow lanes. They had no toys, no games, no luxuries of any kind. But they had each other. They ran and played and laughed, their joy a defiant statement against the harshness of their circumstances. And when one of them fell, the others rushed to help, their small hands reaching out, their faces filled with concern. They were a community, a family, a support system that took care of its own.

"The people are so generous," I said to Ryan one day, my voice thick with emotion. We had just witnessed an act of kindness that had moved me deeply—a group of rickshaw drivers pooling their inadequate earnings to help a sick colleague pay for his medicine. Their generosity, their selflessness, their willingness to sacrifice for someone in need—it was humbling beyond words.

"Just thinking about how much people have, and how much they give," I continued, "it's overwhelming. They have so little, yet they give so freely. They share their food, their time, their love. They welcome strangers like family. It's... it's beautiful."

Ryan smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "That's India," he said. "We are not rich in money, but we are rich in

spirit. We have a wealth of love and kindness. It is what sustains us, what gives us the strength to keep going."

I nodded as the truth of his words cut straight through me. I thought about the people I had met—the vendors and the shopkeepers, the families and the strangers. I thought about their generosity, their warmth, their unwavering hope. They had nothing, yet they gave everything. They had every reason to be bitter, to be angry, to be resentful. And yet, they were kind. They were loving. They were full of grace.

I began to see the grace everywhere. It was in the small gestures—a smile from a stranger, a helping hand, a word of encouragement. It was in the quiet moments—a shared meal, a shared laugh, a shared silence. It was in the resilience of the people, their refusal to give up, their determination to find joy amid suffering.

I saw a group of women at a community well, their laughter echoing through the air. They were filling their pots with water; their bodies bent under the weight of their burdens. And yet, they were laughing. They were smiling. They were celebrating the simple act of being together, of sharing a moment of connection in the midst of their struggles.

I saw a man who had lost everything in a fire, his home reduced to ashes, his possessions gone. And yet, as his neighbours gathered around him, offering what little they had, his face was filled with gratitude. He had lost everything, but he had not lost his community. He was not alone.

I saw children who had nothing, and yet they shared their meagre snacks with each other. I saw families who were hungry, and yet they offered food to strangers. I saw people who were struggling, and yet they helped those who were struggling even more.

It was a lesson in humanity, a reminder that kindness was not a luxury of the rich but a gift of the spirit. It was a lesson in grace, a reminder that love was the most powerful force in the universe.

"The people are so generous," I said again, my voice barely above a whisper. "So kind. It's humbling."

I thought about my own life, about the fears and anxieties that had consumed me for so long. I had been so focused on my own survival that I had forgotten the power of connection, the strength of community, the beauty of grace. But India was teaching me, moment by moment, that generosity was not about what you had—it was about what you were willing to give.

Ryan nodded, his eyes warm with understanding. "In India, we believe that kindness is a form of worship," he said. "It is not just about being good—it is about honouring the divine in every person. When we share our food, our time, our love, we are offering a prayer. We are connecting to something greater than ourselves."

I felt tears stream down my face, the reality of his words settling into my heart. I thought about my mother, about the kindness she had shown to everyone she met. She had taught me that love was the most important thing, that generosity was a gift, that grace was a choice. And now, in

India, I was learning to live those lessons, to embody them, to carry them with me always.

India had shown me the beauty of its temples and monuments, the richness of its culture and traditions. But it had also shown me the depth of its kindness, the power of its grace. It had reminded me that even amid suffering, there was love. Even in the bosom of hardship, there was hope. Even amidst poverty, there was generosity.

I would carry this lesson with me, always. I would carry the faces of the people who had shown me kindness, the stories of the communities that had welcomed me, the grace of a nation that had opened its arms to me. I would carry their generosity, their resilience, their steady hope.

And I would do what I could to honour them, to help where I could, to never lose sight of the beauty and grace that existed alongside the suffering.

India had changed me. It had opened my heart, expanded my horizons, and connected me to something deeper and more profound than I had ever known. It had shown me the power of kindness, the strength of community, the grace of the human spirit.

And I would take it with me through all my days.

PART EIGHT: THE RETURN

Delhi to Guyana

October 2022

Chapter Thirty-one: The Leaving

In late October, it was time to leave. I had been in India for almost three months, and the journey had changed me in ways I could never have imagined. I had found a sense of belonging, a sense of home. I had found myself.

The morning of my departure, I woke before dawn, the familiar sounds of Delhi filtering through my window—the distant call to prayer, the chirping of birds, the gentle hum of the city stirring to life. I lay in bed for a long moment, relishing the feeling of being in this room, in this house, in this country that had become so dear to me. I traced the patterns on the ceiling with my eyes, memorising every crack and shadow, wanting to carry this moment with me forever.

I dressed slowly, choosing the deep blue saree that my mother had given me for graduation—the same one I had worn on that first day, when I had walked through the doors of the High Commission in Georgetown, desperate and afraid. It seemed fitting to wear it now, on this day of endings and beginnings. The fabric was soft against my skin, its gold embroidery catching the light, and I felt a surge of emotion as I touched it. My mother had given me this saree with love and hope, and I had worn it through so many moments of my journey. Now, I was wearing it one last time, a symbol of how far I had come.

I packed my belongings, my movements slow and deliberate. Each item held a memory—the scarf that had been draped around my neck in Gujarat, the small statue

of Lakshmi that Sunita had given me, the journal I had filled with my thoughts and reflections. I placed them carefully in my suitcase, treating each one with the reverence it deserved. They were not just objects—they were pieces of my journey, fragments of the transformation that had taken place within me.

I walked through the house one last time, my fingers trailing over the walls, the furniture, the familiar objects that had become part of my daily life. There was the living room where I had sat with Swami Naryaan, learning about the wisdom of the ages. There was the kitchen where Sunita had prepared my meals with such love and care. There was the garden where I had sat in quiet contemplation, watching the flowers sway in the breeze. Each space held a memory, a moment, a piece of my heart.

Sunita was already in the kitchen when I came downstairs. She had prepared a special breakfast—parathas, my favourite, along with fresh chai and a plate of sweets. Her eyes were red, her smile tremulous, and I felt a spasm of sadness that threatened to overwhelm me.

"You must eat, Didi," she said, her voice soft but firm. "It is a long journey. You need your strength."

I sat at the table, my heart heavy, and ate the meal she had prepared. The food was delicious, as always, but I could barely taste it. I was too consumed by the weight of the moment, the knowledge that this would be my last meal in this house, the last time I would sit at this table with Sunita.

When I was done, I stood and embraced her, feeling her small body against mine. She was trembling, and I could feel her tears soaking into my shoulder.

"Thank you, Sunita," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "Thank you for everything. For your cooking, your kindness, your love. I will never forget you."

She pulled back, her eyes wet with tears, her face a mask of sorrow and gratitude. "You are always welcome here, Didi," she said. "This is your home. Remember that."

Mr. Narinedatt returned from Canada just in time to say goodbye. I had been waiting for him in the living room, my heart pounding with anticipation, when I heard the sound of the front door opening. I stood, my legs shaky, and there he was—his face tired from the journey, but his eyes warm and full of affection.

He crossed the room in a few quick strides and pulled me into a warm embrace. I felt his arms around me, strong and reassuring, and I let myself sink into the comfort of his presence. I had missed him more than I had realised, had longed for his steady guidance and his gentle wisdom.

"Devi," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "Before you go, I need to tell you something important."

I pulled back, my eyes searching his face. "What is it?" I asked, my heart racing with a mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

He took my hands in his, his grip warm and steady. His eyes met mine, and I could see the sincerity in them, the depth of his care for me. I had come to love and trust him

deeply. Every embrace, every smile, every word exchanged carried the same gentle warmth my father had always given me, and I felt it in each one. I knew that whatever he was about to say came from a place of love and generosity.

"Devi," he said, his voice soft but serious. "You don't have to return to Guyana. You can stay here."

I felt my breath catch in my throat. "What?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper. "What do you mean?"

He smiled, his eyes warm with affection. "I have already gotten you a job at the American Embassy in India. You can continue living at my home. You don't have to go back to the fear, the struggle, the uncertainty. You can build a new life here—a life of safety, opportunity, and purpose."

I felt tears stream down my face, the weight of his words settling into my heart. A job at the American Embassy. A place to stay. A future in India. Everything I had dreamed of, everything I had hoped for, everything I had never dared to believe was possible.

"Mr. Narinedatt," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "I don't know what to say. I don't know how to thank you."

"You don't have to say anything," he said, his voice filled with warmth. "You have already given me so much. You have opened your heart to India, allowed yourself to be transformed by its beauty and its wisdom. You have shown me that kindness and generosity can change lives. That is enough."

I shook my head, tears trickling down my cheeks. "But why? Why would you do all of this for me?"

He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Because you deserve it, Devi. You have survived so much, overcome so many challenges. You have shown such courage and grace. And I know that you will make the most of this opportunity. You will build a beautiful life here."

I stood before Mr. Narinedatt, my voice trembling despite my best efforts to steady it. "I have made a promise," I began, "to my parents—especially to my mother—that I will return to them. The night before I left, she made me swear it. And I gave her my word." I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat. "But I need you to know—I will come back here. This is not goodbye forever. I have poured too much of myself into this place, into the trust you've placed in me, to simply walk away and never return. I am coming back, Mr. Narinedatt. I give you my word, just as I gave it to her."

He hugged me at the airport; his eyes filled with tears. I could see the love in his expression, the pride, the sorrow of parting—even though he had offered me a future here, I had made the decision to return to Guyana first, to see my family, to tie up loose ends, and to make arrangements for a more permanent move. I knew in my heart that I would be back. I would return to India, to this home, to this life that he had so generously offered me.

He had given me so much—safety, comfort, guidance, love. He had opened his home and his heart to a stranger, had treated me like a daughter, had changed the course of

my life. And now, he was offering me a future, a chance to build a new life in the country that had become my home.

"You are always welcome here," he said, his voice barely above a whisper. "This is your home now. Never forget that."

"I won't," I said, my voice choked with emotion. "I'll never forget any of this. I'll never forget you."

We stood there for a long moment, wrapped in each other's arms, the world fading away around us. I thought about everything he had given me—the opportunity to come to India, the chance to discover myself, the love and support that had carried me through the most difficult moments of my journey. I would carry him in my heart always, a reminder of the kindness that existed in the world, the generosity of the human spirit.

As I walked toward the security checkpoint, I turned back for one last look. Mr. Narinedatt was still standing there, his hand raised in a wave, his face a mixture of sorrow and pride. Behind him, I could see Sunita, her small frame barely visible, her hand pressed to her heart. Ryan was there too, his face sombre but his eyes filled with warmth.

I waved back, my heart aching with the weight of the moment. I was leaving a place that had become my home, leaving people who had become my family. But I knew I would be back. I would return to India, to the life that was waiting for me, to the future that Mr. Narinedatt had so generously offered.

I walked through the security checkpoint, my steps heavy but my spirit light. I had come to India as a stranger, broken and afraid. I was leaving as a daughter, whole and hopeful. I had found myself in India, and I would carry its spirit with me forever. And I knew, with absolute certainty, that I would return.

The flight back to Guyana was long, but I did not mind. I had time to reflect, to process, to understand the transformation that had taken place within me. I thought about the journey that had brought me here—the fear and the struggle, the kindness and the love. I thought about the people I had met, the lessons I had learnt, the connections I had made. I thought about Mr. Narinedatt's offer—a job at the American Embassy, a home in India, a future beyond my wildest dreams.

I thought about my mother, about the dream she had carried with her all her life. She had wanted to see India, to experience its beauty and its wisdom. And I had done it for her, had seen it for her, had carried her with me every step of the way. I had kept my promise, and I knew that she was proud of me. But more than that, I was going to return to India, to build a life there, living fully and freely in the land of our ancestors.

I thought about India, about the country that had welcomed me with open arms, that had healed my heart and opened my soul. I would carry it with me always, its colours and sounds and smells, its beauty and its chaos, its kindness and its grace. I would return to it soon, and I would build a life there.

I was leaving India, but India would never leave me. It was a part of me now, woven into the fabric of my being, a source of strength and inspiration for the rest of my life. I had found myself in India, and I would never lose myself again.

Chapter Thirty-two: The Flight

The plane lifted off, and I pressed my face against the window, watching the lights of Delhi fade into the distance. I felt tears stream down my face, but I was not sad. I was grateful. Grateful for everything I had experienced, everyone I had met, everything I had become. And I was excited about the future—for the life that awaited me in India, for the home that I would build there, for the promise of a new beginning.

India had given me everything I had ever wanted and more. It had given me a sense of belonging, a sense of purpose. It had given me a home. And I would return to it soon, to claim the life that was waiting for me.

The flight back to Guyana was bittersweet. I stared out the window, watching the lights of Delhi fade into the distance. The city that had become my home was slowly disappearing, its twinkling lights growing smaller and smaller until they were just a faint glow on the horizon. I pressed my face against the cool glass, my breath fogging the window, my eyes fixed on the fading lights as if I could somehow hold onto them, keep them with me just a little longer.

I thought about everything I had experienced, everything I had learnt. The memories flooded my mind like a river—the chaos of the markets, the peace of the temples, the grandeur of the palaces, the kindness of strangers. I thought about the Garba dance under the stars, the thousands of devotees moving in perfect harmony, their

devotion a celebration of life and faith. I thought about the Ayurvedic Park shaped like the human body, its plants arranged to heal the ailments of each part, a testament to India's ancient wisdom. I thought about the Statue of Unity, its bronze figure towering over the Narmada Valley, a symbol of strength and resilience.

I thought about the rice fields where I had cut rice with a grass knife, beaten the stalks to loosen the paddy, and felt the connection to my ancestors in a way I had never experienced before. I had felt closer to my mother in that moment than I had in years, as if she were standing beside me, guiding my hands, whispering her love and her pride.

I thought about the lessons I had learnt—the importance of balance, the power of kindness, the beauty of connection. India had taught me to slow down, to be still, to listen to my heart. It had shown me that joy could be found in the simplest moments—a shared meal, a warm smile, a quiet moment of reflection. It had reminded me that resilience was a choice, that hope was a decision, that love was the most powerful force in the universe.

I thought about the people I had met, the friends I had made. Sunita, with her warm smile and her delicious cooking, her kindness a constant comfort. Ryan, with his stories and his wisdom, his friendship a gift I would treasure forever. Vanita, with her strength and her courage, her journey a reminder that healing was possible. And Mr. Narinedatt, the man who had changed my life, who had opened his home and his heart to a stranger, who had given me a future I had never dared to dream of.

I thought about the India that would always be a part of me. It was not just a country; it was a feeling, a connection, a homecoming. It had seeped into my bones, into my blood, into my soul. I would carry it with me always, its colours and sounds and smells, its beauty and its chaos, its kindness and its grace. No matter where I went, no matter what I did, India would always be a part of who I was.

And now, I was leaving as a daughter. I had found my home. It was not in a place, not in a building, not in a country. It was in the connections I had made, the love I had received, the person I had become. India had given me the greatest gift of all—it had given me myself.

I closed my eyes, and I let the tears fall. They were not tears of sadness—they were tears of gratitude, joy, and peace. I had been given a second chance, a new beginning, a future I had never imagined possible. And I would honour that gift by living fully, by loving deeply, by never forgetting the lessons I had learnt.

I thought about the journey ahead. I was returning to Guyana, to my family, to the life I had left behind. But I was not the same person who had left. I had been transformed by India, healed by its kindness, opened by its beauty. I would return to my mother and father, to my home, but I would carry India with me. I would return to them as a daughter, as a woman who had found her strength and her purpose.

And I would return to India. Mr. Narinedatt's offer was always there—a job at the American Embassy, a home in

Delhi, a future in the country that had become my home. I knew that I would come back. I had left my heart in India, and I would return to claim it.

I opened my eyes and looked out the window. The lights of Delhi had disappeared entirely now, replaced by the darkness of the night sky. I could see the stars scattered across the heavens, their light a reminder of the infinite beauty of the universe. I smiled, my heart full of gratitude and hope.

As the plane carried me across the vast expanse of ocean, leaving India behind but carrying it forever in my heart, I made a silent vow to my mother—a promise that burned with the intensity of a thousand diyas. I would return to Guyana, I would see her face again, I would hold her hands and look into her eyes, and I would tell her everything. I would describe the colours of the spices in the markets, the sound of the temple bells echoing through the narrow lanes, the taste of the chai that Sunita had brewed with such love. I would tell her about the Garba dance under the stars, the thousands of devotees moving in perfect harmony, the joy and devotion that had filled my heart. I would tell her about the rice fields where I had cut rice with my own hands, feeling the connection to our ancestors, to the land they had left behind, to the dream she had carried with her all her life. And I would promise her—not in death, but in life—that I would take her to India. I would bring her to the banks of the Ganges, to the temples of Tamil Nadu, to the palaces of Rajasthan. I would watch her eyes fill with tears as she touched the soil of her ancestors, as she breathed the air of the homeland

she had never seen, as she finally, finally came home. "I promise you, Ma," I whispered into the darkness of the cabin, my voice steady with conviction. "I will take you to India someday soon. We will go together. We will see it together. We will come home together." And I knew, with every fibre of my being, that I would keep that promise.

EPILOGUE

Eighteen months after my first journey to India, we stood at the arrivals gate of Indira Gandhi International Airport, my heart pounding with a mixture of joy and nervous anticipation. The familiar chaos of Delhi swirled around me—the press of bodies, the blare of announcements, the scent of spices and jet fuel mingling in the humid air. I looked at my mother by my side, walking toward the exit with tears streaming down her face, her silver hair pulled back in the same neat bun she had worn throughout her life. She had never imagined she would see the land of her ancestors. But I had kept my promise, and now she was here, in India, with the dream that had sustained her through decades of hardship finally coming to life before her eyes.

The months between my return to Guyana and my mother's arrival in India had been the most difficult of my life. I had come home to celebrate with my parents, to share the stories and photographs of my journey, to begin planning the trip that would fulfil my mother's lifelong dream. But fate had other plans. Within weeks of my return, my father fell ill—a sudden, devastating illness that stole his strength with terrifying speed. I watched the man who had worked double shifts to buy me a car, who had never complained about his sacrifices, who had given me everything he had, fade before my eyes. He held on long enough to see me settled, to hear my stories of India, to know that his daughter had found her home. And then,

quietly, with the same gentle dignity that had defined his life, he was gone.

The grief was overwhelming, a weight that pressed down on me with a force I had not anticipated. I had survived gangs and threats, crossed oceans and built a new life, but nothing had prepared me for the loss of my father. In the midst of my mourning, I made a decision: I would bring my mother to India, not just to fulfil her dream, but to honour my father's memory, to show him that his sacrifices had not been in vain, to carry him with us on the journey he had never been able to take.

The days that followed were a blur of wonder and emotion. I watched my mother stand before the Taj Mahal, her hand pressed to her heart, tears streaming down her face as she whispered prayers I could not hear. I watched her walk through the gardens of the Red Fort, her fingers tracing the delicate carvings, her eyes wide with disbelief that she was actually here. I took her to the markets of Chandni Chowk, where she bargained with vendors in a mixture of broken Hindi and Guyanese Creole, her laughter ringing through the narrow lanes like music. I brought her to the rice fields of Uttar Pradesh, where she knelt in the water and gathered stalks in her arms, her movements slow and reverent, as if she were holding her ancestors in her hands. "I understand now," she told me one evening, sitting on the deck of the houseboat in Kashmir, the Himalayas rising like sentinels in the distance. "I understand why you fell in love with this place. It's not just a country—it's a feeling, a belonging."

But it was the moments in between that touched me most deeply—the quiet evenings when we sat in our hotel room, sharing chai and memories of my father, his presence so palpable in the room that it felt like he was sitting with us. My mother spoke of their life together, of the struggles and joys, of the love that had sustained them through decades of hardship. She spoke of how proud he had been of me, how he had bragged about my journey to everyone he met, how he had held on just long enough to know that his daughter was safe and happy. "He wanted to come here too," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "He never said it, but I knew. He wanted to see the land of our ancestors, to walk where his parents had walked. But he gave that dream to me, Devi. He gave it to you. That was his gift—his love, his sacrifice, his hope."

On our final night in India, my mother and I sat on the rooftop of Mr. Narinedatt's home, the stars scattered across the sky like diamonds on black velvet. She held my hand, her grip warm and steady, and she spoke of the journey that had brought us here—the crossing of the *kala pani*, the generations of struggle and survival, the dream that had been passed down like a sacred flame from mother to daughter. "Your father would be so proud," she said, her voice thick with emotion. "He would be so proud of you, Devi. Of the woman you've become, the life you've built, the promise you've kept. We lost him too soon, but he lives on in you—in your courage, your kindness, your refusal to give up. That is his legacy, and you are carrying it forward."

I returned to Guyana with my mother a week later, the weight of grief now softened by the grace of shared experience. I would return to India soon, to the life and work I had built there, but a part of me would always be in Berbice, in the small wooden house where my father had given me everything he had. His death had taught me something I had not understood before—that love was not just about presence, but about legacy, about the ways we carry those we have lost in our hearts and our actions, in the promises we keep and the dreams we fulfil. My father had never seen India, but he had given me the means to go, the courage to stay, the love to return. And now, whenever I walk through the streets of Delhi, whenever I touch the soil of my ancestors, I feel him walking beside me, his hand on my shoulder, his voice in my ear, his love guiding me home.

“You will forever live in my heart Papa,” I whispered.

I looked up at the sky, and in that moment, the sun seemed to shine brighter than it had all day, its warm golden light wrapping around me like my father's embrace—and I knew, with absolute certainty, that he had heard me. The heavens themselves seemed to acknowledge the words I had whispered, and I felt a peace settle deep in my soul, knowing that somewhere beyond the clouds, my father was smiling, proud of the woman his daughter had become.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashwannie Harripersaud is a trained teacher and gained her Doctorate in Education from Selinus University, Italy. Dr. Harripersaud has her Master of Arts in English from JAIN University in India and her Bachelor of Education from The University of Guyana. She has taught and continues to teach English and Mathematics at the secondary school level for over two decades. Dr. Harripersaud has thus far published twenty-six scholarly articles in international, scholarly, refereed journals in multiple disciplines. She is the author of several scholarly books, and her books *A Dictionary of Selected Nouns for All Ages* won the **Blue Rose Book Award** for 2024, and *Educating, Education, Educators: Working to Create an Educated Nation* won the **Blue Rose Book Award** for 2025.

Dr. Harripersaud is the winner of the prestigious **Award for Outstanding Contribution to Global Scholarship**. She is an awardee of the eminent **25 Influential Women Leaders Award** in 2024 and was awarded for her **Sterling Contribution Towards the Development of Education in Guyana** in 2024**.** She was also honoured by the **Worldwide Women's Association (USA) for achieving "The Summit of Professional Accomplishment."**

BOOKS BY ASHWANNIE HARRIPERSAUD:

[1] *Wholeness and Home in West Indian Literature*

[2] *A Dictionary of Selected Adjectives for All Ages*

[3] *A Dictionary of Guyanese Words and Expressions*

[4] *A Dictionary of Selected Nouns for All Ages*

[5] *A Dictionary of Selected Adverbs for All Ages*

[6] *A Dictionary of Selected Verbs for All Ages*

[7] *Educating, Education, Educators: Working to Create an Educated Nation*

[8] *Chasing Happiness*

[9] *Across the Oceans: Multi-disciplinary, Multi-continental Essays*